

The confounding cosmopolitan, local action, and community college leadership:
an exploration of the perceived roles, responsibilities, and best practices of urban community
college leaders in addressing social equity

by

Marcel Edward Jagne-Shaw

B.B.A., Philander Smith College, 2010
M.P.A., University of Baltimore, 2014

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Abstract

Community colleges over the next decade will be welcoming their most diverse student population ever (Callaway, 2023). Community colleges were historically designed and structurally positioned to serve student populations that are otherwise marginalized by traditional four-year universities (Mulder, 2019; O'Banion, 2019). As of 2023, approximately 10 million students were served by over 1,000 community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC]). While extensive scholarship has examined the development, evolution, and institutional outcomes of the community college sector, these institutions are not monolithic. Urban community colleges (UCC), uniquely enroll more diverse populations of students than their rural and suburban counterparts. These populations consist of more Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and non-resident alien students than rural community colleges (Callaway, 2024). While community colleges generally enroll higher numbers of low-income and ethnically minoritized students than any other type of postsecondary institution, urban community colleges notably serve more diverse student demographics than their two-year peer institutions (LaGanga, 1999; Mulder, 2019). Despite their foundational mandate to support populations adversely impacted by social inequity, empirical literature remains limited regarding the overarching efficacy of these urban institutions (Smith & Miller, 2023).

Research conducted by the Pew Research Center (2018) indicates that Americans are moving from rural to urban and small metropolitan counties in higher numbers than in the past. The urban population in the United States of America grew by 6.4% between 2010 and 2020 and represents 80% of the nation's population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022b). Moreover, the United States' population is increasingly diversifying. The population is expected to be predominantly non-White by 2045 for the first time in history (Edgecombe, 2019). Community colleges have

historically served as key access points to higher education for non-White students (Cooney and Martin, 2024). As American society continues to experience rapid diversification and urbanization (Lloyd, 2012), it is increasingly critical that community college leaders are equipped with empirical data to navigate this shifting landscape. The benefits of successfully navigating this transition will extend beyond students to ensure a robust, educated, and skilled workforce that is reflective of the diversity of the nation (Callaway, 2023). Ultimately, this research explores the perceived roles, responsibilities, and strategic approaches of executive leaders at urban community colleges in addressing and advancing social equity.

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Dr. Terry Calaway

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historically served as key access points to higher education for non-White students (Cooney and Martin, 2024). Moreover, the students served by community colleges generally are experiencing varying levels of inequities that adversely impact their ability to succeed and experience social mobility (McNair, Bensimon, & Malcom-Piqueux, 2020; Smith and Miller, 2023). As society within the United States continues to experience rapid diversification and urbanization (Lloyd, 2012), it is increasingly critical that community college leaders are equipped with empirical data to navigate this shifting landscape. The benefits of successfully navigating this transition will extend beyond students to ensure a robust, educated, and skilled workforce that is reflective of the diversity of the nation (Callaway, 2023). Ultimately, this research explores the perceived roles, responsibilities, and strategic approaches of executive leaders at urban community colleges in addressing and advancing social equity.

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Dedication

As I contemplate this dedication, I am joyously reminded of a sermon by my pastor, Dr. Frederick Haynes III. One Sunday, he took time to expound on a particular promise from God in the book of 1 Corinthians, 15:57— “but thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” The book of Romans, chapter 8, verse 37 illuminates the intentions of this promise further to say, “In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.” That Sunday morning, Dr. Haynes encouraged me to remember that we fight *from* a place of victory—not *for* victory.

Life will undoubtedly afford us challenges to overcome, storms to navigate, and problems to solve. We are not to be weighed down by these temporary circumstances because the victory—from whatever battle you are facing—is already won. This journey towards earning this degree has been challenging. I have found myself in the midst of troubling storms; however, in spite of it all, I continued to feel called to finish. At times, it was as if victory itself beckoned me.

My grandmother. Our family’s matriarch. Mrs. Victoria A. Jagne-Shaw is to whom this work of mine is dedicated. I am here because of you. This is possible because of your choices, your sacrifices, your prayers, and your faithful trust in God. My victory is, indeed, already won because of whose I am. I am proudly one of Victoria’s own.

Preface

I am grateful beyond measure for this opportunity to engage in this work. Ironically, as I conclude this dissertation I am reminded of how much more work there is to do, of how much more there is to accomplish. The fight for equity is not a sprint, nor is it suitable for those who find it easier to quit than persist. The progress that has been made in the American postsecondary education system, while not nearly enough, is evidence of what is possible. It is the responsibility of each of us to meaningfully contribute to the equitable future that humanity deserves.

I was raised in the proverbial shadows of the nation's capital by two loving West African parents who believed in the transformational power of an applied education. It was the pursuit of higher education that led them both to the United States. With no safety net of Title IV funding, my parents persisted. They overcame challenges to achieve their goals and to live out versions of their dreams. It is because of their decisions, their determination, and sacrifices that I am able to pursue goals of my own. As a father, husband, brother, son, and student I am inspired to dream more vividly, plan more strategically, and work more diligently for those who find it difficult to voice their humanity. As a graduate of a historically Black college, I am intimately familiar with systemic marginalization in education systems. I consider it both a privilege and a duty to actively engage in work that goes beyond expanding access; I believe it is necessary that the proverbial gates are dismantled. A new reality is possible. I believe that equitable access to high quality education is the beginning of change. As a researcher and a practitioner, I am committed to advancing social equity through education, both domestically and abroad.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Postsecondary education in the United States of America is one of the unique aspects of American culture that sets it apart from other developed nations. While other countries have developed higher education infrastructure, America remains in the lead for the number of eligible college-aged students enrolling in college (Xiao, Sheng, & Zhang, 2024). For example, China leads the world in terms of the total number of college students enrolled; however, that is primarily due to the large size of its population. The United States of America, conversely, ranks higher in terms of a larger percentage of the population pursuing postsecondary education. The uniqueness of America's postsecondary system arguably shines brightest in the sector of community colleges. Terry O'Banion (2019) refers to these institutions affectionately as uniquely American innovations. Through the attainment of a higher education degree, students can positively shift their socioeconomic trajectories. Alternatively, other developed nations still exercise versions of caste systems, which, to varying degrees, precludes their citizens from rising above the social station they were born into (Nesbitt, 2020; Wilkerson, 2020). For example, Thorat and Attewell (2007) demonstrate how labor markets in India continue to deny social mobility to applicants of lower social standing, even in cases where job applicants have equal educational credentials. Moreover, Wu and Treiman (2007) illustrate how earning educational credentials of value do not equalize wealth across lines of social hierarchy in China.

The concept of access to opportunities through education is particularly visible in the arena of community colleges. While America's higher education system now offers a plethora of opportunities to a widely diverse group of people, it was not always this way. At its inception, America's postsecondary education system was designed to benefit a select group of people (Wilder, 2013; Thelin, 2019). Wealthy landowners, who oftentimes were active participants in

the Mid-Atlantic slave trade, were the intended core audience of the first institutions of higher education in America (Wilder, 2013). Moreover, these institutions, more times than not, only admitted male students. Students of differing ethnic backgrounds, varying religious beliefs, and women of all backgrounds were precluded from participating in the American higher education system for centuries (Harris, Campbell, Brophy, 2019). These exclusionary practices manifested as barriers to postsecondary access—resulting in groups of underserved people (McNair, Bensimon, & Malcom-Piqueux, 2020). These underserved people, as a result of the barriers imposed on them, experienced the effects of social inequity—a manifestation of unequitable access to resources and opportunities. Community colleges—institutions forged with a commitment to expanding access to postsecondary education—have largely been responsible for the work of increasing social equity for diverse, minoritized, and underserved students (Gilbert and Heller, 2013; McNair, Bensimon, & Malcom-Piqueux, 2020).

Statement of the Problem

As the demographics of America's citizenry continues to evolve, colleges are challenged with educating students from diverse backgrounds and experiences (LaGanga, 1999; Hernandez, Burrige, McKinney, and Burnett, 2025). The ability of America to remain competitive on the global stage will be dependent, in part, on its ability to educate a new workforce (LaGanga 1999; Edgecombe, 2019; D'Amico, Turk, Hancock, & Miller, 2022). Callaway (2023) argues that college leaders must meet students' basic needs to ensure equitable student outcomes and a robust, educated, and skilled workforce. Moreover, the citizenry of the nation must be educated and empowered (Pura, 1993). This necessitates an addressing of social equity gaps—some which are steeped in legacy. The Lumina Foundation (2022) warns of the dangers of not addressing long-standing racial equity gaps, specifically, in higher education, stating that the nation will

struggle to meet its labor needs to retain its global and economic standing. The problem identified in this research study is social inequity experienced by students and communities served by urban community colleges (McNair, Bensimon, & Malcom-Piqueux, 2020; Smith & Miller, 2023).

Background of the Problem

The United States' postsecondary education system is steeped in a legacy of exclusionary practices (Wilder, 2013; Thelin, 2019). At the close of World War II, some discriminatory practices had waned; however, systemic discrimination had not been eliminated. During this time, veterans returning from the war caused college enrollments to swell, almost uncontrollably (Mitchell, 2021). Even still, not all Americans were afforded equitable access to postsecondary education. Namely, African American veterans were largely excluded from participating in postsecondary education in the United States of America. While most White veterans of the United States military were afforded generous postsecondary benefits, African American veterans were widely denied admission to American colleges and universities, despite having legal access to the same benefits afforded through the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (Turner and Bound, 2003; Norman, 2010; Mitchell, 2021). Around the same time, President Truman initiated a commission. Known as the Truman Commission on Higher Education, the purpose of the commission was to assess the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities of postsecondary education in America (Gilbert and Heller, 2013; Ris, 2022). Out of this commission came the expansion of America's junior colleges into career and occupational education institutions. These comprehensive institutions became known as community colleges. In fact, the Truman Commission is responsible for coining the phrase "community college" (Gilbert and Heller, 2013).

To address the overcrowding of college classrooms and issues pertaining to equitable access, the Truman Commission recommended that community colleges be expanded in their scope of work and in their geographical footprint. At the time, America's rural communities were also largely underserved by colleges and universities. Among the chief recommendations made by the Truman Commission on Higher Education is that America's postsecondary institutions expand access and increase social equity (Kim, and Rury, 2007; Gilbert & Heller, 2013). This work of increasing social equity in postsecondary education was to be executed largely by community colleges. The work set forth by the 1947 Truman Commission on Higher Education was to address the overcrowding of college classrooms and issues pertaining to equitable access (Gilbert & Heller, 2013; Ris, 2022). American community colleges have historically served a disproportionately diverse population of college-going students. The diversity among these students will only continue to grow (Malcolm, 2012; Malcom-Piqueux, 2018; Mulder, 2019; Hubbard-Jackson, 2021). While all the aims of the Truman Commission's report were not realized immediately, the charge to expand access to postsecondary education fundamentally changed the landscape of higher education in the United States (Ris, 2022).

Community colleges were uniquely designed and positioned to serve students who were otherwise marginalized by the four-year colleges and universities (Boggs & Irwin, 2008; O'Banion, 2019). Community colleges; however, while similarly missioned, are not monolithic. Where community colleges disproportionately enroll more low-income students and ethnically minoritized students than any other sector of higher education, urban community colleges oftentimes enroll an even more diverse student body than their two-year peer institutions (Myran and Parsons, 2013). While urban community colleges exist to serve those students who are adversely impacted by social inequity, not much research has been conducted on the efficacy of

these institutions, nor how their leaders assess and address social equity (Malcom-Piqueux, 2018; Smith & Miller, 2023). Some scholars argue that despite their intentions, urban community colleges may inadvertently perpetuate existing equity gaps by not addressing systemic barriers faced by marginalized populations (McNair, Bensimon, & Malcom-Piqueux, 2020). A commitment to developing an equity-centric institution requires a critical assessment of the language, systems, and perceived thoughts concerning the students adversely impacted by social inequity (McNair et al., 2020).

Community colleges—and urban community colleges in particular—enroll a disproportionate percentage of low-income and ethnically minoritized students (Malcom-Piqueux, 2018; Smith & Miller, 2023). These students oftentimes, in comparison to their peers, experience homelessness and low levels of college readiness at higher rates (LaGanga, 1999; Malcom-Piqueux, 2018; McNair et al., 2020). Social equity gaps can follow students throughout their matriculation, at times adversely impacting their ability to succeed (Malcom-Piqueux, 2018; Musaindapo, 2018). Much research has been conducted on the development, evolution, success, and pitfalls of community colleges generally (Bailey, Alfonso, Calcagno, Jenkins, Kienzl, and Leinbach, 2004; Mulder, 2019; Smith & Miller, 2023). Gaining insight into the ways leaders of urban community colleges perceive their roles and responsibilities in addressing social equity gaps is the focus of this study.

The United States of America is on the precipice of what some scholars have referred to as the “browning of America”—a rapid exponential growth of ethnic diversity that results in no one ethnic group accounting for more than 50% of the nation’s population (Sundstrom, 2008; Frey, 2018). Without a resolution to the systemic social inequalities that have plagued the country since its inception, America will continue to wrestle with achieving liberty and justice

for all— a national ideal established by its constitution. Systemic and de facto policies of discrimination prohibited students of color from equitably participating in postsecondary education (Mitchell, 2021). Moreover, according to The World Bank (2023), by the year 2050 approximately 70% of the globe will be living in urban areas. Within the same timeframe, 83% of North America will be urbanized. As the world becomes increasingly diverse, and the rate of urbanization continues to rise, there is a need for community colleges to be adequately prepared to train a new workforce (LaGanga 1999; Edgecombe, 2019; O’Banion, 2019; Callaway, 2023).

American community colleges will continue to serve a disproportionately diverse population of college-going students, and the diversity will only continue to grow (O’Banion, 2019). Based on the United States Census of 2000, the United States Census Bureau released a population projection. According to the projection, the United States of America’s non-Hispanic White population would fall below 50% in the year 2042 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, 2008; Sohoni, 2020). Edgecombe (2019) posits that for the first time in the history of the United States of America, the population is expected to be non-White by 2045, attributed to a declining birthrate in the White population. As of 2000, seven states have already evolved to become “minority-majority states”—states where the ethnic minorities, in aggregate, account for more than 50% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). In short, America’s evolving ethnic demographic is aligning more with the ethnic makeup of the global landscape (Sundstrom, 2008; Frey, 2018; Springer & Newton, 2019). A postsecondary education system that is responsive to, and reflective of, this change necessitates critical analysis (McNair et al., 2020). Callaway (2023) argues that postsecondary institutions need to provide equitable support for non-White students to support their successful matriculation. While a significant amount of research has examined community colleges, less research has been conducted on the subsection of postsecondary

education referred to as urban community colleges (Smith & Miller, 2023). This gap exists, in part, due to the fluidity of the definition of the word ‘urban’ (IPEDS, n.d.; Smith and Miller, 2023).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into, and examine, the perceived roles, responsibilities, and best practices of executive leaders addressing social equity at urban community colleges.

Research Questions

Three research questions guide this qualitative study. These questions are crafted to gain into the perceived roles and responsibilities of executive leaders at urban community colleges.

1. How do executive leaders of urban community colleges perceive social equity concepts and their leadership role?
2. How do executive leaders of urban community colleges perceive their role in addressing social equity?
3. What best practices do executive leaders of urban community colleges exercise in addressing social equity?

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

The theoretical framework for this research study is Critical Theory (Horkheimer, 1947; Marcuse, 1955). Critical Theory provides a broad approach that examines power structures, social inequalities, and historical contexts to challenge dominant ideologies and promote social justice. It involves a critical analysis of societal systems, institutions, and discourses to understand how they contribute to marginalization and oppression. In the context of this research

study, critical theory will provide a lens for an examination of how urban community colleges, as historical and contemporary institutions, exert their power and influence to promote, demote, or maintain social equity.

The conceptual theory for this research study is transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978; Bass 1985). Transformational leadership theory (TLT) is an organizational leadership theory that provides a framework for examining the inspirational and motivating qualities of leaders that result in their teams or followers achieving extraordinary outcomes through a fostering of shared vision, innovation, and personal growth. Executive leaders of urban community colleges are charged with equitably serving underserved, minoritized, socioeconomically disadvantaged, diverse students (McNair, Bensimon, & Malcom-Piqueux, 2020; Smith and Miller, 2023). How these executive leaders transform their students, campuses, and communities while addressing social equity gaps is examined through the conceptual lens of transformational leadership theory.

Methodology

This research study is designed as a qualitative study (Creswell and Creswell, 2005; Greene, 2007). Specifically, a narrative inquiry approach is employed (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). It is critical to the success of this study to obtain data from the narratives of executive leaders of urban community colleges. Their unique perspectives from leading these distinct postsecondary institutions are essential to expanding the body of research on urban community colleges. One-on-one, semi-structured, timed interviews were conducted with ten to twenty executive leaders of urban community colleges. For the purpose of this study, executive leaders are defined as college administrators that functionally serve at the cabinet-level or serve in high-impact areas of the college administration, even if not appointed to the respective presidential

cabinet. Twelve executive leaders of urban community colleges are represented in this study. One-on-one, semi structured interviews with the twelve executive leaders represent the secondary instrument of data collection for this study. The researcher represents the primary instrument of data collection.

This study employs a nested framework design, situating Transformational Leadership Theory (TLT) as the conceptual framework within the broader theoretical lens of Critical Theory (CT). While TLT provides a behavioral map to identify the specific mechanisms executive leaders use to drive institutional change, relying on it alone risks evaluating leadership strictly through the metric of organizational efficiency. To address this, TLT is anchored within a critical paradigm. By applying CT as the overarching theoretical framework, this research explicitly interrogates the power dynamics behind these administrative actions. This dual structure ensures the study does not merely ask if leaders are transformational, but critically examines whether those transformational practices genuinely dismantle systemic barriers, manage social equity, and ultimately improve social mobility for the communities and students served by these postsecondary institutions.

Alignment Table

An alignment table was created to provide a clear overview of how the various elements of the study are interconnected. This table includes the problem based on literature findings, research questions, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, methodology, and interview questions. The table illustrated the coherence and alignment among these components, ensuring a structured approach to the research (Booton, 2014). The alignment table is available in Appendix A for reference.

Delimitations and Assumptions

To ascertain the perceived roles and responsibilities of executive leaders at urban community colleges, delimitations and assumptions have been identified.

The following assumptions were recognized:

1. Trustworthiness (Ibid. pp.218-219), objectivity, and truth are critical to the research (Creswell, 1994).
2. Multiple realities can be appreciated by utilization of tacit knowledge (Ibid., p.359).
3. The intent of qualitative research is to understand multiple realities are not limited to one (Lincoln and Guba, 1985)
4. Conducting research in natural settings where human behavior and events occur is a prerequisite for qualitative research (Creswell, 1994)
5. Qualitative data are descriptive. Data are reported in words, rather than numbers (Frankel and Wallen, 1990).
6. The qualitative researcher is the primary instrument in data collection and analysis (Frankel and Wallen, 1990; Merriam, 1988).

The following delimitations were recognized:

1. Sector. This study explores executive leaders of urban community colleges. These institutions are defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) as being public two-year community colleges in population-dense areas, identified as urban-large city, urban-medium city, urban-small city, and urban-large suburb.

2. **Sample Population.** This study focuses on executive leaders of urban community colleges. The professional titles are limited to 1) President, 2) Campus President, 3) Chancellor, 4) Vice Chancellor, 5) Vice President, 6) Executive Director, and 7) Dean.
3. **Methodology.** This research study is designed using a qualitative narrative inquiry method. One-on-one interviews, semi-structured, timed interviews were employed to gather data.
4. **Criteria.** Urban community colleges that have achieved graduation and retention rates at, or above, the national average for community colleges will be requested to participate in this research study. Moreover, the study participants must have at least three years of experience serving in an executive capacity at an urban community college.

Significance of the Study

Little research has been conducted on exploring urban community colleges—of the 49,000 dissertations covering community colleges on ProQuest, less than 5% pertain to urban community colleges explicitly (Smith and Miller, 2023). This accounts for less than 2,500 dissertations. Furthermore, studies that make reference to urban community colleges oftentimes are using the institutions as a contextual marker for case studies (e.g. study academic success of 3 males at an urban community college). Few studies have examined these colleges for the impact of that their unique geographical positioning has on stakeholders (Smith and Miller, 2023). When accounting for factors of leadership, social equity, and the intersection of the two factors, the exploration for available research yields even less results. Urban community colleges serve a crucial role in providing access to higher education opportunities for marginalized and underserved groups (Callaway, 2023). Assessing the leadership practices of successful urban community college executives, this research study may provide insight into effective strategies

for promoting and advancing social equity on community college campuses. Gaining insight into, and assessing, the perceived roles and responsibilities of executive leaders of urban community colleges may contribute to researchers gaining a more in-depth understanding of how to address social equity issues at community colleges. Moreover, this research may inform the creation and curation of leadership development programs, and the development of policy and practices that lends to the advancement of institutional change efforts.

Definitions of Terms

Critical Theory encompasses a variety of approaches to understanding and challenging social, political, and cultural structures (Horkheimer, Adorno, and Noeri, 2002).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an academic and legal framework that examines how systemic racism is embedded within the context of laws and institutions in the United States of America (USA). Key aspects of CRT are systemic racism, social construction of race, intersectionality, challenging of dominant narratives, and legal focus (Bell, 1973; Bell 1987).

Minoritized Students are students who are defined as “non-traditional” by classification of their age, race, ethnicity, sex, income or nationality (McNair, Bensimon, & Malcom-Piquex). The “non-traditional” classification is indicative of a deviation from what is generally perceived, and accepted, as normative (e.g. White, heterosexual, male, fiscally strong, etc.).

Racialization is a sociological concept that describes the processes by which social, economic, and political meanings are attached to racial categories. Moreover, it is the process of ascribing racial identities to relationships, social practices, or groups that may not identify as such (Omi and Winant, 2014; Bonilla-Silva, 2021).

Racial Hierarchy is a system of social stratification that ranks different racial groups as superior or inferior to one another. This ranking establishes and maintains unequal power and

resource distribution among racial groups within a society (Omi and Winant, 2014; Bonilla-Silva, 2021).

Social Equity refers to the fair and equitable management of all institutions serving the public, and the fair and equitable distribution of public services. It acknowledges that inequalities exist, and works to eliminate them by ensuring that everyone has access to the same opportunities and resources, regardless of their race, gender, income, sexual orientation, religion, or ability (NAPA, 2000).

Social Inequity is a manifestation of unequitable access to resources and opportunities (Blackburn, 2008; Sealey, 2015). The unequitable access to resources and opportunities may be a result of operationalization of systemic racism, racial hierarchies, or classism.

Socioeconomic Status (SES) is the position or standing of a person or group in a society as determined by a combination of social and economic factors that affect access to education and other resources crucial to an individual's upward mobility (Duncan, 1959).

Social Mobility is the concept was formally introduced to the academic lexicon by sociologist Pitirim Sorokin in 1927, who described it as the transition of an individual or social object from one social position to another. Economist Gary Fields (2019) defines mobility through the lens of "origin-independence." In this framework, true social mobility is achieved when an individual's final socioeconomic destination becomes statistically independent of their starting conditions (e.g. their family's income, zip code, or background).

Student Outcomes are metrics that are used to define and assess students' success (e.g. graduation rates, retention rates, etc.) (Tinto, 1993).

Systemic Racism, also referred to as institutional racism, describes how racism is embedded within the structures and operations of institutions and societies. It defines the

interconnectedness of oppression-- not simply individual acts of prejudice, but about how policies, practices, and norms within organizations create and perpetuate racial inequality (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967).

Urban Community Colleges are postsecondary institutions located in densely populated areas-- metropolitans. These schools are typically more diverse in their student body than other community colleges (IPEDS, n.d.).

Urbanicity is a term that refers to the degree to which a geographical area is considered urban, encompassing factors such as population density, infrastructure, and proximity to urban centers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Figure C.1 is located in the Appendix.

Workforce Development is a significant institutional function that encompasses a variety of specific organizational units working collaboratively to prepare students for work through programming, courses, and activities (James and Dougherty, 2006).

Chapter Summary

Chapter one of this research study introduced the study, provided a statement of the problem, background of the problem, a description and explanation of the methodology, research questions that will guide the study, an alignment table, and an organization of the study.

Organization of the Study

This study will continue with a literature review in chapter two, to include an in-depth background of the problem, history of urban community colleges, challenges facing community colleges, community college leadership, and a review of the social equity landscape at community colleges. In chapter three, a descriptive review of the methodology is provided that is inclusive of the research questions, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter four delves into the analysis of the data that was collected from twelve research participants. Chapter five

provides a discussion of the research findings related to the literature and the theoretical and conceptual frameworks. The chapter ends with implications for the field of study and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this research study is to gain insight into the perceived roles and responsibilities of executive leaders of urban community colleges as it relates to addressing social equity. The purpose of education in American society has long been debated by its citizens. This is evidenced, in part, by the prolonged struggle related to the idea of a public education system in America (Kaestle, 1983; Tyack and Lowe, 1990). Various groups throughout American history have fought for the right to receive equal and equitable access to education (De Bois, 1903; Anderson, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Opportunities to access formal education, at any level, have not always been guaranteed to all Americans (Gardner, 1983; Tyack and Cuban, 1995; Cortese, 2003). To that end, debates about the purpose of education are oftentimes heavily centered around politically and socially charged inquiries. Debates about who should be educated have emerged and persisted throughout history (Cortese, 2003; Wilder, 2013). Post-secondary education, not unlike primary education, has been subjected to scrutiny. Beyond the questioning the purpose of higher education and who should benefit from higher education, debates concerning this sector oftentimes focus on the investment in education (Darling-Hammond, 2004; McMahon, 2009). Determining who should invest, how much should be invested, and who the recipients of said investments should be, are examples of the intensely debated concerns regarding the American postsecondary education system (De Bois, 1903; Anderson, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 1994; McMahon, 2009).

Contemporarily, the debate about postsecondary education appears to have evolved to center on the question of whether postsecondary education is a public or private good (Levin, 1987; Labaree, 1997; Marginson, 2007; McMahon, 2009). In its infancy, during the settling of

America, access to education was regarded as a privilege only enjoyed by the wealthy. In *Ebony and Ivy*, Wilder (2013) posits that the first five colleges of the British American colonies, established between 1636 and 1746, benefitted from the Mid-Atlantic African slave trade. “The colleges were imperial mechanisms to expand European control and to enrich white planters and traders,” argues Wilder. When it was legal, the Mid-Atlantic slave trade enriched the American economy even in states where it was not permitted (Ewing, 2025). To this end, the cost of college was not a significant concern for the intended audience. From their inception, American colleges were supported almost exclusively by wealthy patrons. For example, the original trustees of William and Mary College were from slaveholding families and arranged for colleges to be funded from the profits of slave labor (Wilder, 2013). Moreover, Georgetown University, organized a mass sale of enslaved men, women, and children in 1838. The proceeds of the sale ensured the fiscal sustainability of the institution (Rothman, 2017; Rothman, 2021). Harvard Law School was founded, in part, by a gift from Issac Royall Jr., a wealthy enslaver (Halley, 2008; Wilder, 2013). This is not an isolated incident, Ewing (2025) argues. Millions of acres of land belonging to Indigenous people from Native tribes was stolen and repurposed for the creation of exclusionary American university systems. Pratt (2017) posits that this history is diametrically opposed to the open-access commitment of contemporary community colleges. Bragg (2001) argues that as community colleges’ enrollments grew and the institutions “matured,” the learners they served became more diverse. Community colleges evolved into key points of access to education for marginalized populations (Callaway, 2023).

Diversity, Education, and the United States of America

Community colleges enroll a disproportionate percentage of the diverse students served by the American postsecondary education system (Smith and Miller, 2023). Historically, only

wealthy White men were permitted unfettered access to postsecondary education in America (Wilder, 2013). That historical context informs the framework for what is contemporarily described as a diverse higher education system in the United States of America. Brown (2004) defines diversity as an exclusionary practice. It is the differing from “European-American, male, and normal” that makes one diverse in the American context. Said differently, White as a race and male as a gender are assumed, culturally, to be normal in the United States. To deviate from that is to be excluded from mainstream society to the invisible category of diversity. Brown (2004) argues that the exclusionary practice that allows for diversity to exist in this way is based principally on race, and sometimes gender and disability. Students who identify as women, economically disadvantaged, first-generation, African American, Latin-X, Jewish, Muslim, and a host of other descriptors that are not synonymous with wealthy, White, male, and cisgendered would qualify as diverse. Institutions, government agencies, and organizations throughout the years have made efforts to afford diverse college students equitable college experiences (Lowe, 1999). The postsecondary education system in the United States of America did not, and does not, operate in isolation from the primary education system—the kindergarten through high school, or k-12 system (Hill and Burke, 2022).

Racialization of Education

Ewing (2025) argues that the history of schooling in the United States cannot be understood without understanding the history of race and racism in the United States of America. In 1893, the United States Office of Education issued a report that argued the inferiority of non-White people as it relates to the benefits of education. The report advised that “The colored race is as yet, in general, only capable of receiving and profiting by an elementary education, which costs comparatively much less than that suitable for the white race in its more advanced stages of

civilization”. More than a century before the issuing of the 1893 United States Office of Education report, President Thomas Jefferson posited similar claims, positing that Black people were intellectually inferior, innately; however, they were at least bighearted: “whether further observation will or will not verify the conjecture that nature has been less bountiful to them in the endowments of the head, I believe that in those of the heart she will be found to have done them equal justice (p.125). Similarly, President Thomas Jefferson also espoused his belief that indigenous Americans—those who inhabited America prior to the settling of the European colonies that would later become the United States—should be tamed and made to be civil by way of education (Ewing, 2025). This position seemingly cemented Whiteness, a derivative of the social construct of race, as hierarchically superior to anyone who is non-White (Ewing, 2025). Moreover, this positioning establishes a racial hierarchy that disadvantages anyone, or any group of people, that falls outside of the perceived apex of the racial hierarchy. To be clear, the perceived, and widely accepted, apex in this context was White or Anglo-Saxon males (Wilder, 2013). The United States Office of Education and a President of the United States of America, who also happens to be a principal author of the Declaration of Independence, regarded education as a birthright for White males. Furthermore, he believed that education was an unnecessary, unbeneficial luxury for anyone who did not meet those racialized criteria. The construction of race as a social concept and the exercising of racism have affected every aspect of American life, particularly that of education (KewalRamani & NCES, 2007; Martin, Valoyes-Chávez & Valero, 2024). Omi and Winant (2014) argue that structural forms of racial inequality persist, and in many cases of educational opportunity, it has worsened. Moreover, to best understand the purpose of schools in the United States, it must be acknowledged that the United States of America is a settler colonial racial project. Ewing (2025) posits that the United States

was predicated on “rendering Black and Native people into a state of beast-hood, of savagery” (p.14). Carter G. Woodson reinforces the sentiment of American schools as tools for subjugation, asserting that the physical violence inflicted on Black bodies began at the level of ideation. Furthermore, Woodson (1933) states that, “there would be no lynching if it did not start in the schoolroom” (p.4). Said differently, Woods (1933) argues that the dehumanizing act of physically lynching another human on the basis of race was rationalized first in the American classroom. Paulo Freire (1996) posits that dehumanization marks those whose humanity has been stolen, and those who are stolen it.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are examples of institutional efforts to combat the systemic marginalization and inequity experienced in the American postsecondary education system (Redd, 1998; LeMelle, 2002; Crewe, 2017; Killough, Killough, Burnett, and Bailey, 2018). HBCUs were developed in response to the desire of African Americans—formally enslaved Africans and their descendants—to be free and full participants in the American society (NCES, n.d.; Dannels, Purdy, & Span, 2015). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines historically Black colleges and universities as institutions of higher education that were established prior to 1964 with the principal mission of educating Black Americans. Moreover, these institutions were developed in an environment of legal segregation. These institutions of higher learning, while developed by African Americans—for the purpose of educating African Americans, practiced racial inclusion in their admission policies (Anderson, 2010; Conrad & Gasman, 2015). HBCUs are among the first American educational institutions to desegregate the classroom. While enrollment compositions vary from year to year, in 2022 non-Black students accounted for 24 percent of all HBCU students

nationwide, compared with 15 percent in 1976 (NCES, 2023). Institutions that were birthed in systems of inequity modeled social equity in education for the nation.

Equity and Inclusion in Education

Traditionally white institutions (TWIs) of higher learning—both public and private—excluded the admission of ethnic minorities; however, legislative advocacy spurred by the Civil Rights Movement began to change that (Hartnett, 1970; Hurtado, 2001; Wilder, 2013). The term traditionally white institution is synonymous with predominantly White institution (PWI); however, it is worth noting that the emphasis on ‘traditional’ contextualizes the legacy of exclusion of non-White people from these institutions (Bourke, 2016). In several court cases over a period of time, civil rights were granted to systemically oppressed citizens— this included the right to equal access to education. *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 was focused chiefly on primary and secondary education; however, this landmark Supreme Court case declared “separate but equal” practices in education to be unconstitutional, establishing a legal foundation for desegregating all levels of education. In 1964, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin in programs and activities receiving federal financing. The next year, in 1965, the Higher Education Act provided funding for programs aimed at increasing access for historically underrepresented groups. There was also a focus on reinforcing principles of non-discrimination (Rose, 2016).

Banning Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

The legendary American poet, Maya Angelou penned a poem titled, “These Yet to be United States.” This literary piece examines the paradoxical relationship of global power, influence, wealth, and internal strife experienced by the United States of America. Maya Angelou, in this poem, inquires as to why a nation so rich in resources and influence is suffering.

With an estimated net wealth of \$145.8 trillion, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2022), the United States of America is the wealthiest nation, by net worth, on earth. While the United States of America is arguably financially strong, the suffering pointed to by Dr. Angelou in her poem is of a social nature. This notion is reinforced by the protracted struggle for civil rights experienced by minoritized populations in the USA (DuBois, 1903; Hurtado, 2001; Iverson, 2007; Litwack, 2009). The right to have access to quality education— equal access to equitable educational opportunities—is just one manifestation of that prolonged battle for equity.

In 2022, Ron DeSantis, the elected governor of Florida, signed into law the “Stop WOKE Act.” This legislation aims to regulate how schools, organizations, and businesses within the state of Florida address issues of race and gender (Hutchens and Miller, 2023). Moreover, it is described as part of the governor’s continued effort to dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies in the state. Similarly, in 2023 Gregory Abbott, elected governor of the state of Texas, signed Senate Bill 17 into law. This legislation prohibits diversity, equity, and inclusion activities by publicly supported institutions such as primary schools, colleges, and state agencies (Green, 2023). These seemingly isolated legislative acts are believed to be part of a larger concerted effort on behalf of the politically-conservative citizens in the United States of America (Gorski, 2006; Boily and Epperson, 2020). Conyers (2025) posits that the United States of America is embroiled in political conflict over the implementation and continuance of DEI policies. In his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois seemingly positions himself to be in favor of inclusionary practices. A tireless activist, advocating for the dismantling of systems of racial oppression, DuBois (1903), believed that people within a society should be permitted to fully participate without having to suppress their racial identity. Race, an uncontrollable variable, should not be a barrier to societal inclusion. Phillips (2019) posits that

acknowledging diversity in higher education has become imperative, highlighting the pervasiveness with which diversity is mentioned in university mission statements. Moreover, Phillips (2019) cites that entire departments at some colleges and universities are dedicated to the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). In contrast, since becoming re-elected in 2024, President Donald Trump has targeted institutions of higher education for their inclusionary policies and their promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusion (Edwards, 2025; Ng, Fitzsimmons, Kulkarni, Ozturk, April, Banerjee, & Muhr, 2025). The United States of America is seemingly at a crossroads—a pivotal moment in its history. It must decide, among many things, if it will embrace social equity for all in higher education, or if it will revert to its genesis to exercise exclusionary practices (McNair, Bensimon, & Malcom-Piqueux, 2020; Conyers, 2025).

Brief History of American Postsecondary Education

In 1862, the Morrill Land Grant College Act was made law by the United States Congress. Fifty-two new institutions of higher learning came into existence as a result of the law (Ewing, 2025). The law offered parcels of land to states for the purpose of creating and funding postsecondary institutions. The new universities were intended to develop a generation of “educated bureaucrats” that would usher the country into a modern era (Sorber, 2018). Ewing (2025) argues that there was a national appetite for railroad expansion, agricultural innovation, and increased manufacturing. Economic analysis has suggested that the Morrill Act was transformative for the nation, resulting in significant increases to GDP per capita, and allowing the United States to position itself as a global superpower. The land that was offered up to generate this massive wealth was land that belonged to Indigenous people. Approximately eleven million acres of land from nearly 250 Native tribes and communities was pilfered for the purpose

of American expansion (Ewing, 2025). Generations of college students have benefitted from this massive theft of land. Despite the land belonging to Native tribes, the overwhelming majority of college students who have benefitted from the economic opportunity are White (Wilder, 2013; Ewing, 2025). Native and Indigenous students account for less than one percent of student enrollment at Morrill universities (Feir and Jones, 2021).

As America was being settled, education was perceived as a luxury commodity. Access to formal education was bestowed to a limited number of people— chiefly those who could afford it (Wilder, 2013). Community colleges are not above critique in this regard. Bragg (2001) argues that in their infancy, community colleges primarily served traditionally-aged, male, White, college-bound students. In *Ebony and Ivy*, Wilder (2013) posits that the first five colleges of the British American colonies, established between 1636 and 1746, benefitted from the Mid-Atlantic African slave trade. Wilder (2013), studied this dynamic relationship in depth and discovered that “The colleges were imperial mechanisms to expand European control and to enrich white planters and traders.” From their inception, American colleges were supported almost exclusively by patrons with significant social and fiscal capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000; Blight, 2024). To that end, the first colleges in the British American colonies were tools of Christian expansion, weapons for the conquest of indigenous people, and significant beneficiaries of the African slave trade (Wilder, 2013; Zehmer, Sewell, & Johnston, 2019). The purpose of American postsecondary education would evolve, to some degree, beyond the scope of colonization (Tyack and Cuban, 1995). Contemporarily, the two-year public college sector is the primary point of entry for socioeconomically disadvantaged-- namely African Americans, Latinos, immigrants, and working adults (Bragg, 2001; Callaway, 2023).

President Truman, in 1946, initiated a commission—known as the Truman Commission on Higher Education—to assess the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities of postsecondary education in the United States of America (President's Commission on Higher Education, 1947). The Truman Commission issued a multivolume report as evidence of their work—a six volume report titled *Higher Education for American Democracy*. The recommendations made by the Truman Commission on Higher Education were plentiful; however, the undergirding theme was one of expansion. The Truman Commission on Higher Education argued that American postsecondary education should expand in scope and in service (President's Commission on Higher Education, 1947; Stohl, 2017). The members of the commission believed that investments in America's higher education infrastructure would yield benefits that secured America's global positioning as a geopolitical superpower (Stohl, 2017). Gilbert & Heller (2013) argues that “the sweeping recommendations the report made about higher education in its six volumes were both celebrated and reviled.” Supporting this, in part, is Thelin, (2004), stating that the report had “neither the precedent nor the presidential clout to work its way into Congressional subcommittees.” Out of this commission came the expansion of America's junior colleges. In fact, the Truman Commission is responsible for coining the phrase “community college” (Strohl, 2018).

Community Colleges

The foundation of today's community colleges is cemented in the Morrill Act of 1862. In fact, higher education witnessed a burst of growth from the 1862 Morrill Act, which allowed for the sale of federal lands to states, to establish state universities or add to existing state universities (Witt, Wattenbarger, Collattscheck, & Suppiger, 1994). Initially called junior colleges or two-year colleges, these institutions emerged as a response to the Morrill Act's

expansion of public higher education, opening doors to those historically denied access (Bragg, 2001; Drummond, 2002; Boggs & Irwin, 2008). William Rainey Harper is generally credited with coining the term "junior college" (Witt, Wattenbarger, Collattscheck, & Suppiger, 1994). However, the precise date of this occurrence varies across different accounts. Tillery and Deegan (1985) attribute the inception of junior colleges to Harper and his contemporaries around 1900, placing them in the first generation of such institutions. In contrast, some researchers suggest an earlier date of 1895 for Harper's use of the term (Witt et al. 1994). Additionally, according to Witt et al. (1994), Harper introduced the associate degree in 1899 as a qualification for junior college graduates.

Community colleges are open-access public institutions offering affordable associate degrees, vocational training, and certificate programs (American Association of Community Colleges, n.d.). Kisker, Cohen, and Brawner (2023) argue that community colleges are the bedrock of the American educational and economic landscape. These institutions serve a diverse student population, including those seeking workforce development, transfer to four-year institutions, or personal enrichment (Boggs, 2011; Bailey et al., 2013). Community colleges play a vital role in American higher education by providing accessible pathways to degrees, careers, and lifelong learning. Community colleges approach contemporary issues related to equity, sustainability, and student success, according to Kisker et al. (2023). Jack Mountjoy (2022) offers critique for community colleges arguing that "two-year community colleges enroll nearly half of all first-time undergraduates in the United States, but to ambiguous effect: low persistence rates and the potential for diverting students from four-year institutions cast ambiguity over two-year colleges' contributions to upward mobility." Some scholars cite the negative relationship between enrollment sizes and completion rates at community colleges,

indicating the high cost associated with aiding community college students achieve success (Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Keinbach, & Kienzl, 2006). The Morrill Act of 1862, which established land-grant colleges, laid the groundwork for expanding access to higher education, including for those who could not afford or did not desire a four-year degree. The mid-20th century witnessed a surge in community college enrollment growth. The post-World War II era, characterized by returning veterans and a burgeoning middle class, fueled a demand for higher education. The G.I. Bill of Rights, offering financial support to veterans, further propelled this growth (Bound & Turner, 2002; Levine & Levine, 2011). Coupled with the Baby Boom generation and the Civil Rights Movement's expansion of educational access, community colleges became increasingly vital institutions. Some scholars argue that the community college is uniquely positioned to reverse the widening achievement, wealth and opportunity gaps that threaten the existence of the American middle class (Myran, Ivery, Parsons, Kinsley, and Parsons, 2013). Moreover, Myran et al. (2013) posits that human equality is a founding force of the institution of community colleges. Castro (2015) advocates for community colleges as primary facilitators of social equity, proposing changes that optimize these institutions for the work of achieving equitable outcomes.

Today, community colleges are essential institutions that provide a diverse array of educational opportunities (Pratt, 2017). Community colleges serve a wide range of learners, from traditional college-age students to adult learners, and individuals seeking opportunities to upskill or reskill (Atwell, Ecton, Klien, D'Amico, and Sublett, 2022). Boggs (2003) suggests that community colleges have evolved into dynamic and flexible centers of learning which are responsive to local, regional, and global needs. The key roles of contemporary community colleges are 1) expanding access to higher education, 2) providing flexible academic programs,

3) support workforce development, and foster community development (Kasper, 2003; Jacobs, 2012; Baston, Bridglall, & Nettles, 2022). By offering affordable tuition, community colleges make the attainment of postsecondary education credentials easier for more prospective students, effectively reducing a barrier to entry (Glyn, Salerno, and Chumley, 2021). Similarly, the diverse and flexible course offerings afforded by community colleges allow for non-traditional students (e.g. student parents, elderly adults, working students, etc.) to pursue an academic career at a more convenient pace. Through private/public initiatives, and by way of strategic state planning, community colleges engage in economic development and workforce development, spurring opportunities for social mobility in the communities they serve (Haveman and Smeeding, 2006; Romano and Eddy, 2017; Baston, Bridglall, & Nettles, 2022). Community colleges enroll a higher percentage of minority and low-income students than four-year institutions (AACC, 2015). With the U.S. population projected to be majority-minority by 2044, Colby and Ortman (2015) argue that community colleges must adapt to provide equitable educational opportunities for all students. Moreover, almost 15% of the United States population remains in poverty (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015; U.S. Census, 2025). Depending on which of the two primary metrics are used, this accounts for approximately 35-43 million Americans living in poverty (U.S. Census, 2025). This represents a problem for the future stability and success of the nation. Rodriguez (2015) posits, therefore, that a particular focus should be on serving and assisting those who have historically been underserved in higher education.

Urban Community Colleges

Urban community colleges are described as having been at the forefront of the quest for a multiracial democracy with a clear commitment to increase student success, economic prosperity, and social equity (Myran, Ivery, Parsons, Kinsley, 2013). Myran and Parsons (2013)

define the urban community college as “those [community colleges] serving the largest metropolitan regions anchored by major urban hubs. In most cases, the service area includes a high-density urban center and related neighborhoods, an urban/suburban transition fringe, suburban areas, and limited rural areas” (p.8). Smith and Miller (2023) argue; however, that defining urban community colleges is difficult due in part to the constantly evolving definition of the word ‘urban’ by the United States Census Bureau. Moreover, they argue that many factors, including population density and suburban growth influence what geographical areas are considered urban. Said differently, due to ever-fluid migration patterns of the American population, there are towns that were once considered rural, but in recent years are evolving into urban areas. This is reflective of the analysis conducted by the World Bank (2023) that indicated by 2050, approximately 83% of North America will be urbanized. For this reason, Smith and Miller (2023) and Hardy and Katsinas (2007) posit that research on urban community colleges is not as robust as the available research on rural community colleges. Much of the available research on urban community colleges, they argue, is from a case-study perspective. In much of the research that is available, “scholars have used the urban community college as a location to set their research rather than an exploration of what urban might mean and how urbanicity might impact these institutions” (Smith & Miller, 2024, p.10). Sparks and Nunez (2014) echo this argument indicating that while much research has addressed postsecondary outcomes for students who grew up in rural areas, not much research has been focused on the persistence patterns of students based on the urbanicity of the institution attended. The persistence of college students is tied to their success rates and opportunities to experience social mobility (Haveman and Smeeding, 2006; Button, 2009). How student success is achieved by students and promoted by institutions will vary by institution. The factors that adversely impact urban community

colleges will inevitably overlap with factors that impact community colleges generally; however, there are unique challenges and circumstances that are germane to urban community colleges (Smith & Miller, 2024).

While scholars might disagree on a shared definition of what constitutes an urban college, scholars seem to agree that urban community colleges serve vastly diverse populations of students, and the diversity of the student population mirrors that of the communities they serve (Myran et al., 2013; Smith and Miller, 2023). Ethnic minorities account for at least 30% of community college enrollment generally (Bragg, 2001). Approximately half of the African American and Latino students who enroll in college after graduating from high school choose to enroll in community college (2001). For context, in 2020, ethnic minorities accounted for 48% of all college students in the United States (NCES, 2023). Comparatively, urban community colleges enroll higher percentages of ethnically diverse students, students of low socioeconomic status (SES), and students who lack adequate levels of college readiness (Bahr, 2008; Smith and Miller, 2023).

Challenges Facing Urban Community Colleges

Similar to their non-urban counterparts, urban community colleges are subject to the budget cuts of state and local municipalities (Cisneros, 1996; Boggs & McPhail, 2016). These resource limitations impact the capacity of these institutions to achieve their goals and provide an exemplary student experience. Ozaki, Olson, Johnston-Guerrero, Pizzolato (2020) suggests that community colleges are tasked with meeting a significantly wide range of student needs with fewer resources than their four-year counterparts. Cisneros (1996) also cites a lack of leadership as a reason why urban community colleges experience difficulty in achieving success. Concerns about executive leaders of community colleges are shared by other scholars. Felix, Galan, &

Jimenez-Perez (2025) point to the taxes levied on executive leaders and how those leaders are impacted by them while leading efforts to advance racial justice and social equity. Felix et al. (2025) cite feelings of isolation, difficulty in navigating sociopolitical resistance, and potential of being burned out. These taxes impact leaders' ability to lead. The lack of adequate funding when coupled with the unique challenges of the student demographic that is being served can manifest into institutional problems of low retention and low graduation rates. Tangential to institutional fiscal concerns, professional development opportunities for faculty and staff are limited. Leaders of community colleges are charged with the task of addressing many challenges while working towards achieving social equity (Peterson, Robinson & Rideaux, 2025). These challenges have the potential to adversely impact the student experience. Moreover, it potentially results in poor professional experiences for faculty and staff.

Challenges experienced by the urban community college are not confined to their metropolitan campuses, but they extend beyond their gates to include the communities that they serve. Stahl (1986) argues that a decreasing tax base and deteriorating school systems are part of the problem plaguing these unique intuitions of higher learning. In February 2026, the Florida House of Representatives, under the direction of Governor Ron DeSantis, passed a proposal to eliminate property taxes (Miami Herald, 2026). While the legislative proposal must still gain approval from the Florida Senate, it is believed that such a decision could cost local governments approximately \$14 billion annually. For context, community colleges are funded, in part, by property taxes. Wilson (2019) cites 94% of community college chancellors and presidents in Texas perceived a relationship between property taxes and student completion. Moreover, Stahl (1986) highlights the adverse impacts of increasing rates of immigration, chronic unemployment, and persistent rates of illiteracy. Together, these factors stress the finite resources of urban

community colleges in achieving their mission, accomplishing their goals, and providing exemplary service to their communities. Said differently, the factors that the urban community college seeks to ameliorate are the same factors impeding on its ability to provide adequate resolution.

Leadership Challenges. Community colleges are well positioned to address these challenges; however, these institutions need leadership approaches that will allow for them to achieve success (Cooney, Martin III, Ayres-Palmore, and Garza, 2023). Both Cisneros (1996) and Stahl (1986) posit that leadership is essential to the success of urban community colleges. Ethical leadership is held up as a north star for navigating the uncertainty and challenges (Peterson, Robinson, & Rideaux, 2025). Executive leaders of these institutions are encouraged to continue advocating for what is equitable, even in the face of opposition and adversity. Cementing the point, “in an era marked by criticism, challenge, and change, urban community colleges and their leaders must seize the initiative and undertake new efforts to redefine their agendas and the criteria and policies by which their success will be judged” (Stahl, 1986, p.8). Burmicky (2023) contends that “community colleges cultivate social justice tenets rooted in opportunity, racial inclusion, and holistic student care” (p.218). The work of community colleges is rooted in expanded access, inclusion, social equity, and social mobility; however, the factors of increased diversity, inequitable systems, and generational poverty can be exacerbated by urban environments, making that work difficult.

Diversity in Urban Environments

Urban communities in the United States of America often experience higher rates of racial and ethnic diversity than their rural counterparts. Jo and Lan Rong (2002) posit that urban school districts have absorbed the largest number of immigrants and low-income students. They

argue that immigrants living in urban areas tend to be less educated and have a lower proficiency in spoken English compared to immigrants who live in suburban areas (Rong & Preissle, 1998). The Hispanic population has been the fastest growing population - from less than one million at the turn of the last century to 34 million in 2000. Moreover, the Hispanic population in the United States of America has become the largest minority population in the country. Similarly, the Asian population in America has shown a rapid rate of growth-- from less than 250,000 in 1900 to 11 million in 2000 (Jo and Lan Rong, 2002). According to the Pew Research Center, immigrants account for approximately 15.4% of the United States' population, approximately 51.9 million people (2025). Per the United States Census data, a significant percentage of immigrants reside in the nation's largest cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston (2025). Leaders addressing social equity in urban ecosystems are confronted with achieving equity across a wider spectrum of diversity than their counterparts in rural ecosystems.

Challenges of Educating in Urban Environments

Francois and Weiner (2024) found that administrators in urban school districts often experienced external challenges while attempting to improve their districts. They argue that the neoliberal hyper-focus on external compliance (e.g. testing and formal evaluations) often sabotages equitable outcomes and overshadows a leader's ability to focus on the moral accountability required to foster genuine student learning. Furthermore, research on Title I school administrators highlighted that while transformational leadership is critical for high-poverty schools, administrators identify constant external pressures as a primary barrier to effectively modeling that leadership and shaping a healthy culture (Brown, Grace, and Jones, 2024). Ewing (2025) argues that despite much critique of the practice of tracking, Native children and African American children disproportionately represent students that are guided and

steered away from high school curriculum that would better prepare them for college. This highlights internal systemic challenges within the primary school system that mirrors the inequities outside of the school system. The lingering impact of systemic marginalization follows students beyond the k-12 system. Studies indicate that an overemphasis on coding within the field of computer science is leading to what are perceived as “technical ghettos”—where ethnically minoritized students are trained for low-wage, introductory-level technology jobs, while their White counterparts are ushered into opportunities to innovate with start-ups (Anderson, 2016). Inequity may be experienced unintentionally; however, it is a result of intentionality. Achieving social equity, seemingly, must be approached with a similar—if not greater—level of intentionality.

Social Equity in Community Colleges

Though community colleges are lauded for their ability to democratize higher education, significant disparities in student achievement persist, necessitating a critical examination of equity within these institutions. Moreover, it is contended by McNair, Bensimon, & Malcom-Piqueux (2020) social equity in community colleges entails the equitable treatment of all students, irrespective of their demographic characteristics, and the provision of equal opportunities for academic and personal success. As Tinto (1993) argues, student success is influenced by a complex interplay of personal, social, and institutional factors. Social equity, therefore, requires addressing systemic barriers that hinder student progress. Tinto & Pusser (2006) advocate for an institutional model that centers student success. Students achieving success is greater than any one office, department, or role. Student success, as a metric, goal, and outcome should be prioritized at an institutional level (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Hurtado (2001) asserts in alignment, indicating that students from marginalized groups may face discrimination,

bias, and a lack of cultural understanding from faculty and staff, which can negatively impact their sense of belonging and academic motivation. Carey (2004) cites that despite years of effort towards improving student success, college completion rates in the United States of America have not significantly changed in the past 20 years. Tinto (2006) acknowledges that there are many reasons for the lack of progress achieved. The web of barriers and obstacles experienced by the underserved students enrolled at urban community colleges constitutes a system that exhibits an imbalance of equity (McNair et al., 2020). Ivery and Bassett (2011) posit that, “in the nation’s inner cities, the idea that we’ve entered a truly colorblind era that affords equal opportunity to all is a fantasy that ignores the reality of what for decades has been defined as the ‘crisis in urban America’—generational conditions of concentrated poverty, unemployment, segregation, incarceration, inadequate education, and related ills, which have disproportionately afflicted African American, Latino, and nonwhite populations”. Executive leaders of urban community colleges are contemporary leaders charged with resolving legacy crises.

Castro (2015) posits that social equity appears easy to understand, yet argues that the seemingly simple appearance is the reason why there is such widespread misunderstanding regarding how social equity is defined. Castro contends that social equity is actually complex—an amalgamation of sociopolitical and economic relations (2015). Similarly, it is argued by McNair, Bensimon, & Malcom-Piqueux (2020) that education leaders interrogate the concept of equity and its relationship to equality, stating that “the paradox of equality requires a critical examination of the historical, social, cultural, and political perspectives that make the concept of equality a misnomer for many in our society, especially minoritized students” (p.3). Social equity is not easily explained, nor is it readily comprehensible by the average person. Leaders in these spaces, charged with this work must lead in the demystification of, defining of, and achieving of

social equity—for the communities they serve (McNair, Bensimon, & Malcom-Piqueux, 2020). Myran and Parson (2013) suggest that social equity can be defined as the pursuit of a multiracial democracy. A multiracial democracy is a society in which people of all races, religions, classes, and genders unite in support of principles of social justice and racial and civic equality. “It is a call for new ways to address long-term, unresolved racial inequities. It is a call to confront and dismantle at last the residual impact of legalized discrimination from the past” (Myran & Parson, 2013). As it pertains to postsecondary education, Dowd and Bensimon (2015) argue that equity be perceived and employed as a standard by which community college leaders determine “whether a state of affairs is just or unjust” (p.9). Castro (2015) seemingly agrees with the framing of equity as a matter of leadership, offering that equity is a “contextually dependent construct,” arguing that “vision is the most important element of engaging equity-oriented practice” (p.6). Zamani (2000) provided insight into how success rates for students of color paled in comparison to white majority students despite multiple efforts aimed at increasing student success for minoritized students. Scott (2013) argues that the proverbial playing field in postsecondary education is not equal—all students are not afforded the same opportunities to succeed.

Leaders of urban community colleges are charged with navigating the circumstances related to developing and implementing social equity (Stahl, 1986; McNair et al., 2020). Tinto & Pusser (2006) warn though that too much research focuses on theory, perhaps appealing to fellow scholars. It is suggested that these theoretical offerings do not often translate well into defined actionable next steps. Leaders should be mindful of the feasibility of their visions of achieving social equity to translate and be understood by the people doing the work. Moreover, specifically as it pertains to achieving student success—which is the success of all students

regardless of where they come from—Tinto and Pusser (2006) posit that research in this area focuses too heavily on external affairs. It is argued that context matters—knowing what led to a student’s current state is important in understanding how to help said student; however, the college has little immediate influence over external factors such as family dynamics, prior high school experience, etc.

Achieving the Dream

Achieving the Dream (ATD) is an American organization committed to championing colleges across the country (Mayer, Cerna, Fong, Rutschow, and Jenkins, 2014). ATD partners with over 300 American community colleges to transform communities by way of transforming community colleges. Central to the work of ATD is the creation of opportunities and the dismantling of barriers to students’ success. In 2023, ATD published an equity toolkit aimed at aiding institutional leaders in identifying and implementing the most promising practices in improving equity in community colleges (Achieving the Dream, 2023). Founded in 2004, Achieving the Dream was established by The Lumina Foundation to close achievement gaps and accelerate student success nationwide by guiding institutional change, influencing public policy, generating knowledge, and engaging the public. To remedy equity gaps, ATD encourages community college faculty members to use data-informed decision-making to improve student success and close achievement gaps among underrepresented groups, including “racially marginalized and poverty-impacted students” (ATD, 2022c, para. 5). While ATD assists community colleges in curating and facilitating improved outcomes for all students, there is a particular focus on socioeconomically disadvantaged and minoritized students through institutional change. This approach mirrors the institutional-wide approach to student success argued by Tinto & Pusser (2006). Since its inception as a “non-governmental reform network”

(ATD, 2018a, para. 6), a key component of ATD has been engaging faculty members at community colleges to analyze the evidence of student achievement gaps and collaborate with administration and staff members to make sustainable improvements specific to their colleges (Torres et al., 2018). Achieving student success is, in part, a matter of strategic collaboration. ATD exemplifies this through its unique positioning as a third-party agency with no direct ties to institutions, but through advocacy of a shared vision for students' success.

Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory

Critical theory, a theoretical approach originating from the Frankfurt School and other intellectual movements, offers a rigorous analytical tool for investigating the social, political, and economic structures that underpin higher education (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002). In the context of community colleges, critical theory can be used to analyze issues such as equity, power, and social justice (Fairclough, 2003; Grioux, 2004). Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an extension of Critical Theory which delves more deeply into examining the intersectionality of race and equity, in relation to power, privilege, systems, and society (Crenshaw, 1989; Bell, 1992; Delgado, 2017). Ladson-Billings (2000) argues that CRT “helps to raise some important questions about control and production of knowledge—particularly knowledge about people and communities of color” (p.272). Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theory developed in the 1970s (Ladson-Billings, 2009). CRT is based on five tenets (Solorzano, Villalpando, and Oseguera, 2005):

1. Centrality of race and racism- race and racism are defining characteristics of American society and are imbedded in the higher education structure.

2. A challenge to dominant ideology- CRT challenges the accepted principles of meritocracy, color blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity.

3. A commitment to social justice- CRT is fundamentally committed to the elimination of all forms of racial, gender, language, and generation status, and class subordination.

4. Emphasis on the value of experiential knowledge- allows for the view that experiential knowledge is a strength and there is value in counter-stories.

5. Interdisciplinary perspective- CRT challenges the undisciplined focus of much of the educational research.

While CRT is an extension of Critical Theory, it is necessary to note that the two theories are not synonymous. Critical Theory, for its applicability in analyzing systems and institutions for their impact on power, justice, and economy, it is chosen as the theoretical framework for this study.

Employing use of Critical Theory, Solorzano and Bernal (2001) examined the lived experiences of ethnically minoritized students, low-income students, and first-generation college students, highlighting the impact of institutional racism, classism, and other forms of discrimination. Moreover, it is argued that as researchers highlight the need for inclusive practices, strategies must acknowledge the diversity of students' backgrounds for equitable experiences and outcomes. Harrison (2024) employs critical narrative inquiry to examine how the authenticity and academic success of Black students are impacted by "White fragility". This exploration of how Black students' experiences are impacted by the ecosystem in which they are expected to succeed is indicative of the critical analysis of systems advocated for by McNair, et al. (2020). Similarly, Cho (2025) examines 63 ethnically-minoritized college staff members

across the United States of America. Cho's use of critical narrative inquiry was to document how marginalized staff navigate and sometimes subvert oppressive state policies amidst a political climate that is not supportive of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices. In this study, it is illustrated that systems of postsecondary education do not operate independently from systems of politics or systems of governance. Cho examines how those systems impact the ways in which the administrators who are charged with facilitating students' success show up. It highlights an interconnectedness of power, influence, and systems. Horkheimer, Adorno, and Noeri (2002) argue the applicability of Critical Theory to understand and challenge social, political, and cultural structures. This applicability is evidenced in the leadership study conducted by Santamaria & Santamaria (2012). Introducing the "Applied Critical Leadership" framework, the authors use diverse educational case studies to explore how leaders dismantle the status quo. The work emphasizes that truly equitable administrators reject top-down mandates, opting instead to share power and co-construct institutional policies directly with the marginalized communities they serve. These leaders decentralize their power, collaborating directly with marginalized groups. It is important to note the decentralization of power as key component of critical theory. Systems exert power and influence, as do the actors within systems. In the study conducted by Santamaria & Santamaria (2012), the actors established lines of demarcation between themselves and the system on behalf of those oppressed by the system.

Systems Theory

Systems theory, a theoretical perspective that conceptualizes organizations as complex systems comprising interdependent elements (Birnbaum, 1988). It has been extensively applied to diverse fields, including education. Anderson-Long and Jeffries (2019) contend that systems theory can be used to demonstrate how shifts in society can impact higher education and how

higher education can impact shifts in society. Moreover, they argue that “open systems theory views colleges as subsystems of a larger society, with permeable boundaries that allow for influence from their external environments” (p.1). Systems theory provides a valuable analytical tool for understanding the intricate relationships between students, faculty, staff, administrators, and external stakeholders. Davis, Dent, and Wharff (2015) contend that “postsecondary educational institutions are faced with a confluence of factors that increase the complexity of systems that leaders must manage” (p.1). Community colleges function as open systems, engaging in a dynamic interplay with their external environment. They receive inputs from various external sources, including students, funding agencies, and regulatory bodies, and generate outputs such as graduates and skilled workers (Senge, 1997). The interconnectedness of community college systems means that a change in one part can have ripples of consequences. Feedback loops allow these systems to respond to challenges and opportunities (Katz and Kahn, 2015).

As there is a wide range of community college types, so too is there a diversity of systems. Davis, Dent, and Wharff (2015) offer complex adaptive systems (CAS) as a means of examining community colleges. CAS are described as a “highly connected network of semi-independent agents from which the system wide patterns emerge—systems that can adapt and learn over time” (Clancy, Effken, and Pesut, 2008). Moreover, CAS are characterized by diverse and interdependent agents, connected by a shared goal or perspective that interact in nonlinear ways, self-organize, have emergent properties, and adapt to the environment” (Davis, Dent, and Wharff, 2015). Cilliers (2000) offers that for leaders charged with leading in complex adaptive systems, moving away from the traditional management models of bureaucracy is necessary. Instead, leaders should employ adaptive models of leadership, as they acknowledge the emerging

dynamics of complex systems. Alfred (2008), and Eddy (2012) argue that community college leaders are stuck in hierarchical bureaucratic leadership frameworks that fail to serve them well. Davis et al. (2015) highlights the limitations of hierarchical models of leadership in meeting the increasingly complex needs of educational leadership. Systems theory, in the context of this study, supports the concept of postsecondary institutions as systems to be critically examined for their power and influence.

Leadership Theory

Organizational leadership theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding the role of leaders in shaping the direction, culture, and performance of organizations (Bass, 1985). There is a myriad of leadership styles that exist— effective leaders know when, where, and how to apply the leadership styles at their disposal (2018). In the context of community colleges, effective leadership is paramount for navigating complex challenges, such as increasing enrollment, enhancing student success rates, and adapting to evolving societal needs. Burmicky (2023) argues that leaders of community colleges must be equity-driven and social justice-oriented to be successful in achieving the goals of community colleges. Moreover, it is offered that due to the increase of diverse learners enrolling, expansion of programs (e.g. dual credit), and an increase of Pell Grant recipients and first-generation college students, leadership in the community college sector has become more comprehensive. Leaders of community colleges must be more culturally responsive, culturally sensitive, and culturally aware to deliver equity to their students (McNair et al.).

Community college leaders face a myriad of challenges as they strive to fulfill their mission of providing accessible and affordable higher education. Balancing the diverse needs of students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community members while navigating financial

constraints requires skillful leadership (Bass, 1985; Northouse, 2018). As student populations become increasingly diverse, leaders must foster inclusive environments that support the success of all learners (McNair, Bensimon, & Malcom-Piqueux, 2020). Moreover, the rapid pace of technological advancement necessitates a commitment to innovation and adaptability in order to equip students with the skills they need to thrive in the 21st-century workforce. An adaptive leadership style is suggested by Cilliers (2000), for community college leaders operating on the ever-shifting landscape of American postsecondary education, particularly in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic that disrupted leadership norms. Alternatively, Burmicky and Hartman (2023) contend that community college leaders embrace equity-driven and social justice-oriented leadership styles.

Equity-Driven Leadership

Transformational leadership provides theoretical context for equity-driven leadership (Burmicky and Hartman, 2023). Strategies that empower community college leaders to advocate for, and enact social change are steeped in transformational leadership. Moreover, it is argued by Shields (2010) that transformative leadership equips college leaders to advance key subjects such as liberation, democracy, equity, and social justice. Boggs (2011) contends that the shared mission of community colleges is to expand access to postsecondary education and the opportunities associated with it. Burmicky and Hartman (2023) suggest that institutional data can be operationalized to achieve equity. They argue that many times college leaders do not know where to look when aiming to close equity gaps. Sentiments by McNair et al. (2020) support this position—stating that “when institutions disaggregate data, they are more likely to look at differences by race and ethnicity than students’ socioeconomic status or their parents’ level of educational attainment” (p.9). Equity-driven leadership in community colleges is informed by

the tenets of transformative leadership, such as critical humility, coalition building, liberation, and democracy. Furthermore, it must be linked to student outcomes, with a particular focus on equitable educational attainment for historically marginalized populations (Burmicky and Hartman, 2023). This definition aligns with equity-mindedness, a framework used by scholars to promote racial equity in reducing racial equity gaps (Malcolm-Piqueaux and Bensimón, 2017), and examine institutional policies supporting underrepresented students (Felix, 2021). This perspective empowers community college leaders and scholars to drive transformative changes toward more equitable environments (McNair et al., 2020; Burmicky and Hartman, 2023).

Transformational Leadership

Transformation leadership theory is an organizational leadership theory that provides a framework for examining the inspirational and motivating qualities of leaders that result in their teams, or followers, achieving extraordinary outcomes through a fostering of shared vision, innovation, and personal growth. Transformational leadership theory offers a theoretical framework for understanding how executive leaders of urban community colleges perceive their roles and responsibilities as it pertains to addressing social equity (Burns, 1978; Bass 1985). Lamaro, Ndyomugenyi, & Openjuru (2025) explore the evolving role of postsecondary executives, paying particular attention to the shift from traditional administration to dynamic transformational leadership. The authors find that in the midst of intense circumstances—namely equity gaps—leaders must serve as change agents. There is an emphasis on collaborative governance and participatory decision-making yielding success for leaders who are focused on achieving equity, despite political resistance and finite resources. Similarly, executive leaders of urban community colleges are charged with equitably serving underserved, minoritized, socioeconomically disadvantaged, diverse students (McNair et al., 2020; Smith and Miller,

2023). Bass (1985) posits that the essence of transformational leadership involves the dynamics of the leader-follower dyad, which is concerned with second order change and those phenomena, such as intellectual stimulation, that have typically been excluded from social science research. Elmalak-Watad & Schechter (2025) posit that culturally responsive transformational leadership serves as a critical mechanism for social mobility. By adapting to student heterogeneity and fostering academic environments that bridge the gap between diverse cultural backgrounds and institutional practices, leaders significantly influence students' long-term career aspirations and their capacity to navigate structural social barriers. While acknowledging the similarities between transformational and transactional leaders, Bass (1985) argues that key distinguishable attributes of the transformational leader are charisma, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation. Bass (1985) examines the connective tissue of relationships, leadership style, environment, and productivity experienced by transformational leaders. It is with this lens that the perceptions of executive leaders of urban community colleges will be examined.

Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory, a concept with roots in sociology, economics, and political science, has been increasingly employed to understand the social and economic dynamics of communities. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) suggest that the term “social capital” initially was used to highlight the survival and functioning of city neighborhoods—a focus on personal relationships developed over time that served as a foundation for trust and collective action. Scholars have since expanded the use of the term to highlight social capital as an influence on human and economic performance (Coleman, 1988; Baker, 1990). In the context of community colleges, social capital can be defined as the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate cooperation and collective action among students, faculty, staff, and community members. Social

capital may also be used to examine the social mobility and economic viability of students who have attained credentials of value (e.g. associate or bachelor's degrees) from postsecondary institutions (Portes, 2014). Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, and Klingsmith (2014) offer that social capital comes from cultural capital, defining it as having access to social networks and connections. Moreover, they contend that "cultural capital includes the culturally learned and internalized beliefs, values, and attitudes about the role education plays in life success" (p.2). Sandoval et al. (2014) provided insight into students' persistence in relation to social and cultural capital. The students that they engaged attributed relationships with faculty, family support, and campus engagement to their success as marginalized community college students.

Lesser (2000) defines social capital as "the wealth (or benefit) that exists because of an individual's social relationships; it exists in, and produced by, relationships" (p.4). Kerrigan (2014) argues that social capital can manifest as either a public or private good. As a public good, Kerrigan offers that social capital manifests as a resource shared amongst a group. This resource may promote unique behavior and be "drawn on to achieve otherwise hard to attain objectives" (Smylie and Evans, 2006, p.189). In this context, ethnically minoritized students, or otherwise underrepresented students at community colleges may have potential to access social capital collectively under certain circumstances. Bourdieu (2002) offers that "social capital is made up of social obligations, which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility" (p.281). Moreover, it is argued that attainment of certain factors (e.g. formal education) may increase the social capital of an individual. Portes (2014) contends that a downside to social capital exists. Social capital, if manifested in ways the reinforce existing inequalities, or excludes certain demographics of people, is detrimental. This is particularly true in the context of community colleges. Social

capital in the context of this study can be perceived as the currency earned by minoritized students throughout their matriculation. This ‘currency’ has the potential to afford these students social mobility—a transition from the socioeconomic status that they come from.

Summative Analysis

The United States of America’s postsecondary education system was intentionally developed in inequity (Du Bois, 1903; Wilder, 2013). It is reflective of a perpetuation of what Ewing (2025) describes as the United States’ original sin—the miseducation of Black and Native children for the purpose of exerting sociopolitical dominion and enforcing a racial hierarchy that benefits White Americans almost exclusively. The United States of America has used its school systems—primary, secondary, and postsecondary—to marginalize, oppress, and establish social dominance over non-White people (DuBois, 1903; Omi and Winant, 2014; Ewing, 2025). The Truman Commission on Higher Education sought to remediate the legacy of discrimination and exclusionary practices that systemically marginalized and underserved vast populations of people—ethnic minorities, women, LGBTQIA, socioeconomically disadvantaged people—for decades (Kim and Rury, 2007; Strohl, 2018). Even community colleges at their inception served a primarily White male demographic (Bragg, 2001). Contemporary community colleges with their commitment to open access, are diametrically different to the early days of postsecondary education in America.

McNair, Bensimon, & Malcom-Piqueux (2020) contend that while community colleges are vastly diverse, enrolling more first-generation, socioeconomically disadvantaged, African American and Latino students than any other segment of American higher education, these institutions experience difficulty in achieving equity for their most underserved students (e.g. African Americans and Latinos). Urban community colleges (UCC) represent a distinct segment

of American community colleges; however, due to their geographical positioning, these institutions are representative of the most diverse higher education institutions in America (Smith & Miller, 2023). Urban community colleges are vastly more diverse than their non-urban community colleges. Their unique levels of diversity, when coupled with their geographic uniqueness in population-dense metropolitan areas affords leaders of urban community colleges unmatched opportunities to address social equity. Addressing social equity has implications that ripple throughout campuses and into the communities served by them (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Myran and Parsons, 2013). Social equity impacts students' persistence, success, and social mobility (Tinto, 1993; Piqueux 2020). How leaders of urban community colleges address social equity is not explored with any great level of detail in the existing literature on community college leadership and community colleges. This qualitative study examines the gap in the literature.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Introduction

This chapter describes the research methodology by which the gap in literature will be studied. The chapter begins with an introduction that outlines the premise of what to expect. The organization of this chapter is such that following the introduction, the purpose of the study, research questions, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, research design, and site selection are explored in detail. Moreover, the study participants, instrumentation, methods related to data collection and data sources, data analysis, alignment table, limitations, ethical considerations, and study quality will be delved into in the order prescribed. The chapter will close with a summary of the aforementioned components of the study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into, and examine, the perceived roles, responsibilities, and best practices of executive leaders addressing social equity at urban community colleges.

Research Questions

In the pursuit of understanding the perceived roles and responsibilities of executive leaders of urban community colleges in addressing social equity, this qualitative narrative inquiry research study is designed to explore the following research questions:

1. How do executive leaders of urban community colleges perceive social equity concepts and their leadership roles?
2. How do executive leaders of urban community colleges perceive their roles in addressing social equity in the communities that they serve?

3. What best practices do executive leaders of urban community colleges exercise in addressing social equity?

According to the existing literature on community colleges, gaps in social equity exist between African American college students and White college students. Similarly, low-income college students experience equity gaps in relation to the access and achievement experienced by high-income college students (Achieving the Dream [ATD], n.d.; McNair, Bensimon, & Malcom-Piqueux, 2020). The first research question seeks to determine how urban community college administrators—namely executive leadership—examine social equity and perceive their leadership at one of America’s most unique postsecondary institution types (Smith & Miller, 2023). The second research question is designed to gain insight as to how these executive leaders of urban community colleges envision themselves addressing social equity from their positions of power, influence, and resources. The final research question explores what these executive leaders perceive to be best practices in addressing social equity. Best practices for the purpose of this study are to be assessed for alignment to across participant responses in an effort to determine what can be replicated to close equity gaps at other urban community colleges.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Lochmiller and Lester (2017) described a study’s theoretical framework as the foundation that conveys the study’s perspective. Conversely, the conceptual framework or conceptual lens is described as a theory framing the variables. Critical Theory (CT) is employed as the theoretical framework for this qualitative, narrative inquiry research study (Horkheimer, 1947; Marcuse, 1955). Critical Theory provides a broad approach that examines power structures, social inequalities, and historical contexts to challenge dominant ideologies and promote social justice. It involves a critical analysis of societal systems, institutions, and discourses to understand how

they contribute to marginalization and oppression. Critical Theory is particularly action-oriented. Horkheimer (1937) described Critical Theory as one intended to liberate human beings from a perception of the world as a static set of rules. Horkheimer argues for society to be viewed as a historical construct that is shaped by ongoing power struggles. Employing use of Critical Theory, Solorzano and Bernal (2001) examined the lived experiences of ethnically minoritized students, low-income students, and first-generation college students, highlighting the impact of institutional racism, classism, and other forms of discrimination. In the context of this research study, Critical Theory will provide a lens for an examination of how urban community colleges, as historical and contemporary institutions, exert their power and influence to promote, demote, or maintain social equity (Horkheimer, 1947; Marcuse, 1955; Iverson, 2007).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an extension of Critical Theory which delves more deeply into examining the intersectionality of race and equity, in relation to power, privilege, systems, and society (Crenshaw, 1989; Bell, 1992; Delgado, 2017). Ladson-Billings (2000) argues that CRT “helps to raise some important questions about control and production of knowledge—particularly knowledge about people and communities of color” (p.272). Bernal and Villalpando (2002), using critical race theory, examined the social inequity experienced by faculty of color. The marginalized faculty were identified as women and ethnic minorities—moreover, in some cases the participants represented an intersectionality of the two. While Critical Theory—and not Critical Race Theory—is employed as the theoretical framework for this study, it is important to note the differences. Equity gaps at urban community colleges are not solely tied to race. Equity gaps may be experienced across a wide array of dichotomies. For example, equity gaps exist between able-bodied students and differently-abled students; neurotypical students and neurodivergent students; male students and female students; urban-socialized students and

rurally-socialized students (Portillo, 2026). The use of Critical Theory is intended to examine how executive leaders of urban community colleges address social equity for all students—not solely students of color. Horkheimer (1937) argues that Critical Theory should challenge the status quo; that there must be a commitment to exposing all inequality and advocating for systemic equity.

Transformational leadership theory, as a conceptual framework, provides a lens to examine how executive leaders of urban community colleges perceive their roles and responsibilities as it pertains to addressing social equity (Burns, 1978; Bass 1985).

Transformation leadership theory is an organizational leadership theory that provides a framework for examining the inspirational and motivating qualities of leaders that result in their teams, or followers, achieving extraordinary outcomes through a fostering of shared vision, innovation, and personal growth. Rather than relying on a system of rewards and punishments to maintain the status quo, transformational leaders actively engage with their teams to create a shared vision, foster an environment of trust, and drive profound institutional change (Burns, 1978). Executive leaders of urban community colleges are charged with equitably serving underserved, underrepresented, minoritized, socioeconomically disadvantaged, diverse students (McNair et al., 2020; Smith and Miller, 2023). Bass (1985) posits that the essence of transformational leadership involves the dynamics of the leader-follower dyad, which is concerned with second order change and those phenomena, such as intellectual stimulation, that have typically been excluded from social science research. Said differently, transformational leadership as a conceptual lens affords the researcher a viewpoint to assess the extent to which executive leaders of urban community colleges are galvanizing their campus stakeholders to achieve social equity, a deviation from institutional status quo.

While acknowledging the similarities between transformation and transactional leaders, Bass (1985) argues that key distinguishable attributes of the transformational leader are charisma, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation. Moreover, Bass (1985) posits that four pillars form the framework of Transformational Leadership Theory: 1) idealized influence, 2) inspirational motivation, 3) intellectual stimulation, 4) individualized consideration. Bass argues that without these four pillars, a leader is not transformational. When looking at how executive leaders of postsecondary institutions manage complex, systemic challenges—like advancing social equity—these four pillars provide a framework for evaluating their administrative strategies. It is with this lens that the perceptions of executive leaders of urban community colleges is examined. Bass (1985) examines the connective tissue of relationships, leadership style, environment, and productivity experienced by transformational leaders.

Contrast and Compare

Transformational Leadership Theory, like Critical Theory, challenges the status quo—it does not accept legacy practices simply because they have seemingly served the institutional or its stakeholders well. Transformational leaders assess processes, practices, and people to determine how institutional change may come about. Transformational leaders are successful if the organization functions better than it did prior to their leadership. Where the two theories diverge is in expected outcomes. Social equity may be a goal of a transformational leader; however, the primary goal is organizational optimization. In the context of urban community colleges, a transformational leader may improve student success metrics, increase the institutional endowment, and rebrand the institution in a way that yields robust investments (Bass, 1985). Conversely, Critical Theory is one of disruption. Social equity is not simply a goal, but a mandate to achieve if the leader is to be successful. The challenging of the status quo for a

critical leader may involve the dismantling of the system altogether (Horkheimer, 1947). Where transformational leaders aim to improve organizations within a broken system, leaders operating from a Critical Theory framework aim to dismantle broken systems and rebuild sustainable and equitable systems in their place. The distinction may be simplified into perspective or scope of work. Critical leaders perceive the interplay of systems that organizations operate within; transformational leaders focus within the paradigms of organizations (Bass, 1985).

Transformational Leadership (TL) offers a valuable lens for examining how postsecondary executives articulate vision and motivate personnel. Because TL traditionally prioritizes organizational efficiency over systemic disruption, it frequently leaves hegemonic power dynamics undisturbed. The dual structure employed in this study ensures that the researcher does not merely ask if leaders are transformational, but critically examines whether those transformational practices genuinely dismantle systemic barriers, manage social equity, and ultimately improve social mobility for the communities and students served by these postsecondary institutions. Employing this dual framework enables the researcher to simultaneously investigate the mechanisms executives use to inspire institutional change and critically interrogate the distribution of power within those processes—ultimately determining whether systemic barriers to social equity are being actively dismantled.

Research Design

This research study is designed as a qualitative study (Creswell and Creswell, 2005; Greene, 2007). Specifically, a narrative inquiry approach is employed (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). It is important to obtain data and perspectives from the narratives of executive leaders of urban community colleges to assess their management of social equity. Connelly and Clandinin (2000) refer to the study of narratives as the study of the way humans experience the world.

Similarly, Suter (2012) argues that the best way to understand complex stories is through the acknowledgement of the multiple realities that constitute the narratives. Connelly and Clandinin (2000) posit that narrative inquiry has a long intellectual history across multiple academic disciplines. In part, they argue that humans live storied lives and share narratives about these experiences. Through the use of narrative inquiry, the varied perceptions of executive leaders will be acknowledged and examined. In the context of this study, the use of narrative inquiry will be used to examine the ways executive leaders have addressed social equity at urban community colleges. Furthermore, the use of narrative inquiry will be used to examine the ways in which executive leaders have experienced social equity issues at urban community colleges. Study participants consist of twelve executive leaders of urban community colleges.

For the purpose of this study, executive leaders are defined as college administrators that functionally serve at the cabinet-level. The study participants who agree to participate in this research study, and that are selected by the researcher, will be interviewed in a one-on-one, semi-structured, timed format that will allow for their unique narratives and perspectives to be shared. As this research study is designed using a qualitative approach, interviews will be used as the primary instrument of data collection. This is a means of gaining deep and meaningful insight into the perceived roles and responsibilities of executive leaders of urban community colleges.

This study employs a nested framework design, situating Transformational Leadership Theory (TLT) as the conceptual framework within the broader theoretical lens of Critical Theory (CT). While TLT provides a behavioral map to identify the specific mechanisms executive leaders use to drive institutional change, relying on it alone risks evaluating leadership strictly through the metric of organizational efficiency. To address this, TLT is anchored within a critical paradigm. By applying CT as the overarching theoretical framework, this research explicitly

interrogates the power dynamics behind these administrative actions. This dual structure ensures the study does not merely ask if leaders are transformational, but critically examines whether those transformational practices genuinely dismantle systemic barriers, manage social equity, and ultimately improve social mobility for the communities and students served by these postsecondary institutions.

Site Selection

This research study is designed to be conducted in a hybrid manner—both virtually and in-person. The determination of location is made as a matter of convenience for both the study participants and the researcher. Urban community colleges across the United States are identified as potential sites where study participants will be selected. The urban community colleges, as site selections, will be selected with a focus on diversity, equity, and a representative sampling of the larger body of urban community colleges in America. To that end, this research study is considering the following factors in selecting the urban community colleges: geography, level of urbanicity, diversity of leadership, and success in serving a diverse student body. The researcher will use industry-recognized awards as a metric for determining institutional success.

For the purpose of having a representative sampling, consideration is given to urban community colleges in this study representing the primary regions of the country: East, West, Mid-West, North, and South. The urbanicity of America's cities also widely varies. As a result, consideration is given to the population-density or level of urbanicity of the cities that urban community colleges inhabit. As the purpose of this research study is to explore how executive leaders of urban community colleges perceive their roles and responsibilities in addressing social equity, significant consideration is given to the diversity of the leaders and the diversity of the students of these institutions. While urban community colleges innately serve diverse

populations, careful consideration is given to the diversity of the student bodies when selecting sites for the purpose of this research study. To have a representative sampling of participants, consideration is given to the gender, ethnicity, race, and tenure of the executive leaders of these urban community colleges. The diversity of the executive leaders of urban community colleges is hypothesized to have an impact on their perceived roles and responsibilities in addressing social equity. Similarly, the diversity of the student body will impact the existence of social equity on urban community college campuses, as campuses will have varying levels of diversity. As it pertains to protecting the anonymity of the sites, when referenced in this research study, the institutions are described by locale, institution size, and given a unique alias that correlates with a legend only accessed by the researcher. Data System (IPEDS) is used to identify the comprehensive list of urban community colleges that will be contacted for the purposes of this study. Per the definitions outlined by IPEDS, urban community colleges are identified by the level of urbanization in the communities the postsecondary institutions primarily operate in. The scope in this regard has been limited to the following:

- Urban— large city
 - Defined as a territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population of 250,000 or more.
- Urban— medium city
 - Defined as a territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.
- Urban— small city

- Defined as a territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 100,000.
- Urban— large suburb
 - Defined as a territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with population of 250,000 or more.

Figure C.1 in the appendix conveys the NCES Urban-Centric Locale table, providing additional insight to the levels of urbanicity. Moreover, formal requests were made to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC-&U), and the Center for Urban Education (CUE) to identify contact information for executive-level leaders employed by the urban community colleges identified by IPEDS. Data provided by IPEDS allowed for the researcher to more acutely and accurately identify urban community colleges that are meeting or exceeding the national graduation and retention rates for community colleges.

Study Participants

The study participants are executive leaders of urban community colleges. It is the intent of the research to obtain data from a minimum of 10 executive leaders. The executive leaders selected for the purpose of this study will be defined as leaders of urban community colleges who serve at the cabinet-level of college administration. Consideration in their selection is given to their ethnic, racial, and gender diversity. Consideration is also given to their tenure as an executive leader of an urban community college. For the purpose of this research study, an executive leader is defined as the chief executive officer or president of the institution, and a cabinet-level administrator such as the Vice President of Student Services, Vice President of

Workforce Development, or Vice President of Institutional Advancement. In unique cases, an executive leader may not formally be assigned to the cabinet-level; however, their role affords them high visibility and responsibility for impacting institutional culture. The scope of executive leadership is defined in this way to capture the perceived roles and responsibilities of the campus administrators responsible for developing and implementing strategic institutional plans. The urban community colleges that are selected are identified from a list of postsecondary institutions that are self-reported to operate in communities of medium and high urbanicity as defined by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

Instrumentation

The researcher will serve as the primary instrument in collecting the data for this research study. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews will also be employed for the use of collecting data. Qualitatively, semi-structured interviews offer the flexibility to explore topics that arise naturally during the interview, while still maintaining a non-directive approach. This method allows for both planned and spontaneous questioning, resulting in a more conversational and in-depth discussion (Schutz, 1964; Lochmiller & Lester, 2017).

Data Collection and Data Sources

Twelve executive leaders are selected to participate in this study. Their roles vary, as do the institutions that they lead. Urban colleges as a unique subset of community colleges are not monolithic. Study participants are reflective of institutions in small, medium, and large cities across the United States of America.

Participants were contacted via email to describe the research study and to request their participation. Potential participants will be offered a total of three weeks to respond to the request

for participation. Upon agreeing to participate in the study, confirmed participants were provided with consent forms via email. Moreover, to help the study participants prepare for the semi-structured interviews, study participants were provided with a copy of the interview questions in advance.

Data Analysis

The collected data is analyzed within the theoretical framework of critical theory, with an aim of understanding how the perceived roles and responsibilities of executive leaders of urban community colleges impact their addressing of social equity (Sorokin, 1927; Giddens, 1984). In addition, the researcher applied a critical theory lens in examining data from participant narratives. Creswell (2014) supported the use of theory-oriented inquiry like critical theory as “providing an overall orienting lens for the study of questions of class, and race” (p. 98). As this study is designed qualitatively, thematic analysis is employed to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning from semi-structured interviews. Moreover, thematic analysis is employed to examine, code, and analyze reoccurring themes from interview transcripts. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), researchers can gather information from their interviews by taking notes, audiotaping, or videotaping. The researcher serving as the primary research instrument will conduct interviews with study participants by way of teleconferencing technology, employing Zoom and Microsoft Teams to videorecord the interviews. The researcher will take detailed notes as the participants are interviewed. Moreover, these teleconferencing mediums will conduct the initial transcription of the interviews. The researcher performed a secondary review of the interview transcripts to ensure accuracy. The researcher synthesized findings from the literature review and participant narratives to identify emergent categories and themes. Subsequent to the first round of coding, the researcher will engage in horizontalization, a

standard procedure in phenomenological research, to ensure all data is considered without hierarchy (Moustakas, 1994). To uncover significant meanings and themes, the researcher clustered the data after the horizontalization process.

This study relies on a nested architecture that clearly delineates the behaviors observed in the field from the lens used to analyze them. Transformational Leadership Theory (TLT) serves as the conceptual framework, directly informing the development of interview protocols and the initial deductive coding of specific executive actions—such as idealized influence and intellectual stimulation. However, to rigorously assess how executive leaders manage social equity, these observed administrative behaviors are subsequently subjected to the theoretical framework of Critical Theory (CT). This two-tiered approach dictates that the data is not evaluated simply for operational alignment or campus consensus; rather, it is critically analyzed to determine whether the leaders' transformational mechanisms actively disrupt hegemonic power structures to facilitate upward social mobility for historically marginalized student populations.

Alignment Table

The alignment table represented by Figure A.1 provides a format for aligning the problems based on literature findings to the research questions, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, research methodology, and interview questions. For example, the disproportionately high concentration of social inequity gaps experienced by students served by urban community colleges is explored through research question one, which is analyzed through a theoretical framework of critical theory (Horkheimer, 1947; Marcuse, 1955). Figure A.1 is located in the Appendix.

Limitations

The researcher acknowledges the following limitations: (a) the possible difficulty of establishing rapport over a digital platform, (b) possible small sample response for the one-on-one timed interviews, and (c) bias in the responses of the study participants as it pertains to the assessment of their leadership in addressing social equity. Moreover, the researcher intends to only engage public two-year institutions. In addition, the IPEDS definition for ‘urban’ is limited to large cities, medium cities, small cities, and large suburbs. This is representative of a limitation of sample size and population.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure alignment with standard ethical considerations in qualitative research, the researcher has given ethical consideration to maintaining the anonymity of the institutions and the executive leaders of the institutions that are represented in this research study. Moreover, the researcher took steps to ensure that the collected data was protected. The research will abide by the ethical considerations of respect for people, meaning considering risk versus benefits, and just conscription (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). To ensure informed consent and respect for autonomy, participants will be provided with written forms detailing their rights. They will be explicitly informed that their participation in the interviews is voluntary and that they have the freedom to withdraw at any time. Considering IRB requirements, a consent document will be distributed electronically to each participant in advance of the scheduled Zoom interview. The researcher will conduct a verbal review of the consent document at the commencement of the interview. This document will also encompass authorization for the recording of the Zoom session.

As it pertains to conflicts of interests and bias, the researcher acknowledges his bias as an ethnically minoritized person within the context of this research study. The researcher aims to achieve objectivity through the triangulation and verification of qualitative data collection. All data acquired during this research, including recorded media and associated information, will be stored in a secure digital format on the researcher's personal computer, with access restricted solely to the researcher. Restriction to the researcher's computer will include a password protected computer, with data stored in encrypted files. Data will be retained for a duration of five years from the date of acquisition, subsequent to which it will be permanently and securely destroyed. The researcher will collect the transcript data and will store it in a locked file cabinet in my home office. Data will be kept for 60 months and then properly disposed of according to ethical guidelines.

Study Quality

The quality of a research study—whether quantitative or qualitative—is a matter of credibility and thoughtfulness. Readers of research studies need to be able to confidently rely, to a degree, on the credibility of the research presented. Study quality then is about the acknowledgement and adherence to standards. Quantitative studies, for example, have well-established measures of ensuring quality such as validity, reliability, and generalizability (Tracy and Hinrichs, 2017). Qualitative studies, alternatively, do not rely on the aforementioned measures to establish quality of a study. Tracy and Hinrichs (2017) posit a “Big Tent” approach to the quality of qualitative studies. This approach, “creates standards by which scholars from a variety of paradigms, backgrounds, and communities can consider and evaluate qualitative research with common understanding and acknowledgement” (p.1). Tracy (2010) argues for eight tenets to guide the quality of qualitative research. High quality qualitative research is

described as being: 1) worthy, 2) rich in rigor, 3) sincere, 4) credible, 5) resonant, 6) significant in contribution, 7) ethical, and 8) meaningfully coherent (Tracy, 2010). The table represented by Figure B.1 provides a visual representation of the Big Tent criteria for qualitative research posited by Tracy and Hinrichs (2017). Figure B.1 is located in the Appendix.

To ensure the quality of this study, the researcher will employ reflexivity, acknowledging the researcher's own bias and how those biases, if any, might influence the research process. Tracy and Hinrichs (2017) refer to this metric of quality assessment as sincerity. Sincerity, according to the authors, is not intended to connote a particular reality; however, it is intended to convey an awareness of one's own identity and role within the research. The researcher is self-identified as a member of an ethnically minoritized group. Moreover, the researcher is a college graduate and one who experiences matters of social equity personally. As it pertains to ensuring a high level of quality in the conducting of this qualitatively study, it is imperative that the researcher's biases, motivations for pursuing the study, and shortcomings are acknowledged (Tracy and Hinrichs, 2017). Qualitatively, consideration is given to the dependability of the data collected. Detailed field notes will be kept ensuring consistency in the relaying of participants' narratives. The researcher intends to document each step of the research process thoroughly. As this research study is designed using a qualitative narrative inquiry method, the researcher will employ triangulation as a means of gaining clearer insight during data analyses. The triangulation of data is intended to enhance credibility. Moreover, for ethical consideration, the researcher will be transparent in the description of the study, including research design, data collection procedures, and data analysis processes. Similarly, great attention to detail will be executed in consideration of the protection of human and institutional data.

The purpose of this study is to assess the perceived roles and responsibilities of executive leaders of urban community colleges in addressing social equity. Furthermore, the significance of this research study is in the dearth of research available on urban community colleges and the students they serve (Smith & Miller, 2023). It is imperative to the quality of this study that it is resonant. Tracy and Hinrichs (2017) defines resonance as the extent to which the research meaningfully impacts an audience. While it is ultimately the responsibility of the reader to make connections between the research findings and contexts that are familiar to them, the researcher may achieve resonance through evocative writing, formal generalizations, and transferability. To that end, the researcher will pay great attention to detail in the development of the themes, with a keen awareness of who may be impacted by the research. Similarly, it is integral to the quality of this study that it contributes significantly to the field of research (Tracy and Hinrichs, 2017). Significance is evaluated by whether or not the research findings extend, transform, or complicate existing bodies of knowledge, theories, or practices in new, important, and insightful ways (p.7-8).

The research aims to have a heuristic contribution to the field of knowledge. Research is heuristic when it influences a variety of audiences to engage in action (Tracy and Hinrichs, 2017). To that end, the researcher will be thorough in the exploration of existing data and equally rigorous in conducting interviews and developing themes. The researcher will engage a plurality of voices and resources to ensure that a holistic and robust body of research is developed. To the point of interview quality, the researcher will pilot the interview questions as a measure of ensuring quality. The researcher will recruit a small number of participants (e.g. 2-5) that are similar in description to the target study participants. These individuals will not be included in the main study. The piloting will involve the researcher conducting interviews with the select

group of participants following the interview guide that is developed for the main study. Through this process, the researcher is practicing interview skills, such as active listening, probing, and building rapport. Upon concluding the interviews, the researcher will evaluate the data and interview questions for 1) clarity, 2) relevance, 3) wording, 4) flow, and 5) timing. Interview questions will be revised based on the aforementioned criteria. It is worth noting, the piloting of interview questions can be an iterative process. As a result, the researcher may conduct multiple rounds of interviews to better refine the interview questions that will ultimately be used in the main research study.

Summary

The purpose of this study is to assess the perceived roles and responsibilities of executive leaders of urban community colleges in addressing social equity. This research study is designed using a qualitative, narrative inquiry approach. In chapter three, the research provided the purpose of the study; three research questions—qualitative in design; theoretical and conceptual frameworks; research design, and site selection. Moreover, the research, in chapter three, provided a description of study participants, instrumentation, data collection, data sources, and data analysis methods; limitations; ethical considerations; and delved into considerations for enhancing the quality of the study.

Chapter 4 - Research Results and Analysis

Introduction

As outlined in in Chapter 1, this chapter presents an analysis of the data and research findings generated from interviews with executive leaders of urban community colleges. The chapter begins with a restatement of the research questions and an overview of participant demographics. The findings are then organized thematically and presented in relation to the study's research questions. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

Research Questions

This research study was guided by three research questions designed to examine the perceived roles and responsibilities of executive leaders at urban community colleges in relations to addressing social equity. The research questions focused primarily on the perceptions of executive leaders, as it related to their roles, their leadership, and their practices. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do executive leaders of urban community colleges perceive social equity concepts and their leadership roles?
2. How do executive leaders of urban community colleges perceive their roles in addressing social equity in the communities that they serve?
3. What best practices do executive leaders of urban community colleges exercise in addressing social equity?

Participant Demographics

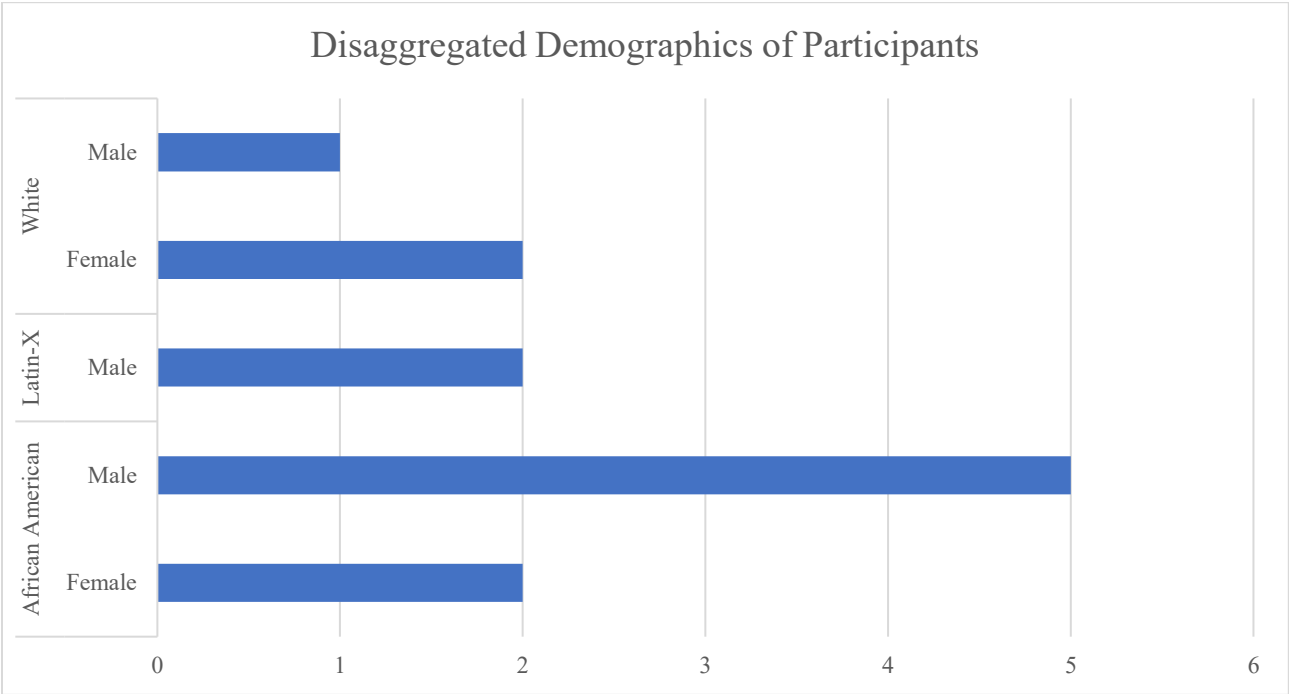
Table 4.1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the study participants. Table 4.2 illustrates a disaggregated view of the demographic data. Because the study was not tied to a

single institution, participant demographics are organized by institution, geographical location, IPEDS-defined territory, and leadership role within the community college. For the purpose of this study, study participants were identified as executive leaders of urban community colleges. To be eligible, in part, study participants had to have at least 3 years of professional leadership experience at an urban community college. Moreover, study participants, in their professional capacity must serve at the cabinet-level, or have a high visibility, high impact role. For example, study participants are Presidents, Chancellors, Vice Presidents, Vice Chancellors, Executive Directors, and Deans. In an effort to cast a comprehensive net for data collection, particular detail was paid to diversity of candidates and their locations. Study participants represent gender differences, racial differences, and work in almost every region of the United States of America. Participants' narratives reflect the unique challenges of their respective regions. For example, Participants 1, 2, and 7 are challenged by how they address social equity as a result of local legislative circumstances. Conversely, Participants 10 and 11 benefit from a sociopolitical ecosystem that supports social equity efforts. Table 4.1 and Table 4.2 illustrate the demographics of the study participants.

Table 4.1 Participant Demographics

Participant	State	Region	IPEDS Designation	Gender	Race	Role
<u>Participant 1</u>	AR	South	Urban-medium city	Female	White	Chancellor
<u>Participant 2</u>	TX	South	Urban-large city	Male	Latin-X	Campus President
<u>Participant 3</u>	SC	Southeast	Urban-small city	Male	African American	President
<u>Participant 4</u>	MO	Midwest	Urban-large city	Male	African American	President
<u>Participant 5</u>	OH	Midwest	Urban-medium city	Male	African American	President
<u>Participant 6</u>	MT	Mountain West	Urban-medium city	Female	White	Chancellor
<u>Participant 7</u>	AZ	Southwest	Urban-medium city	Male	Latin-X	Chancellor
<u>Participant 8</u>	MA	Northeast	Urban-large city	Female	African American	President
<u>Participant 9</u>	MI	Midwest	Urban-large city	Male	African American	Campus President
<u>Participant 10</u>	MD	Mid-Atlantic	Urban- large suburb	Female	African American	Vice President
<u>Participant 11</u>	NY	Northeast	Urban-large city	Male	African American	President
<u>Participant 12</u>	MT	Mountain West	Urban-medium city	Male	White	Dean

Table 4.2 Participant Demographics



Institutional Context

The institutions represented are heavily embedded within diverse, urban, and regional environments, serving significant populations of first-generation students, working adults, and historically marginalized communities. Literature indicates that urban community college students are more likely to be racial minorities that have historically fallen behind their peers in accessing and completing higher education. This is exacerbated by the higher likelihood that they are from lower income households with greater basic needs insecurity (Community College Research Center, 2019, Lumina Foundation, 2022; Callaway, 2023) These colleges do not operate in a vacuum; their equity challenges are intimately intertwined tied to local geographic and sociopolitical realities. Morgan, Cho, Davis II, and Campbell (2023) argue that the context in which urban community colleges (UCC) reside deeply impacts the livelihood of campus actors (e.g. students, faculty, staff, and community members). As an example, some leaders of UCCs

must navigate stark hyper-local divides, such as the 28% mortality rate difference between communities located South of Interstate 30 versus North of 30 in the North Texas area. Similarly, Callaway (2023) highlights an equity issue of transportation for students at an urban community college in Tennessee. He describes how a lack of access to capital and reliable transportation manifests in students feeling isolated from the amenities of the urban environment they reside in. Inequities in the communities that are served by urban community colleges manifest in a variety of ways—health disparities, access to amenities, quality of education opportunities, housing insecurities, etc. Executive leaders of these unique institutions are charged with meeting the basic needs of their students, curating experiences that increase their exposure to what is possible, and providing support along those various journeys.

Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the study and addresses the three research questions that guided the inquiry. Semi-structured, timed interviews with 12 executive leaders of urban community colleges produced the data. These findings detail the strategies and lived experiences of postsecondary executive leaders actively working to dismantle institutional barriers and improve social mobility for historically marginalized communities. To ensure the analysis moves beyond surface-level behavioral descriptions of higher education administration, the thematic results are presented through a nested analytical architecture. Informed by the work of Sadana's (2021) First Cycle coding methods, the research utilized provisional coding based on the four components of Transformational Leadership Theory (TLT) to categorize executive leadership behaviors. Moreover, Saldana explains that Second Cycle coding requires the research to move beyond descriptive categories to analyze the data theoretically. Saldana posits that the first-cycle coding connects to an overarching theory. For the Second Cycle of analysis, Saldaña's (2021)

Theoretical Coding was employed. This allowed the researcher to re-examine the provisional TLT codes through the lens of Critical Theory, examining the power dynamics and assessing whether the leaders' actions disrupt systemic barriers that may preclude students from achieving social equity.

Findings are organized by research question. For each research question, themes are presented with supporting participant quotations to illustrate how executive leaders described their perceived roles, responsibilities, and best practices in addressing social equity. The themes identified align with the four pillars of Transformational Leaders Theory-- 1) idealized influence, 2) inspirational motivation, 3) intellectual stimulation, 4) individualized consideration (Bass, 1985). Table 4.3 serves as a guide through the two-tiered thematic analysis.

Table 4.3 Thematic Analysis Guide

Executive Action Observed in the Data	Conceptual Map: Transformational Leadership (TLT) Interpretation	Theoretical Lens: Critical Theory (CT) Interpretation
Deploying "semantic agility" by pivoting institutional language from "equity" to "socioeconomic status"	Intellectual Stimulation: The executive is innovating communication strategies and adapting to external environments to maintain organizational alignment and secure ongoing funding.	Subversive Resistance: The executive is actively shielding marginalized communities and equity initiatives from hostile, hegemonic political forces to ensure institutional survival and continued resource distribution.
Protecting and funding organic, student-led activism and culturally specific expression	Individualized Consideration: The executive is supporting the emotional, social, and cultural needs of the student body, fostering a generalized culture of care.	Decentralizing Power: The executive is actively relinquishing unilateral institutional control to validate non-dominant forms of knowledge and elevate the political agency of marginalized populations.
Redefining institutional success by prioritizing wealth-building employment and living wages over standard degree completion rates	Inspirational Motivation: The executive is articulating a compelling, future-oriented vision that motivates the campus to exceed standard operational goals.	Emancipatory Metrics: The executive is rejecting neoliberal institutional data in favor of material, emancipatory outcomes that accurately reflect the dismantling of intergenerational poverty.

Research Question 1

How do executive leaders of urban community colleges assess social equity concepts and their leadership role?

The first research question serves to establish a baseline for data collection efforts. How executive leaders of urban community colleges assess social equity and their leadership roles determines, to an extent, how these leaders show up as it relates to addressing social equity. Findings associated with Research Question 1 are indicative of executives leading by example, taking risks to uphold the ethical imperative of equity. Bass (1985) posits that transformational leaders are strong role models, demonstrating high ethical standards, conviction, and commitment to the organization's core values.

Defining Equity in the Urban Context

Participants overwhelmingly conceptualized equity not as a theoretical academic concept, but as a tangible metric of economic survival and social mobility. Each executive, in their own way, argued for the need to know who is being served by the institution and its efforts. Moreover, executives linked the understanding of people to the ability to achieve social equity. Participant 3 posits, "to define social equity, first you need to look at demographics of your community..." Participant 11, echoing this sentiment defined equity on the "the surrounding area and student demographics." He expounds to highlight "health disparities, median income, social mobility, and professional readiness as metrics for success." Participant 5 defined equity through the lens of "accelerated ambition" and "proximity to possibility". He argued that ambition is limited by exposure, or lack thereof. Therefore, in his perspective, equity requires the combination of "awareness (curating exposure to what is possible) and assistance (helping them navigate the path)". Participant 5 believes that without the assistance, awareness may lead to

frustration. Even worse, lack of adequate assistance may manifest as an impediment to students' persistence. For this group of executive leaders, assessing social equity is a function of being familiar with their community. Leaders should have an intimate working knowledge of who they are serving. The knowledge of community breeds familiarity and allows for informed decision making.

Executive leaders explicitly linked equity to local socioeconomic outcomes based on the lived experiences of the students they serve and the communities that their institutions inhabit. Participant 9 framed social equity as "economic rescue for the underserved". Participant 10, assessing social equity within the context of her role, redefined the core product of the institution, asserting that "the degree isn't the product... the person and their ability to ascend socially... is." This perspective of students' unique needs is expounded on by Participant 6 who assesses social equity through the diversity of her students. Participant 6 acknowledges that while her campus community may not have great racial diversity, the income disparities among her study body are vast. Furthermore, she expounds on the varying levels of social readiness experienced by her students, citing that a great deal of the students that she serves come from rural backgrounds and are often intimidated by perceived rules of society in "the big city." Participant 6's aim in addressing social equity is to account for the differences that exist to level the proverbial playing field.

The Broader Societal Mission

The executive leaders who participated in this study perceive the community college as an active partner of the communities that they serve. Community colleges, in their perspective, are critical stakeholders in the reshaping of realities, particularly as it relates to macro-level societal inequities. Participant 5 posited this as the "Multiplier Effect," where the institution's

role is not just to train individual workers, but to transform the entire ecosystem. He argues for a moral positioning and responsibility to eradicate poverty. Participant 5 describes the community college as an "honest broker" that bridges the gap between neighborhood talent and corporate demands. Participant 8 further expanded this societal mission, explicitly linking equity to the creation of "intergenerational wealth and democracy." The importance of equity as economic empowerment for communities is evidenced by Participant 12's acknowledgement of how many graduates choose to remain in the community after earning credentials of value. He notes, "We have roughly 85% of our graduate completers that stay within our... region... they might start, as an example, as a carpenter from our carpentry program, but they end up as a business owner. So, it allows them really to move into our community as a highly functioning member of our community."

The benefit of closing of equity gaps that are defined as economic opportunities extends beyond individual students to more holistically encompass communities of people. Participant 3 drives this point home arguing that, "the most important color is green for economic development, because who does not want a [good] quality of life? ... Excellence doesn't have a color. Outcomes don't have a color. So, looking at things through an equitable lens... green is the best color because who does not want to have the quality of life?" Participant 3, like the other executive leaders who participated in this study communicate a keen understanding of the interplay of systems. A commitment to advancing students' social mobility and enhancing their quality of life is a reflection of the broader capitalistic system at work. A socioeconomic hierarchy is intertwined within the system of capitalism. Acknowledging that, these executive leaders assess that the best way to address social equity is through an improvement of their students' economic standing within society. These executive leaders illustrate a commitment to

using their power, leadership, platform, and influence to empower the students who enroll at their respective institutions. Moreover, there is an evidenced commitment to empowering the communities from which those students come from.

Research Question 2

How do executive leaders of urban community colleges perceive their role in addressing social equity in the communities they serve?

Accountability and Modeling Behavior

Participants of this study perceived their roles as requiring intense, structural accountability. For these executive leaders, holding their teams accountable required that they led by example. Participant 7 and Participant 9 both explicitly shared their belief around this concept stating that, they would not ask their staff to do anything they would not do themselves, or tasks that they have not already done. This perception of the need to lead by example was reinforced by their adamant refusal to blame students for systemic failures. This stance illustrates students as outcomes or byproducts of broken systems, and not as broken students who are incapable of achieving success. Participant 6 perceives her role, and that of her team, as being “intrusive.” In this case, it is perceived that the role of executive leaders is to be perpetually inquisitive about how best to serve students, particularly those who experience social inequity. Participant 6 demonstrates this by way of the “intrusive advising” model that encourages staff to inquire as to whether students’ basic needs are met (e.g. food, transportation housing, etc.). Participant 11 demonstrates this by way of fostering a culture of belonging. The belief is that if students’ feel as though they belong in college, that they will be more likely to succeed. These approaches to ensuring that students’ basic needs are met is akin to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1943). Maslow argued that humans are motivated by a hierarchy of needs—basic needs (e.g. air,

water, food, shelter) must be met before a human can be motivated by higher level needs (e.g. friendship, intimacy, respect.). In the case of urban community colleges, these executive leaders perceive that students' basic needs are those things that may fall outside the scope of the traditional classroom or lecture hall (e.g. transportation, shelter, childcare). Once those basic needs are met, students may be motivated to aspire for higher level needs such as term registration, scholarships, internships, and graduation.

Participant 1 modeled this through her "IT Ticket" theory, arguing that an unresolved IT ticket sitting for 400 days is a direct equity issue because it prevents learning. She demonstrated holistic accountability by tracing billing errors backward through institutional departments, perceiving "every administrative delay... as a barrier to student persistence". Participant 12 narrated a particular personal position stating, "Seeing how well they have become members of our society gives me that drive and that motivation to ensure that I'm providing that opportunity for every student... I always have an eye on what the student can achieve. Not what they have achieved." Participant 2 advocated his commitment to accountability by insisting that leadership must view student dropouts not as "anecdotal" incidents, but as "systematic" failures of the institution, demanding that colleges act as "bridge makers," not "gatekeepers". This positioning acknowledges the barriers that are erected and maintained by traditional structures and systems. Participant 2 moves beyond acknowledgement to committing to building bridges to opportunities where barriers to the same still remain. Participant 11 also makes his commitment personal by posing the following question to his team, "is this the institution that we would send our families to?" Participant 11's positioning aids in establishing a culture of accountability for all members of the faculty and staff. If the institution is not one that faculty and staff would readily recommend to their own family then there is improvement to be made and each employee is

empowered to make that improvement. Participant 11 explicitly highlights a focus on customer service, citing a need for students to feel welcomed and supported. His goal is to ensure that the college is “student-ready,” a significant shift from the traditional focus on whether students are “college-ready.” This positioning is reflective of executive leaders perceiving their roles as action oriented, curators of culture, and leaders by example. In the context of the urban community college, the executive leader ensures that students are afforded an institutional experience that is prepared to meet them where they are and equipped to prepare them for where they want to go.

Idealized Influence

Idealized influence—or role modeling—emerged as a key theme in how study participants spoke of their role, particularly as it relates to social equity. Study participants expressed their conviction of the necessity to address social equity. For these executive leaders, it is a function of the role. Taking on the responsibility of serving as an executive leader of an urban community college is to serve a population that is impacted by inequity, as evidenced by poverty rates, mortality rates, quality of life, etc. The urban community colleges represented in this study are confronted by a myriad of circumstances that are germane to, or exacerbated by, their urban environments. Study participants did not shy away from acknowledging equity gaps experienced by their campus communities. Moreover, participants were clear about their perceived duty to close social equity gaps. Participant 5 posited that his role is to “make people aware of what’s possible. [students] can never have raised ambition if they’re not aware of opportunity and if they don’t have the assistance to actually access the opportunity.” He, explained, “my role is to facilitate proximity to possibilities”. These sentiments were echoed by Participant 6 who makes it a priority to lead with love. “We don’t normally talk about love, and

I've decided to." This stance is bold, as she acknowledges that her approach is counter-culture. This bold stance is strategic as well, as it subtly encourages other members of her team to be free to be themselves. Participant 6 acknowledges her privilege and utilizes her power and influence to challenge the status quo, arguing that "we have the power to change those lives and I think we forget because we're so busy with meetings and all of the things that we have to do." Leading through idealized influence requires an acknowledgement of the power and platform of leadership. That acknowledgement should be made actionable, as evidenced by Participant 11's advice for leaders to "get to know your community and build relationships." Change, he posits, comes through collective action.

Navigation of Systemic and Immediate Tensions

Leaders consistently described the tension between fighting for long-term systemic change and addressing the immediate, daily crises of their students. Participant 1 highlighted the "flat tire/electric bill reality," noting that vulnerable students are often "one flat tire away from dropping out". One unplanned emergency can severely impact a student's success. She perceived her role as managing both immediate emergencies like helping a student to pay an electric bill to keep them enrolled— and managing long-term goals such as graduation metrics. Participant 4 shared this perspective, stating that "life costs" are actual barriers for Black and Brown students. This revelation led to the development of an emergency fund apparatus that could provide stipends to students for gas, rent, and childcare. Similarly, Participant 12 shared, "knowing that we are going to have some emergency need, then we have set aside some dollars specifically for that. So that's part of that long-term planning is being thoughtful about the things that could occur in the future that would require some pretty quick attention."

While most participants were clear about acknowledging their power and ability to influence the closing of equity gaps, there was also an acknowledgment of the nuance needed to exert said influence and power. Participant 1, for example, is challenged by political circumstances that are exacerbated by her college's location in Arkansas. She indicates having to navigate anti diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) legislation. Her commitment to social equity is defined by the college's ability to lift students out of poverty, stating that "the socioeconomic mobility of our graduates" is what she immediately thinks of when asked about social equity. Similarly, Participant 2 speaks to the difficulty in closing equity gaps as a result of politically-motivated budget cuts. For context, in 2023 Texas' legislature passed Senate Bill 17—a bill banning DEI offices, programs, and hiring in public universities. The difficulty experienced by Participant 2 is exacerbated by his role as a campus president within a community college system. He serves as one of seven campus presidents. He expressed his advocacy for social equity, citing his support of campus protests— "we're there... we just had one [protest] recently with almost 300 students that did something for the ICE and immigration protests. It's a First Amendment Right." Participant 3 explains that, "students do not come to a college campus to fail. But we have to make sure in the enrollment process, in the advising process that we're doing a good qualitative case management of those students." Accountability in this case is operationalized through well communicated, well connected processes that are executed by well-informed and connected teams.

Guiding the Next Generation of Leaders

When reflecting on their roles as mentors, the participants offered stark, pragmatic advice for navigating political resistance. Participant 1 advised emerging leaders to "block out the noise" of political rhetoric and utilize "semantic agility," intentionally shifting language from

"race/gender" to "First Generation" to protect the work of poverty alleviation. Participant 2 advised future leaders to abandon "Eurocentric" and "linear" management approaches in favor of "circular" and "indigenous" methods that source solutions directly from the community. Executive leaders of urban community colleges perceive themselves as accountability partners, role models, and protectors of the institutional mission. By way of developing a vision, communicating expectations, modeling best behavior, and navigating roadblocks, these executive leaders perceive their role in addressing social equity as a moral imperative. It is particularly relevant in times of rapid change. Addressing social equity for these executive leaders is, in large part, change management. Robert Michael Franklin would refer to urban community colleges as "anchor institutions," the institutions that have an enduring presence and operate to stabilize people amidst chaos and rapid transition (2007). Echoing this sentiment, Participant 11 argues that community colleges are uniquely positioned to be a response or answer to inequities—a safety net that allows for those in it to develop holistically and envision a better life for themselves.

Research Question 3

What best practices do executive leaders of urban community colleges exercise in addressing social equity?

Data-Driven Decision Making and Assessment

To operationalize equity, these leaders rely heavily on precise data rather than broad assumptions. For example, Participant 9 warns of the dangers of doing things the way that they have always been done. He argues that old tactics will not necessarily be successful with a new generation of students; therefore, he prioritizes meeting with community stakeholders regularly to gain insight into where he can improve. Participant 7 utilizes data as a shield against political

pushback. When challenged by a board member on whether the college still cared about white students, he deployed the "moral imperative defense," using data to explain that resources follow the areas of greatest need, effectively dismantling the argument. Participant 5 pushed assessment further by advocating for "exposure metrics," tracking whether students participate in life-changing experiences and internships, and utilizing a "social capital inventory" to identify and close networking gaps early in the admissions process. These decisions by executive leaders reflect the need and usefulness of data. Executive leaders equipped with good data are able to acutely address social equity gaps instead of taking broad brush approaches to solving equity issues.

Participant 12 shares of the institution's reliance on a third-party vendor to assist in data analytics around equity. He shares,

We use a software package from EAB Navigate... if there are gaps in their progression, which includes everything from attendance to performance, then we have what's called a Care Team that will be notified... Using that data, it allowed us to lobby for and secure some state dollars to create a support mechanism for students of a particular population of financial need. And without having that data to back it up, we would not have secured the state dollars.

In this case, the use of data helped to secure funding that aided students in need. In an era of declining fiscal support for postsecondary education, securing funding to support students is mission critical. The use of data to aid in storytelling is a compelling tool for executive leaders who must justify their budgets to boards and state legislators. This is also the case for Participant 9 who relies on grant funding to support free enrollment for students who are interested in specialized programs offered at their regional training center.

The use of data manifests in a variety of ways. For Participant 3, the Deming Cycle is employed. He shares, "the framework that we use for continuous process improvement is called the Deming cycle. ... it's 4 quadrants. It's planning, doing, checking and acting... it now gives my team something tangible to look at and think through... do we keep doing the same thing or do we pivot?" participant 3 employs use of this model to ensure all recourses and efforts are aligned with the institution's 5-point strategy. The Deming Cycle model allows for the strategic plan to serve as the benchmark by which success may be measured. He states that "51% of the residents" in his county are women. He used that data to assess "through an equitable lens" whether those students were represented in the institution's "high demand/high wage programs." His analysis revealed that the majority of women students were in low wage/low demand jobs "like child development [and] CNA (certified nursing assistant programs)." This data analysis drives his decision-making. His commitment to equity spurs him to develop strategies to enroll more women—who represent 51% of his county—into "high demand/high wage" programs.

Participant 6 operationalized her commitment, developing a programmatic response to an equity gap that she perceives significantly impacts students. Participant 6 identifies confidence as a gap that can impact the ways students show up during matriculation and beyond. She prioritizes what she refers to as "social preparation." This is reflective of students' ability to acclimate to social settings that differ from their own. She references rural student who grew up on farms that may feel out of place at formal events. Her "Service Saturdays" are opportunities throughout the semester for students to engage in community service alongside executive leaders from throughout the city. Through this initiative, students are volunteering alongside chief executive officers of local banks, non-profit organizations, civil servants, etc. Participant 6 argues that these opportunities allow socioeconomically disadvantaged students to 1) experience

gratitude and 2) network with people whose social access is far greater than theirs, increasing their social capital.

Strategic Alignment and Resource Allocation

Participants emphasized that equity rhetoric is meaningless without rigorous financial alignment. Participant 10 executed this through strict "budgetary gatekeeping," stating that "nothing happens without it," referencing the college's strategic plan. She sets an expectation that all use of resources, budgets, and campus space be strictly justified by one of three transformational aspirations that are explicitly outline in the institution's strategic plan: 1) access, 2) completion, or 3) post-completion. She notes the importance of post-completion being framed as a livable wage. If requests do not align with these equity goals, it does not receive her support.

Cultivating an Inclusive Campus

Creating an inclusive environment extended far beyond the classroom. Participant 10 institutionalized this by making "belonging" a structural department, explicitly tracking faculty and staff belonging under the premise that excluded employees cannot create inclusive environments for students. Participant 12 proudly narrated his experience with a campus audit stating, "we had a Northwest accreditation visit last fall and that's one of the commendations that came out of our visit: the very visible culture of care on campus for students." The commitment to curating an inclusive campus can yield benefits for all stakeholders: student, faculty, staff, and community members. The commitment demonstrates actionable steps to be taken to ensure physical and psychological safety, not just for the most vulnerable populations but all persons who find themselves within the ecosystem. Taking a broader, institutional approach, Participant 3 explains that accountability in curating an equitable environment looks like a series of touch

points for employees. He continues, "we do four or five different layers of assessment. Number one, we do what we call the employee engagement survey... the service excellence survey... the supervisor feedback form... [where] employees are able to evaluate the effectiveness of their supervisor... and what we do is really wrap around services to help that supervisor [with] a number of professional development trainings."

Decentralizing Power and Validation of Marginalized Experiences

Through the conceptual map of Transformational Leadership Theory, "Individualized Consideration" is characterized by an executive's capacity to serve as a mentor, offering tailored support based on the unique needs of their followers. However, when subjected to the framework of Critical Theory, this behavior transcends standard administrative mentorship. The executive leaders in this study operationalize individualized consideration by actively decentralizing institutional power, validating non-dominant forms of knowledge, and elevating the voices of those historically marginalized within the academic hierarchy. Rather than imposing unilateral solutions, these leaders recognize that sustainable social equity requires co-constructing knowledge directly with the communities they serve. The decentralization of power is not to be mistaken for an abdication of duties. Executives who decentralize their power are modeling an equitable power dynamic that requires executive leaders to actively engage the members of their team. Engagement is necessary for consistent messaging of the vision, communication and evaluation of the strategy, and reinforcement of expectations. Decentralization of power is effective if leaders are also actively engaging member of the college who historically are unfamiliar to wielding power. This is a manifestation of the four core principles of Transformational Leadership Theory, particularly Individualized Consideration, where leaders

demonstrate genuine care for the personal development of each follower (Burns, 1978; Bass 1985).

Empowering the Invisible Frontline

Decentralizing power also requires an executive leader to validate the critical roles of staff members who are typically excluded from decision-making and institutional influence. Participant 7 demonstrates this through the "Carl the Custodian" example, which illustrates a desire for total institutional buy-in for student success. Utilizing his "First Contact" theory, Participant 7 recognizes that students frequently encounter groundskeepers and custodians long before they interact with a professor or academic dean. He notes that a simple greeting from a custodian can ultimately determine if a vulnerable student feels they "belong" on campus.

To operationalize this, Participant 7 shares the narrative of "Carl," a custodian who had worked at the institution for 24 years but had never been told he mattered to student retention. By intentionally empowering Carl to check on students during high-stress periods like midterms and finals, Participant 7 effectively turned a historically, and systemically, marginalized employee into a vital retention agent. A key touchpoint to the student experience. Through the critical lens, this strategy dismantles, and reimagines, the traditional academic hierarchy. Moreover, it validates the lived experience and relational power of working-class staff members in the fight for student equity. Similarly, Participant 9 empowered his institution's facility team to be vital contributors to retention efforts. "Students want to come in and feel good about where they are going to school. It seems like simple stuff... they've painted a picture after 5 minutes [of being on campus]. If they say this campus is dirty, they're going to think everything is faulty, so you've got to do the simple stuff first." Both Participant 7 and Participant 9 acknowledged the dignity of their historically and systemically marginalized staff. Both participants invited them

into the realm of influence. By way of their executive power and influence they empowered and, to a degree, liberated staff to perceive more of themselves. This strategy exemplifies a holistic approach to addressing equity at urban community colleges. Equity, in these instances, transcends students' experiences to encompass the entire campus community.

Rejecting Eurocentric Linearity

A fundamental tenet of Critical Theory is the dismantling of hegemonic, top-down power structures. Participant 2 explicitly operationalizes this by rejecting traditional higher education administrative models in favor of organic, circular leadership. He advises fellow equity-minded leaders to abandon "Eurocentric," "linear," and "unilateral" approaches. Instead, Participant 2 advocates for a "circular" and "indigenous" approach that centers collective problem-solving. His advocacy is steeped in his own lived experiences. Participant 2 proudly represents the community he serves in his role as a campus president. This pride stems from his acknowledgement that he grew up in this community. His presidency is a "full-circle" moment, bringing him back to lead in the community that raised him. He does not shy away from acknowledging the shortcomings (e.g. economic opportunities) of this community, but is fueled by the opportunity to close those equity gaps. "We don't get the same resources [on this side of town]", he says. He shares that inspired his research focus which is to "grow your own." By decentralizing his own executive authority, he operates on the epistemological belief that "more problems can be solved from the people we're trying to solve them for... than from external and from unilateral approaches."

Protecting Organic Student Agency

Finally, validating marginalized epistemologies requires an institution to protect the cultural expression and political agency of its students. Participant 2 perceives the protection of

student-led activism as a core administrative duty. He actively facilitates safe spaces by supporting organic student movements, proudly pointing to his backing of a 300-student protest regarding ICE and immigration, as well as funding a student-requested community mural. Rather than acting as an institutional gatekeeper to suppress political disruption, he operates on the philosophy of "not being in the 'no' business" when it comes to student ideas and cultural expression. Participant 2 acknowledges the complexity of pursuing equity in a politically hostile ecosystem, yet uses his power and influence to support equity-minded initiatives. By relinquishing institutional control over campus discourse, he empowers students to exercise their own political and social agency. Participant 6 speaks to the importance of this when she posits that marginalized students are not often aware of what they can do, or what they have access to. Providing students with confidence, access, and agency is also part of social equity. She argues, "it is the leveling of the playing field, accounting for everyone's respective starts."

Strategic Leadership and Semantic Agility

Within the nested framework of this study, Transformational Leadership Theory identifies "Intellectual Stimulation" as the mechanism by which leaders encourage innovation and challenge the status quo (Bass, 1985). When applied to the management of social equity, the Critical Theory lens reveals that these executive leaders are not merely solving administrative inefficiencies (e.g. low retention rates, workforce-ready course offerings, etc.); they are actively engaging in strategic leadership to navigate and dismantle hegemonic political structures. Executives are developing strategy, deploying resources, and galvanizing support to close equity gaps. Effective strategy, in part, necessitates that leaders set a clear vision for where they intend to go, what their aim for the college is. This vision must be communicated clearly and consistently. Moreover, executives are charged with ensuring that their teams are knowledgeable

about how they are expected to contribute to achieving said vision. Where leaders are aware of opposition to their vision, it is necessary that the strategy to achieve the vision is effective at circumventing opposition. This is particularly true for participants of the study who serve in states that are firmly against equity work. The data demonstrates that in highly politicized environments, advancing social mobility requires executives to employ sophisticated linguistic and tactical maneuvering to protect marginalized students from external and internal resistance.

Semantic Agility as a Survival Strategy

For executive leaders operating in conservative or politically hostile regions, the explicit language of equity often acts as a lightning rod for legislative pushback. Pushback in these environments could manifest in a myriad of ways—reduction or elimination of funding, targeting for demotion or termination, etc. Participant 2 cites loss of funding and the closing of offices related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programming. “Politically, that’s had a tough impact on us.” Participant 1 actively utilizes what can be termed "semantic agility" to continue her institution's equity work while "blocking the noise" of disconcerting political rhetoric. To ensure the college can still serve historically marginalized groups without breaking the law or drawing political fire, Participant 1 savvily pivots her administrative vocabulary. She replaces heavily targeted demographic terms like "race" and "gender" with structural identifiers, focusing instead on "First Generation" and "Low Socioeconomic Status". For context, the state of Arkansas, where Participant 1 serves, has a poverty rate of 15.7% according to the United States Census (2023). The national poverty rate at the same time was 12.7%. Participant 1 strategically aims to close social equity gaps, by focusing less on the language and more on outcomes—a decision she attributes to Elvis Presley, citing one of his lyrics, “a little more action and a little less talk”. By choosing to translate the language of equity into the language of poverty

alleviation, she notes that it "doesn't get me in trouble," effectively shielding the institution's ability to accomplish its core mission. This strategy is indicative of semantic agility as a vital survival strategy for equity leaders operating in conservative states.

The External Validator

Strategic leadership is also required to dismantle ingrained hegemonic resistance within an institution's own faculty and staff. Participant 4 confronts the complex identity dynamics of higher education administration by acknowledging that achieving equity internally can be challenging, a level of difficulty that is exacerbated by racialized resistance. He notes a perceived bias among White staff members who frequently exhibit a willingness to accept equity directives from national organizations—which are often led by other white professionals—than from their own Black or Brown executive leadership. Rather than confronting this perceived bias directly, Participant 4 employs an "External Validator" or Trojan Horse strategy. He deliberately utilizes this existing bias to his advantage by partnering with these external organizations to communicate, educate, and motivate the vision he shared initially. He acknowledges that, “partnering with a larger national organization can kind of help break the ice in an organization that might be stubborn to this very topic.” Exhibiting a commitment to getting the work done, he employs a strategy that uses perceived opposition to his benefit. Even as he shares his perspective, Participant 4 admits to speaking “in code” about his strategy, a nod to his commitment to the work. “They are more likely to get on board,” he says. Through the critical lens, this is a profound example of a leader treating equity as a political strategy, subverting a hegemonic power dynamic to force institutional progress and resource redistribution.

Material Emancipation Over Traditional Metrics

Through Transformational Leadership Theory, "Inspirational Motivation" is understood as an executive leader's ability to articulate a compelling vision that galvanizes wide support within an institution toward a common goal. When analyzed through the lens of Critical Theory, it becomes evident that the executive leaders in this study are not merely motivating their campuses to achieve standard operational benchmarks. Findings indicates that these executive leaders are actively redefining what institutional success looks like by prioritizing material emancipation over traditional, neoliberal higher education metrics. Participants in this study reject the notion that raw graduation rates equate to social equity, arguing instead that true institutional success is more accurately defined by an individual's escape from poverty. Moreover, success can be evidenced by a social mobility experienced by students that manifests in their accession to intergenerational wealth. These executive leaders are looking beyond standard postsecondary metrics that often center the individual. Instead, these leaders are in pursuit of generational change for the communities that they serve.

Redefining the Institutional Product

A prominent sub-theme across the participants' narratives is the explicit rejection of the college degree as the *pièce de résistance* of postsecondary education. This is particularly the case when advised to consider the demographics of the population being served. Participant 10 proudly redefines the core function of her institution, arguing that "the degree isn't the product... the person and their ability to ascend socially... is really about how well we do." Operating in a region that has a high-cost of living attributes to some of the challenges that she faces in her role. She notes that standard employment might still leave graduates falling below a "living wage" metric. Consequently, she directs institutional focus toward "wealth-building employment," such

as roles in biotechnology, cybersecurity, and life sciences, to ensure actual socioeconomic mobility rather than just credentialing.

This critical reframing of success is echoed by Participant 1, who boldly challenges standard accountability metrics that penalize colleges when students do not graduate. Participant 1 is unapologetically realistic about students "jobbing out"—leaving the institution prior to degree completion. From her perspective, if students secure high-wage offers, such as a \$60,000 position in the aviation industry, she encourages those students to take the jobs. She admits, “sometimes I can’t keep them in school.” Through the lens of a critical emancipatory perspective, she insists that if a student leaves poverty, the fundamental mission of the college is met, even if the state's traditional completion metric suffers as a result. By prioritizing the student's material reality over the institution's statistical optics, she subverts a systemic compliance model to focus on true equity.

Targeting the ALICE Population and “Back-Mapping”

To operationalize this emancipatory vision, executive leaders like Participant 5 utilize highly targeted structural interventions. Participant 5 explicitly identifies the "working poor"—specifically the ALICE population (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed)—as his primary demographic. Instead of broadly hoping degrees lead to jobs, he strategically employs the "back-mapping" method. Participant 5 “back-maps” academic programs directly from economic goals to ensure they lead to wages that manifests in students’ evolving out of the ALICE designation.

Participant 5 acknowledges the structural limitations of certain academic fields that historically maintain poverty wages. If an academic program, such as Early Childhood Education, traditionally keeps a graduate in the working poor class, he argues that the institution

has a moral imperative to pair that program with entrepreneurship training. By teaching the student not just to work in a daycare, but to own one, the institution's vision shifts from simple workforce preparation to the active creation of intergenerational wealth. Through the critical lens, this transformational approach moves the college beyond serving as a passive supplier of cheap labor, and actively positions it as an engine for structural economic liberation for communities.

Dismantling Structural Gatekeeping

The four pillars of Transformational Leadership Theory identify "Idealized Influence" as an executive's ability to act as a moral role model, taking risks to uphold the core values of the institution. When analyzed through the lens of Critical Theory, this influence is not merely used to model good administrative behavior; it is weaponized to actively dismantle the structural gatekeeping that disproportionately harms marginalized students. The executive leaders in this study demonstrate that acknowledgement of the brutal tangible realities of poverty is a prerequisite for equity work. Moreover, they actively identify routine administrative friction as a form of systemic barriers. Participant 12 provides an example of how his institution operationalizes this. Through a unique programmatic approach to a traditional field, Participant 12 explains how he enrolls women, who are traditionally underrepresented in the field, into a welding program. He shares, "we have a program called Women in the Trades... we have structured it so that it is women teaching women so that they don't feel like they're going to be under the microscope... It creates a more inclusive environment... Currently in our welding program, we're about 30% female."

Administrative Bureaucracy as Systemic Oppression

It is perceived that marginalized populations are not served best by postsecondary education structures. Traditional higher education bureaucracy does not function as a supportive framework, but as a rigid barrier. Participant 2 provides an insightful critique of this dynamic through what he terms the "Just Quit" reality. He notes that when his students experience an institutional barrier or receive a bad grade, they do not navigate the bureaucratic process to file a complaint or speak to a dean. He believes that because these students have "already been through enough in [their] lives," they simply quit. Through the critical lens, Participant 2 insists that executive leadership must pay attention to these students who drop out. He argues that these students are not isolated, anecdotal incidents, but as "systematic" failures of the institution. He passionately exclaims that community colleges function best as "bridge makers," explicitly rejecting their historical role as "gatekeepers."

Participant 1 operationalizes this critical stance through her "IT Ticket" example. She argues that a seemingly routine administrative delay, such as an IT ticket sitting unresolved for 400 days, is actually a profound equity issue because it actively prevents a faculty member from teaching or a student from engaging with their coursework. Practicing holistic accountability, if a student receives an incorrect bill, she traces the error backward through the Bursar, Financial Aid, and the Registrar. Moreover, she sets an expectation that her leaders who report to her do the same. By viewing every administrative delay as a structural barrier to student persistence, she forces the institution to recognize how its own internal friction maintains inequity. Furthermore, she curates a campus culture of care. Equity is not merely the job or responsibility of one person, one team, or one office. Equity becomes a by-product of an environment shaped by an executive leader's commitment to social equity.

Addressing the Material Costs of Survival

Dismantling barriers also requires addressing the immediate, material crises of the working poor. Participant 1 acknowledges the fragile reality of her student population, noting they are often "one flat tire away from dropping out." An acknowledgement shared by Participant 2 by way of his "Just Quit" theory. To remedy this, she advocates for emergency interventions that bypass traditional financial aid channels, such as setting up a specific 501(c)(3) to meet students' emergency needs (e.g. utility bill, car repair, etc.). By linking immediate crisis management to long-term graduation statistics, she moves the institution beyond traditional academic support and directly addresses the material realities of poverty. This strategy is indicative of balancing the need for immediate action with long-term, system change required to achieve social equity. Participant 1, with a focus on moving her students out of poverty eventually, invests in their ability to succeed academically in the present.

Challenging Academic Hegemony

The dismantling of institutional barriers extends beyond student services to include the academic curriculum. Participant 9 approaches modernization plainly as an equity imperative. He challenges traditional academic hegemony by framing Artificial Intelligence (AI) not as a threat to academic integrity, but as a critical, necessary, and relevant tool. He argues that, "you can't be scared of it," encouraging the adoption of AI by community colleges. Participant 9 posits that institutions should take the lead on incorporating this tool in their curriculum, citing that, "[students] are coming from high school already using AI." He argues that institutional policies that prevent students from utilizing AI is fundamentally inequitable because they will soon be competing in a workforce that relies on it heavily. Consequently, he asserts that the

college must teach students how to use these tools responsibly, ensuring that outdated academic policies do not lock students out of the modernized economy.

Summary of Findings

The narratives provided by these postsecondary executives reveal that leading an urban community college involves more than poignant rhetoric that laments the equity gaps that exist. Leading an urban community requires moving beyond traditional administrative compliance. It involves setting bold vision, developing strategies, edification, employing innovation, and empathy. The findings indicate that these executive leaders conceptualize equity as an urgent mission that sets as its goal contemporary economic rescue and intergenerational wealth-building. By curating an ecosystem of institutional accountability that is intent on prioritizes the leveling of the proverbial field for marginalized students, all students benefit. Through semantic agility and executing highly targeted, data-driven best practices, these leaders transform their institutions from gatekeeping bureaucracies into active engines of social mobility. The subsequent chapter will synthesize these findings with the broader theoretical literature, detailing the implications of these administrative strategies and offering actionable recommendations for the higher education sector.

Chapter Summary

The findings presented in this chapter reveal that advancing social mobility within postsecondary institutions requires executive leaders to move far beyond standard administrative compliance. By analyzing the qualitative narratives through the nested framework of Transformational Leadership Theory and Critical Theory, a distinct pattern of emancipatory leadership emerges. These executives utilize semantic agility to subvert hegemonic political resistance, prioritize material wealth-building over neoliberal completion metrics, actively

dismantle bureaucratic gatekeeping, and decentralize their own power to validate marginalized voices.

Collectively, these themes demonstrate that addressing social equity is not a passive, metric-driven endeavor; it is an active, often strategic process of structural disruption. The following chapter, Chapter 5, will contextualize these findings within the broader academic literature, presenting the implications of this study and offering actionable recommendations for current and future community college leaders committed to the pursuit of social equity.

Chapter 5 - Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study is to critically examine how executive leaders at urban community colleges address social equity. Moreover, it is important to examine how these executive leaders navigate a myriad of barriers to improve social mobility for historically and systemically marginalized populations. How these executive leaders navigate obstacles has potential to be considered best practices for similarly-positioned leaders who are working to achieve social equity. Through the conceptual framework of Transformational Leadership Theory (TLT) and the theoretical framework of Critical Theory (CT), Chapter 4 reveals that these executive leaders do not simply manage existing systems; they actively employ strategy that subverts hegemonic structures, reshape institutional metrics, and decentralize administrative power to center the voices of community members. These actions are disruptive to the status quo that often is attributed with perpetuating inequity. This is particularly critical to note given the geographical locations in which some of these executive leaders serve—cities and states that are politically opposed to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts. From a macrolevel analysis, these executive leaders of urban community colleges are serving under one of the most conservatively-leaning administrations to lead the United States Department of Education in recent years. This context imposes additional layers of difficulty to the already difficult work that is led by these executive leaders.

This chapter contextualizes those findings within the broader academic discourse. It addresses specific gaps in current higher education leadership literature, illustrating how the strategies deployed by these executive leaders challenge traditional administrative paradigms. How urban community colleges are embedded in the communities that they serve expands the boundaries of the community college context (Morgan, Cho, Davis II, and Campbell, 2023).

Finally, this chapter outlines actionable implications for higher education practice and offers recommendations for future research.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into, and examine, the perceived roles, responsibilities, and best practices of executive leaders addressing social equity at urban community colleges. Three questions were developed to guide this qualitative study. Gaining insight into the perceptions and best practices of executive leaders of urban community colleges, the following three questions were employed:

1. How do executive leaders of urban community colleges perceive social equity concepts and their leadership roles?
2. How do executive leaders of urban community colleges perceive their roles in addressing social equity in the communities that they serve?
3. What best practices do executive leaders of urban community colleges exercise in addressing social equity?

Discussion of Findings Related to Research Questions

The findings reflect executive leaders' unshakable commitment to strategically challenging the systems that allow for the marginalization of urban community colleges students. The executive leaders in this study move beyond questioning why systems of poverty, racism, and patriarchy exist; they actively reimagine and diligently build systems that are counterculture. The findings illuminate the strategy, care, passion, and vision held by executive leaders addressing social equity at urban community colleges.

Redefining Equity as Economic Emancipation

A dominant theme that emerged while answering Research Question 1 is the rejection of traditional definitions for student success. The participants of this study, effective urban community college leaders, completely reject traditional definitions of student success. Definitions of success that are tied purely to degree completion rates are perceived as limited in their ability to reflect the work that is being done to achieve social equity. Viewed through the lens of Critical Theory, these executive leaders conceptualize equity as material economic emancipation. Said differently, a credential of value is valuable only if it is able to afford the recipient some form of liberation from their socioeconomic status quo. The executive leaders in this study aim to materially change the lives of the students and communities that they serve.

Participant 10 argued that the degree itself is not the product; rather, the true metric of success is the person and their ability to ascend socially. It is worth noting that standard living wages are often insufficient in urban environments, so these unique postsecondary institutions of higher learning must center wealth-building employment rather than graduation rates. For these leaders, it is not enough for students to graduate from their institutions if they are not elevating from the places that sent them there. This aligns directly with Participant 5's strategy of specifically targeting the ALICE population (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed). By back-mapping academic programs to ensure that they lead to wages that move students out of poverty, and by pairing low-wage fields with entrepreneurship training to foster intergenerational wealth, Participant 5 demonstrates that transformational leadership requires visionary capacity. A leader who is working to achieve social equity must develop and cast a vision for their teams to follow. Moreover, the vision must be rooted in the dismantling of systems of poverty. This is important to note because a focus on resolving poverty for students individually would fail to

acknowledge the systems that allowed for poverty to exist. Critical Theory necessitates that systems, and not merely outcomes, are examined critically (Horkheimer, 1947). The existing literature frequently illustrates community colleges as passive workforce pipelines; however, the findings of this study position these institutions and their leaders as active architects of regional economic rescue.

The Strategic Nature of Transformational Leadership

In addressing the second research question regarding autonomy, the findings challenge traditional assumptions of Transformational Leadership. While TLT emphasizes idealized influence and intellectual stimulation to build organizational consensus (Bass, 1985), the findings of this study reveal that advancing equity often requires strategic leadership to navigate systemic hostility. Participant 1's use of "semantic agility"—pivoting her language from "race and gender" to "First Generation" and "Low Socioeconomic Status"—is a calculated strategy to protect equity work from politically conservative attacks. Similarly, Participant 4's "External Validator" strategy deliberately exploits ingrained institutional racial biases, utilizing White-led national organizations as a "Trojan Horse" to deliver equity mandates that his staff might reject from Black or Brown leadership. Conversely, Participant 2's explicit rejection of "Eurocentric" and "linear" management styles in favor of "circular" and "indigenous" problem-solving techniques illustrates that executive leaders who are equity-minded must intentionally decentralize their power. To decentralize their power is not to abdicate responsibility or power. It is strategically empowering others within the organization to contribute meaningfully towards the work of achieving social equity and student success.

These actions taken by executive leaders illustrate that addressing social equity is not merely administrative; it is an active subversion of traditional, oftentimes static power structures.

Addressing equity gaps within the urban community college is inherently change management work. It is the antithesis of legacy systems of postsecondary education. Achieving social equity welcomes the marginalized in; it meets students uniquely where they are; it provides holistic support for students' basic needs (Cooney, Martin III, Ayers-Palmore, and Garza, 2023; Smith and Miller, 2023). Furthermore, addressing social equity from a transformational leadership lens builds upon the idealized influence and intellectual stimulation to build organizational consensus. A transformational leader in this context respects the intellectual contributions of their teams and simultaneously encourages them to think differently about how the work is accomplished. Executive leaders evidenced this through the prioritization of administrative delays to students, "intrusive advising," and the empowerment of custodial staff. These leaders nimbly avoid pitfalls that would derail institutional progress. The use of semantic agility to avoid proverbial roadblocks in the path to social equity is a critical skill exercised by executive leaders of urban community colleges. There is acknowledgement that the students that they serve are underrepresented. To serve as an executive leader of an urban community college is to accept that challenging the systems that allow for this underrepresentation to exist may breed opposition. Urban community college leaders must be strategic and nimble if they are to be successful.

Operationalizing Equity Through Structural Disruption

The execution of best practices is correlated with Research Question 3 and requires leaders to identify and dismantle the hidden bureaucratic mechanisms that reproduce inequality. It is not enough to know that systems are actively working against social equity; executive leaders must engage in critical analysis of said systems. Moreover, executive leaders must move beyond analysis to be solution-oriented. Students served by urban community colleges often

experience a systemic neglect that cannot be perpetuated by executive leaders. Participant 1's theory of the "IT Ticket" operationalizes this observation by proving that an issue as seemingly benign as an IT ticket that goes unresolved too long may be perceived as an equity barrier. Perceptions of the executive leaders suggest that students who are accustomed to not being prioritized will default to quitting because they do not have reasons to believe that support is available to them. Participant 1 illustrates how this seemingly innocuous problem adversely impacts students' persistence. Marginalized students are perceived to experience low confidence that can manifest as imposter syndrome, as noted by Participant 6.

Participant 2 posits that these students will simply quit if faced with one too many barriers. This is because of their lived experiences as marginalized people: often unheard, unseen, and unsupported. Every administrative delay is perceived as structural gatekeeping. Perhaps, even worse, students may perceive barrier as confirmation that they are not worth the investment of higher education. Operationalizing equity requires the strict alignment of resources and culture. Participant 10 employs "Budgetary Gatekeeping," mandating that every resource and space request be explicitly tied to access, completion, or post-completion equity goals, or the request is denied. This strict demonstration of budget protection is reflective of an institutional alignment with social equity. It is imperative that executive leaders' vision, institutional mission, goals, and expectations are aligned.

Curating Culture for Equity

The findings suggest that culture is not a manifestation of happenstance; it is the result of intentional effort. Participant 7's "Carl the Custodian" example extends retention accountability to historically invisible frontline staff, fundamentally disrupting the traditional academic hierarchy to foster an authentic culture of belonging. This example is reflective of the

Inspirational Motivation principle that is associated with Transformational Leadership theory (TLT). Executive leaders are articulating a compelling, future-oriented vision that motivates campus community members to exceed traditional operational goals. Participant 9 similarly empowered the members of his team, welcoming them into sharing the responsibility of ensuring that the campus is beautiful. Most notable is his perception that students who come from “broken communities” do not want to be associated with a “broken campus.” To that end, executive leaders must be intentional in communicating their expectations to the campus community. While executive leaders are responsible for setting a vision and establishing strategies, it is the members of the campus community (e.g. faculty and staff) that will oftentimes be responsible for whether initiatives are successful. Galvanizing support is essential to the success of executive leaders. Team members must be knowledgeable about leaders’ expectations, equipped to execute said expectations, and understand specifically what their role in achieving social equity is. This is evidenced by the intentionality employed by executive leaders in dismantling traditional hierarchies, exercising an inclusive form of leadership that values the contributions of everyone.

Discussion of Findings Related to Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Critical Theory (Horkheimer, 1947; Marcuse, 1955) served as the theoretical framework for this study. Critical Theory provides a broad approach that examines power structures, social inequalities, and historical contexts to challenge dominant ideologies and promote social justice. It involves a critical analysis of societal systems, institutions, and discourses to understand how they contribute to marginalization and oppression. In the context of this research study, critical theory provided a lens for an examination of how urban community colleges, as historical and contemporary institutions, exert their power and influence to promote, demote, or maintain social equity.

The findings indicate that executive leaders of urban community colleges (UCC) are well aware of the multitude of systems that are functioning—in the foreground and background—while they pursue the work of achieving social equity. Racial equity gaps in higher education have existed since the inception of postsecondary education in America (Wilder, 2013). Gender equity gaps in higher education have existed. As the industry of postsecondary education has grown and evolved, a plethora of equity challenges have been identified. Participants of this study acknowledged the diversity of challenges that exist in their respective student bodies. For example, equity gaps exist between able-bodied students and differently-abled students; neurotypical students and neurodivergent students; urban-oriented students and rurally-oriented students (Portillo, 2026). These executive leaders of urban community colleges have committed to 1) learning their students and their communities, 2) addressing their basic needs and unique challenges, and 3) developing strategies to ensure that student who are adversely impacted by a lack of social equity are not barred from achieving success. The line of connectivity for these three commitments is a critical challenging of established systems that perpetuate inequity and marginalization. These executives employ innovative strategies that challenge the status quo and subvert political opposition. With a goal of achieving social equity for their students and the communities that they serve, these leaders are dismantling barriers to student success that are erected by hegemonic systems. Most notable, these leaders are using the system of postsecondary education—a historically exclusive system—to establish a more equitable society.

Transformational theory (Burns, 1978; Bass 1985) served as the conceptual framework for this study. The conceptual theory for this research study is transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978; Bass 1985). Transformational leadership theory is an organizational leadership theory that provides a framework for examining the inspirational and motivating qualities of

leaders that result in their teams or followers achieving extraordinary outcomes through a fostering of shared vision, innovation, and personal growth.

Executive leaders of urban community colleges are charged with equitably serving a population of underserved, underrepresented, ethnically-minoritized, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and diverse students (McNair, Bensimon, & Malcom-Piqueux, 2020; Smith and Miller, 2023). These leaders have redefined student success to extend beyond the traditional metrics of grade point average (GPA) and degree completion rates; success is redefined to mean the elimination of poverty, the beginning of generational wealth, and positive social mobility for communities that experienced systemic and historical marginalization. Executive leaders perceive the institutions that they lead as anchor institutions, communal partners offering stability and growth opportunities. Whether it is the example of Participant 5 supplementing traditional low-wage degrees with high-demand skills or Participant 7's strategy of empowering organizationally-marginalized employees to be key stakeholders in student retention campaigns, these executive leaders are transforming the culture of their institutions. Participant 6 posits about leading a culture of love; Participant 11 shares about a campus culture of "student readiness," and Participant 8 spoke of developing a justice-oriented culture through hiring specifically for social equity. These decisions are not isolated events, but they are incremental marks of progress towards achieving extraordinary outcomes. The transforming of postsecondary education will not be achieved in an instance; it was not developed in one. Transformation of the postsecondary education system for social equity will be an ongoing work that is perpetuated and maintained by committed leaders who are dedicated to leveling the proverbial playing field for all students, of all backgrounds to succeed.

Discussion of Findings Related to Literature

The findings of this study support and extend the broader body of literature on community college leadership. Previous research has explored and examined how community colleges serve a disproportionate number of students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds; these are students who are first generation, Pell Grant recipients, students who may be housing insecure (Callaway, 2024). Much of the existing literature on community college leadership examines how community college leaders solve for these challenges (Smith and Miller, 2023). This study confirms the distinctive nature of urban community colleges (UCC). Where community colleges enroll a greater number of marginalized students than their 4-year counterparts, urban community colleges oftentimes enroll an even higher number of students who are adversely affected by systemic marginalization (Callaway, 2023; Smith and Miller, 2023). Unique circumstances necessitate unique approaches. Executive leaders of urban community colleges cannot afford to apply broad, one-size-fits-all solutions to the distinct circumstances that impact their institutions; instead, these leaders must exercise precision in their approach to address social equity.

Equity-Driven Leadership and Diversity

The findings of this study suggest that a lack of social equity—social inequity—manifests in a variety of ways and that those inequities can be exacerbated by the context of an urban environment. UCCs inherently serve underserved and underrepresented students. This population is oftentimes reflective of communities that are marginalized. The task of addressing social equity may seem overwhelming at times; the work is challenging. Many times, executive leaders do not know where to begin (Burmicky and Hartman, 2023). It is a strong understanding of the data and equally strong command of data analysis that makes the difference of whether a leader

is successful in their efforts to address social equity. The alternative, through the lens of Critical Theory, is to simply maintain status quo systems that perpetuate inequity. This is failure for executive leaders who are aiming to achieve social equity. Callaway (2023) argues that “college leaders need to develop strategies to engage underrepresented students, promote their retention and completion, and provide them with holistic support services that meet their basic needs (P.65).” Developing such strategies necessitates an understanding of the population being served.

Data-Driven Results

Dr. Cornell West argues, “you cannot lead the people if you do not love the people; you cannot save the people if you do not serve the people.” While Participant 6 prides herself on her unique approach of leading with love, the key takeaway is that leading people requires that you know who you are leading. Each executive of this study indicated in their own way the importance of knowing your community. Participant 11 advises of cultivating relationships beyond the gates of the campus. Participant 4 echoes this sentiment through his commitment to regularly attending city stakeholder meetings, even though he is underrepresented. Participant 1 also established biannual meetings with an external advisory council. These meeting commitments represent opportunities for executive leaders to learn what their community needs of them. For example, Participant 3 learned that over 51% of the county that he serves is comprised of women; however, women are underrepresented in the high-wage, in-demand careers in the same county. Equipped with this data, participant 3 launched a strategic campaign to enroll, matriculate, and graduate more women in these fields. This action is reflective of his focus on community wellbeing, ensuring that postgraduate success of students is equitable.

The findings of this study suggest that knowing problems exist is not enough. Acknowledging that that urban school districts across the United States have absorbed the largest

number of immigrants and low-income students (Jo and Lan Rong, 2002) is not sufficient for addressing social equity. The acknowledgement of approximately 10 million students being served by community colleges in 2023, and that these institutions are oftentimes the primary entry point to higher education for low-income and marginalized students is not addressing social equity. Action is required. Executive leaders must set visions that align with the needs of their communities, primarily. For executive leaders to align their visions with the needs of their community, they must engage in knowing their community. Data collection and building relationships are first steps towards becoming a knowledgeable leader that is equipped to make decisions about the future of students and their communities. The findings suggest that addressing social equity in this context means eliminating poverty, creating opportunities for marginalized populations to establish generational wealth, and curating inclusive cultures that dismantle systems of oppression. Urban communities, like the colleges who serve them, are unique in their needs. Participant 6 described a campus community that benefits more from social acclimation than the poverty alleviation needed in the communities served by Participant 1, Participant 5, and Participant 9. Data is the beginning of the long road towards addressing social equity.

Implications for Practice and Organizational Support

The synthesis of these findings offers implications not only for current community college presidents but for the broader ecosystem of educational support networks. To truly advance social mobility for students and to close equity gaps in the communities served by community colleges, it is imperative that national organizations, consulting partners, and community leaders who are committed to this work of closing equity gaps strongly consider how the following recommendations may be applied within their respective scopes of work. The work

of achieving social equity is multifaceted, multilayered work that is complicated further by entrenched systems that perpetuate the institutionalized marginalization that social equity seeks to eliminate. Social equity that is achieved through postsecondary education has the potential to transform more than the individual recipients of formal education; the communities served by these institutions will flourish in the wake of the inclusivity and parity brought about by social equity. The increased rates of diversification and urbanization that is occurring nationally necessitates that urban enclaves, cosmopolitan centers, and metropolises are prioritized. Urban community colleges are well positioned to 1) address social equity, 2) solve the distinctive challenges faced by urban areas, and 3) develop a robust, well-educated workforce for the future needs of this nation. None of this happens successfully in the absence of committed, equity-minded executive leaders that employ their power and platform to advance equity.

Reimagine Metrics for Success

Postsecondary institutions of education and their supporting partners should transition from tracking graduation rates to tracking post-completion wage ascension. This is particularly salient for institutions that are serving systemically marginalized students. These students are adversely impacted by interconnected systems that promote and perpetuate marginalization, economically, socially, politically, and academically. To this end, academic programs must be rigorously audited against local and regional poverty statistics to ensure they are not structurally reproducing the working poor. Metrics for success should be associated with the tangible, measurable outcomes that align with a reduction of harm to the systemically marginalized and an increase of inclusion to those who have systemically been denied equitable access.

Audit Bureaucratic Gatekeeping

Executive leaders, in their pursuit to address and achieve social equity, should consider conducting comprehensive reviews of their internal administrative processes. The purpose of such an audit is to identify and reduce or eliminate any friction that impedes on students' ability to succeed. Administrative mishaps in financial aid, billing, and technology services must be recategorized from "customer service issues" to high-priority equity barriers that can actively cause marginalized students to forego their educational pursuit. This strategy should be perpetual by design. Processes and procedures should regularly be evaluated for their effectiveness in achieving their intended outcomes equitably. This charge should be managed by leaders within an organization; however, it is the responsibility of all organizational members to be sensitive to the mandate to be equitable in every aspect of work.

Mission Auditing

Smith and Miller (2023) posit that urban community colleges generally do not have explicit reference to their urban environment in their mission statements. Literature that examines urban community college mission statements is limited. Elements distinctively connecting these institutions to their communities were missing from the review by Smith and Miller (2023). The omission, they speculate, might be attributed to the overarching expectation that all community colleges are actively engaged in their respective communities. Given the unique challenges that are experienced by urban community colleges (UCC), challenges that may be exacerbated by their urban positioning, it is important that executive leaders of UCCs are intentional in defining their institutional mission. In the same way that these executive leaders redefined student success to mean the elimination of poverty, executive leaders should be as intentional about refining their mission statements to reflect the distinctive work of achieving

social equity, not just for students but for the communities that they inhabit and serve. As the nation's need for a new workforce increase, the demands from businesses, non-profit organizations, civic groups, and municipalities will exponentially increase as well. Urban community college leaders must be clear about what their mission is. A well-defined mission and clearly articulated goals will ensure that resources are no underutilized or wasted, as evidenced explicitly by Participant 10 and Participant 11.

Deploy Creative Strategies for Inclusion

Executive leaders, particularly those in highly politicized environments, must be trained in semantic agility. Strategic plans should focus strictly on the undeniable metrics of poverty alleviation. Moreover, strategies should focus on shielding vulnerable, marginalized student populations from political conflict. In addition, the responsibility for student success must formally incorporate all faculty and staff, to include frontline, non-academic staff. Custodians, groundskeepers, and financial aid advisors must be acknowledged for their experience, proximity to students, and contributions within the organization. Moreover, they should be trained and empowered as critical retention agents. This strategy requires that executive leaders be intent on curating a culture of shared responsibility among employees. A curated institutional culture of shared responsibility can manifest as a culture of care that is perceived and accepted by students. This is particularly salient for systemically marginalized students who may feel unheard, unseen, unprepared, or undervalued. It is imperative that in addition to deploying innovative strategies, that UCC leaders are nimble in response to ever shifting circumstances. It is critical that executive leaders are able to adapt (Cooney, Martin III, Ayres-Palmore, and Garza, 2023).

National Attention and Global Implications

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) is well positioned and adequately equipped to pioneer the path for the future of postsecondary education. The organization should invest in the deepening of the understanding of urban community colleges. Advocacy for, and research of, urban community colleges should be prioritized given the context of the shifting landscape domestically and globally. Community colleges will be welcoming their most diverse student population ever over the next decade (Callaway, 2023). Moreover, The World Bank (2023) expects that 83% of North America will be urbanized by 2050. In the same time frame, approximately 70% of the globe will be living in urban areas. The ability of America to remain competitive on the global stage will be dependent, in part, on its ability to educate a new, diverse workforce (LaGanga 1999; Edgecombe, 2019; D’Amico, Turk, Hancock, & Miller, 2022). This workforce of the near future is immensely diverse—a cosmopolitan of historically marginalized groups. Through a lens of Critical Theory, most postsecondary institutions have not, and do not, serve marginalized students well. For example, the racial equity gaps in higher education are long-standing and persistent (Lumina Foundation, 2022). It is worth reiterating that equity gaps exist between able-bodied students and differently-abled students; neurotypical students and neurodivergent students; male students and female students; urban-educated students and rurally-educated students (Portillo, 2026). Ethnically diverse, neurodivergent, gender-fluid, and historically non-traditional people will constitute the emerging workforce, both domestically and abroad. This is reason enough for national organizations such as the AACC and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) to prioritize research of postsecondary institutions that have successfully engaged in this work of addressing social equity and serving underserved and underrepresented people.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this narrative inquiry explored the executive perspective, future research should expand upon these findings in the following ways:

1. **Longitudinal Wage Studies:** Quantitative studies should track the specific cohorts of students targeted by these executive initiatives to measure their actual, long-term acquisition of intergenerational wealth compared to traditional degree-earners.
2. **Frontline Staff Perspectives:** A qualitative study utilizing Critical Theory should explore the lived experiences of the "invisible" staff members (e.g. custodians, clerks) when they are formally empowered as retention agents, analyzing the shift in institutional power dynamics.
3. **Community Perspectives:** A qualitative study to explore the perceptions of community members who are the intended beneficiaries of social equity policies. Qualitative studies should examine if community members perceive the urban community college as a partner or pariah in the work of improving the socioeconomic condition of the community.
4. **The Efficacy of Semantic Agility:** Future research should evaluate the long-term impact of masking equity language. Studies must determine if pivoting to "socioeconomic status" instead of a specific focus on race successfully preserves resources for racially marginalized groups, or if it inadvertently dilutes the focus on systemic racism over time.
5. **The Cost of Racism:** Future qualitative research should examine the perceived cost of anti-DEI initiatives and policies on institutions' ability and capacity to achieve their organizational missions, adequately develop a robust and well-educated workforce for the future, and equitably serve their communities. Moreover, future quantitative research

should explore the financial implications of anti-DEI initiatives and policies. Studies must determine the longitudinal impact on colleges' fiscal sustainability.

6. **Balancing Equity with Expansion:** Future research should examine the challenges that executive leaders of urban community colleges face as the increased rate of urbanization yields increased rates of gentrification. How do executive leaders balance the need to expand their campuses to meet growing needs while ensuring that institutional growth does not perpetuate inequity?
7. **Urban Ecosystems:** Future research should explore the ways that urban universities collaborate with urban community colleges to advance social equity and develop a well-trained, robust workforce that addresses the unique needs of their communities. An exploration of best practices and the outcomes yielded would further expand the field of knowledge on urban community colleges.
8. **Transformational Leadership Assessment:** Future research should examine the leadership styles of a larger sampling of executive leaders who are serving urban community colleges to determine if they are transformational leaders, and how it impacts the success of their institution, and that of their communities.

Conclusion

The narratives of these executive leaders of urban community colleges (UCC) illustrate that leading for social equity is a highly disruptive, deeply political endeavor. The work is challenging due to the disproportionate number of marginalized students that are served by UCC. The challenges are exacerbated by the distinctive nature of urban environments. These cosmopolitans are often rich with resources, yet many urban residents experience inequity as it pertains to accessing the bountiful amenities that are inherent to urban living. Moreover, political

winds shift social climates, making it difficult for executive leaders to strategize effectively long-term. Circumstances related to lack of living wages, adequate childcare, reliable transportation, and safe shelter are manifestations of the inequity that is found in urban centers across the United States of America. Executive leaders of urban community colleges are charged with meeting the basic needs of their students first if they are to ensure that these marginalized populations of students are to succeed academically. These executive leaders routinely navigate a multitude of systems—systemic racism, patriarchy, poverty, etc.—to dismantle barriers erected by said systems. Author James Baldwin, in 1961, famously posited that "To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time." Baldwin seemed to be building on the adage that speaks of the blissfulness of ignorance. For Baldwin, the consciousness he speaks of is the navigation of dual identities and management of systemic inequalities. The rage that he works to keep at bay is a result, in part, of the exhaustion experienced. Similarly, executive leaders of urban community colleges are dually positioned in systems of inequity. Executive leaders are first positioned as actors of the system—the system of American postsecondary education. Secondly, these executives are positioned as advocates for equity and justice. The system of higher education in America has perpetuated inequity by design, so these executive leaders are, in some sense, working against the grain to achieve social equity.

Executive leaders of urban community colleges are well positioned to be transformational leaders. Leaders who spearhead transformational change for the communities that they serve. Such leaders operating through a critical lens do not simply optimize the existing academic structure; they fundamentally redefine its purpose. This redefinition is not without opposition or obstacles. A myriad of interconnected systems that perpetuate the social ills of systemic

marginalization pose threats to the work that these leaders are aiming to achieve. All critical leaders are transformational; however, all transformational leaders are not critical in their approach. Both are needed to advance the equity agenda in America. Critical leaders of urban community colleges are actively reimagining what systems of postsecondary education are capable of accomplishing. These leaders are successful through the acknowledgement and honoring of the lived realities of poverty—from flat tires and administrative friction that causes students to drop out, to localized mortality rates that disproportionately impact minoritized populations. As evidence of their commitment to curating cultures of care, accountability is elevated as a new metric of institutional success. Campus communities are held accountable for advancing equity, and empowered by their leaders to make a positive difference. These executive leaders work strategically to dismantle gatekeeping bureaucracies. Moreover, these executive leaders are actively challenging the systems, perceptions, and structures that knowingly and unknowingly perpetuate inequity.

Ultimately, the findings of this research demonstrate that achieving social equity is a matter of changing lives, transforming communities, and curating culture that counters the status quo. There are levels to achieving equity; different leaders achieve different levels of results. Achieving social equity at all necessitates that systems that allow for the marginalization of people from any background or any lived experience are challenged. Systems that deny or limit access must be reformed or dismantled for social equity to exist. This is exceptionally difficult work—building equitable culture and sustainable systems from within systems that are historically inequitable. Executive leaders of urban community colleges who are working towards achieving social equity are strategic, nimble, inclusive, and innovative leaders that accomplish extraordinary outcomes for their institutions and their communities. They are

transformational leaders. The findings of this study suggest that achieving social equity in urban community colleges requires that executive leaders 1) subvert hegemonic structures strategically, 2) be committed to relentlessly aligning institutional resources with equity goals, 3) and transform their institutions into uncompromising engines for economic emancipation—not just for individual students, but for generations of community members.

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Appendix A - Alignment Table

Appendix Figure A.1

Literature Anchor	Research Questions	Interview Questions by Participant Group	Conceptual Framework	Aligned Dimensions
American community colleges have historically served a disproportionately diverse population of college-going students—and the diversity among these students will only continue to grow (Malcolm, 2012; Malcom-Piqueux, 2018; Mulder, 2019; Hubbard-Jackson, 2021).	R1: (Examining Concepts) How do executive leaders of urban community colleges perceive social equity concepts and their leadership role?	Q1, Q8	Bass' 4 Pillars of Transformational Leadership Theory	Inspirational Motivation (Vision & Meaning) Idealized Influence (Role Modeling & Accountability)
Social equity gaps can follow students throughout their matriculation, at times adversely impacting their ability to succeed (Malcom-Piqueux, 2018; Musaindapo, 2018).	R2: (Perceiving Role) How do executive leaders of urban community colleges perceive their role in addressing social equity in the communities they serve?	Q5, Q7, Q9	Bass' 4 Pillars of Transformational Leadership Theory	Intellectual Stimulation (Innovation & Questioning Status Quo) Idealized Influence (Role Modeling & Accountability)
As the world becomes increasingly diverse, and the rate of urbanization continues to rise, there is a need for community colleges to be adequately prepared to train a new workforce (LaGanga 1999; Edgecombe, 2019; O'Banion, 2019).	R3: (Best Practices) What best practices do executive leaders of urban community colleges exercise when addressing social equity?	Q2, Q3, Q4, Q6	Bass' 4 Pillars of Transformational Leadership Theory	Individualized Consideration (Supportive Climate & Mentorship) Inspirational Motivation (Vision & Meaning)

Appendix B - Big Tent Criteria Table

Appendix Figure B.1

Summary of the eight big-tent criteria for excellent qualitative research.	
<i>Criteria for quality (end goal)</i>	<i>Various means, practices and methods through which to achieve</i>
Worthy topic	The topic of the research is: • Relevant • Timely • Significant • Interesting
Rich rigor	The study uses a sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex: • Set of theoretical constructs • Data and time in the field • Sample(s) • Context(s) • Data collection and analysis processes
Sincerity	The study is characterized by: • Self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher(s) • Transparency about the methods and challenges
Credibility	The research is marked by: • Thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit (non-textual) knowledge and showing rather than telling • Triangulation or crystallization • Multivocality • Member reflections
Resonance	The research influences, impacts, or moves particular readers or a variety of audiences through: • Aesthetic, evocative representation • Naturalistic generalizations • Transferable findings
Significant contribution	The research provides a significant contribution: • Conceptually/theoretically • Practically • Morally • Methodologically • Heuristically
Ethics	The research considers • Procedural ethics (such as human subjects) • Situational and culturally specific ethics • Relational ethics • Exiting ethics (leaving the scene and sharing the research)
<i>Criteria for quality (end goal)</i>	<i>Various means, practices and methods through which to achieve</i>
Meaningful coherence	The study • Achieves what it purports to be about • Uses methods and procedures that fit its stated goals. • Meaningfully interconnects literature, research questions/ foci, findings, and interpretations with each other

Source: Tracy, 2010. Republished with permission of SAGE.

Appendix C - NCES Urban-Centric Locale Table

Appendix Figure C.1

NCES Locale Code	NCES Locale	Definition
City		
11	Large	Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population of 250,000 or more
12	Midsized	Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000
13	Small	Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 100,000.
Suburban		
21	Large	Territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with population of 250,000 or more.
22	Midsized	Territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.
23	Small	Territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with population less than 100,000.
Town		
31	Fringe	Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an Urbanized Area.
32	Distant	Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an Urbanized Area.
33	Remote	Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is more than 35 miles from an Urbanized Area.

SOURCE: NCES locale classifications and Criteria. Retrieved February 25, 2025, from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/docs/LOCALE_CLASSIFICATIONS.pdf

Appendix D - Invitation to Participate in Research

Subject: Invitation to Contribute to Research on Addressing Social Equity at Urban Community Colleges

Dear *[Executive Leader's Name]*,

I am writing to you today from Kansas State University to extend an invitation to participate in a vital research study titled "Moral Imperative, Local Action, and Community College Leadership: An Exploration of the Perceived Roles and Responsibilities of Urban Community College Leaders in Addressing Social Equity." Given your esteemed position as *[Executive Leader's Title]* at *[Executive Leader's College's Name]*, your strategic insights into student enrollment approaches, student persistence strategies, and social equity management are precisely what I seek to inform this critical inquiry.

My study is designed to gain insight into, and examine, the perceived roles, responsibilities, and best practices of executive leaders addressing social equity at urban community colleges. I am confident that the collective wisdom of leaders like yourself will yield actionable insights that not only advance academic understanding but also offer practical value to the field of community college leadership.

Your participation would involve a brief, focused contribution: a confidential virtual interview, not to exceed 60-minutes. I am committed to ensuring this experience is efficient and impactful, respecting your demanding schedule.

I uphold the highest standards of ethical research. All data collected will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and anonymized in any reports or publications. Your identity, and that of your institution will remain strictly private. This research has received full ethical approval from the Kansas State University's IRB/Ethics Committee, (*Reference: [Protocol Number]*).

I believe that the findings from this study will provide a unique benchmark and a deeper understanding of how to best address social equity at the community college level. A summary of the key findings will be shared with all participating executives as a token of our appreciation for your valuable time and contribution.

To confirm your interest or to arrange a brief call to discuss the study further, please respond to this email at **MarcelJagne@ksu.edu** or call me directly at 202-904-0190 by *[RSVP Date]*.

Thank you for considering this opportunity to shape the future of knowledge in our shared field.

Sincerely,

Marcel E. Jagne-Shaw
Doctoral Candidate