Through the kaleidoscope: How millennial women construct leadership pathways in higher education

by

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B.F.A., Emporia State University, 2011
M.S., Kansas State University, 2013

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

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Department of Special Education, Counseling, and Student Affairs
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Abstract

This critical qualitative study examined how millennial women in higher education described and interpreted their pathways toward leadership roles, the ways institutional cultures shaped their persistence, and how institutional structures influenced their decisions about pursuing and sustaining leadership. Guided by the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) and radical feminist theory, the study drew upon semi-structured interviews with nine millennial women working in higher education. Data were analyzed thematically, resulting in six interconnected themes and a collective narrative that represented shared patterns across participants' experiences.

The findings revealed that participants' careers were nonlinear in shape but neither accidental nor aimless. Participants made deliberate decisions to develop the knowledge and experience necessary for advancement, even when their institutions did not provide visible or reliable pathways between preparation and opportunity. Relationships often bridged this distance by making participants' readiness visible, explaining unwritten expectations, and creating access to leadership experiences. In many cases, these relationships did not merely support the pathway; they constituted the pathway itself.

Participants interpreted persistence as a commitment to sustaining a viable leadership career rather than remaining loyal to a particular position or institution. Persistence could involve staying and resisting limiting conditions, but it could also require leaving when institutional expectations compromised participants' agency, values, or control over their time. Institutional cultures shaped these decisions through inconsistent advancement practices, uneven access to authority, and reliance on supervisors and other influential individuals to enact policies and create opportunities. Supportive relationships could temporarily make structurally deficient

environments sustainable, but they could not compensate indefinitely for unclear pathways or incongruence between institutional practices and participants' values.

The study demonstrates that individual agency and structural constraint operate together in millennial women's leadership careers. Participants repeatedly constructed viable pathways, but institutions depended heavily on their adaptability and relationships to compensate for unreliable structures. The findings elaborate an organizational interpretation of the Kaleidoscope Career Model by foregrounding how institutional conditions shape participants' ability to pursue challenge, balance, and authenticity. They also suggest that higher education institutions must create transparent and accessible leadership pathways, recognize relational development as leadership work, and connect preparation to opportunity without requiring exceptional sponsorship.

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Approved by:

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Dedication

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

The persistent underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles within higher education is produced through deeply embedded structural inequities that shape access to power, decision-making, and institutional influence (Acker, 2006; Blackmore, 2017; O'Connor, 2020). While existing scholarship has documented disparities in representation and identified structural barriers to advancement, this body of work has largely focused on outcomes rather than the processes through which leadership pathways are constructed and navigated within institutional contexts (Blackmore, 2017; O'Connor, 2020).

The problem addressed in this study is how millennial women in higher education interpret and navigate the organizational structures and conditions that shape their access to and persistence in leadership roles. Leadership pathways within higher education are not governed solely by formal criteria such as credentials and experience but are structured through ongoing organizational structures and processes, including hiring and promotion practices, informal networks of mentorship and sponsorship, expectations surrounding availability and institutional loyalty, and evaluation systems that define leadership potential (Acker, 1990; Ibarra et al., 2010; Manning, 2024). These processes function as mechanisms through which power is exercised and legitimacy is constructed, often privileging norms aligned with historically masculine models of authority (Acker, 1990; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Manning, 2024).

As a result, advancement into leadership is not simply a matter of access to opportunity but requires continuous interpretation of institutional expectations and strategic navigation of organizational environments. Women must make ongoing decisions about how to engage with, adapt to, or resist these expectations while assessing the sustainability of leadership pathways within their professional and personal lives. Examining these decisions reveals how

organizational conditions shape women's access to leadership as well as the desirability and viability of leadership over time.

Millennial women are navigating these leadership pathways within a distinct generational and institutional context. They have entered a higher education landscape characterized by corporatization, increased performance accountability, and shifting expectations around work, leadership, and professional identity (Samalavičius, 2018). At the same time, research suggests that millennials may hold higher expectations of their employers, even when their priorities broadly resemble those of other generations (Magni & Manzoni, 2020). Research with millennial employees also highlights the importance of internal communication and ongoing feedback in supporting engagement and organizational commitment (Walden et al., 2017). Together, these perspectives raise questions about how millennial women navigate higher education institutions when organizational practices do not align with their expectations for support, communication, and advancement.

Despite growing attention to gender disparities in leadership, intersectional scholarship emphasizes the importance of attending to differences among women rather than treating their experiences as uniform (Cho et al., 2013). Research on generational differences and workplace experiences provides additional context for examining millennial professionals' careers (Baker Rosa & Hastings, 2018; Lyons & Kuron, 2014). These perspectives raise questions about how millennial women interpret and navigate the organizational structures and conditions that shape their access to and persistence in leadership roles. By focusing on these experiences, this study builds on existing understandings of barriers to examine the organizational processes through which leadership pathways are constructed, evaluated, and sustained within higher education institutions.

Overview of the Topic and Statement of the Problem

The persistent underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles within higher education reflects deeper structural inequities (Acker, 2006). Despite modest gains, women continue to be excluded from executive positions, particularly those where policy is made and institutional direction is shaped (Blackmore, 2017; O'Connor, 2020). While studies have explored gender disparities in leadership more broadly, far less attention has been paid to the lived experiences of millennial women, a generation uniquely positioned at the intersection of cultural change and evolving expectations of leadership (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Twenge et al., 2010). Research on women in higher education leadership has consistently demonstrated that organizational cultures, informal networks, and gendered expectations continue to shape who is perceived as a legitimate leader within academic institutions (Blackmore, 2017; Morley, 2013). Therefore, the problem addressed in this study is how millennial women in higher education interpret and navigate the organizational structures and conditions that shape their access to and persistence in leadership roles.

Leadership pathways within higher education are not only structured through formal criteria such as experience and credentials but are also governed by implicit norms (Acker, 1990; Blackmore, 2017; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Manning, 2024). These norms function as informal regulatory mechanisms, shaping who is perceived as ready for leadership and whose contributions are recognized as legitimate. In many cases, these expectations align with historically masculine models of authority, privileging uninterrupted career trajectories, visibility, and institutional conformity. As a result, women often encounter additional scrutiny, contradictory expectations, and limited access to mentorship or sponsorship opportunities that are critical for advancement into senior administrative roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Recent commentary highlights how economic uncertainty and concerns about career sustainability are prompting millennial women to reconsider traditional advancement goals (Carter, 2025). Millennial women have come of age in institutions that promote diversity yet often operate within entrenched patriarchal and hierarchical structures. Economic uncertainty and caregiving responsibilities provide additional context for understanding millennial women's career decisions (Carter, 2025; "Millennials, Women 'Sandwiched,'" 2020). The professional trajectories of this generation have also been shaped by broader economic and institutional transformations, including the expansion of contract labor, increasing administrative complexity, and the intensification of performance metrics across academic and administrative roles (Giroux, 2014). As a result, millennial women often experience leadership pathways that appear inclusive in theory but remain difficult to access in practice, creating a gap between what institutions promise and what women actually experience.

In addition to structural barriers within institutions, millennial women are navigating generational shifts in attitudes toward leadership, work–life integration, and professional identity (Galdames & Guihen, 2022). Deloitte's (2024) survey highlighted the importance of meaningful work and work-life balance to millennials' job satisfaction and employer choices. However, these expectations frequently collide with the bureaucratic and risk-averse structures that characterize many higher education institutions. This tension creates a disconnect between how leadership is imagined by emerging professionals and how it is operationalized within institutional contexts. These generational differences can shape how millennial women evaluate institutional environments and their alignment with their professional and personal priorities. Consequently, leadership advancement is not simply a matter of access to opportunities but also

involves ongoing decisions about whether institutional structures support sustainable professional engagement.

Scholarship on women's leadership in higher education has provided important insights into structural barriers, leadership preparation, and institutional conditions that shape advancement (Blackmore, 2017; Ely et al., 2011; O'Connor, 2020). These contributions provide a foundation for examining how organizational practices shape access to leadership and opportunities for advancement. Building on this scholarship, this study examines how millennial women make meaning of these conditions and respond to them throughout their leadership pathways.

From an organizational and critical feminist perspective, barriers are not simply encountered; they are produced and reproduced through routine institutional practices and interactions (Acker, 1990; O'Connor, 2020). Processes such as hiring and promotion decisions, access to informal mentorship and sponsorship, distribution of service and emotional labor, and evaluation criteria tied to narrowly defined expectations of leadership all function as mechanisms through which power is exercised and legitimacy is constructed (Acker, 1990; Manning, 2024). These processes operate both formally, through policy and procedure, and informally, through cultural expectations and interpersonal dynamics, often in ways that are difficult to observe yet deeply consequential.

As a result, leadership pathways are shaped not only by access to opportunities but by the cumulative effects of these organizational processes over time. Individuals must interpret and respond to signals about belonging, credibility, and potential as they decide whether to pursue, persist in, or disengage from leadership trajectories. Research has examined systemic gender inequities in academia (Allen et al., 2021) and generational differences in work values (Twenge

et al., 2010). Examining how organizational processes operate in participants' everyday experiences extends existing understandings of structural barriers. This study brings these concerns together by examining how millennial women interpret and navigate organizational conditions as they pursue and sustain leadership within higher education.

Examining the experiences of millennial women offers an important opportunity to better understand how leadership pathways are evolving within contemporary higher education institutions. This study seeks to illuminate the complex interactions between organizational structures, gendered norms, and generational identity (Acker, 1990). Understanding these dynamics is critical not only for advancing scholarly knowledge of leadership pathways but also for informing institutional practices that support more equitable and sustainable leadership development within higher education. Together, these perspectives shift the focus from individual experiences of inequality to the organizational processes that shape leadership pathways within higher education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how millennial women in higher education interpret and navigate the organizational structures and conditions that shape their leadership pathways. Leadership pathways in higher education refer not only to formal advancement processes but also to the informal, relational, and structural dynamics that shape access to and persistence in leadership roles. Within higher education institutions, these conditions are not experienced as discrete elements but are embedded within institutional cultures that shape how structures, expectations, and opportunities are understood and enacted. While institutions often promote values of equity and inclusion, women continue to encounter systemic barriers that influence access to and persistence in leadership roles (Ely et al., 2011).

These barriers are produced through gendered expectations, inequitable workloads, limited institutional support, and deeply embedded norms surrounding leadership and meritocracy (Ely et al., 2011). In this way, institutional culture operates as the context through which leadership is defined, evaluated, and made attainable or unattainable within higher education.

Grounded in radical feminism (hooks, 2000; Osborne, 2001), I approached this study through critical qualitative inquiry (Denzin, 2017). I treated leadership pathways as socially constructed and shaped by identity, power, and the cultural and structural dynamics of institutional life, rather than as neutral or purely meritocratic. I approached interviews as reflexive spaces in which participants interpreted their experiences and co-constructed knowledge about how institutional environments shaped their experiences and decisions within higher education.

By centering the narratives of millennial women aspiring to or occupying leadership roles, I examined how participants understood and navigated their leadership trajectories within institutional contexts. Ultimately, this research contributes insight into how leadership pathways are experienced and negotiated by millennial women and offers implications for institutional policies and leadership development practices that aim to create more equitable and sustainable pathways into senior leadership roles within higher education.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study is grounded in radical feminism and informed by the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM). Radical feminism provides a structural framework for examining how patriarchal power is embedded within organizational structures, cultural norms, and routine institutional practices (Acker, 1990; Osborne, 2001). Rather than locating inequity in women's individual readiness or choices, radical feminism directs attention to how institutions construct leadership

legitimacy, distribute opportunity, and reproduce gendered expectations surrounding authority, availability, and commitment (Acker, 1990; hooks, 2000; Osborne, 2001).

KCM provides a complementary framework for understanding how women navigate their careers in relation to authenticity, balance, and challenge (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). These dimensions shift in prominence as individuals respond to changing personal priorities, professional circumstances, and organizational conditions. Whereas radical feminism directs attention to the structures through which leadership pathways are produced and constrained, KCM supports examination of how participants interpret and respond to those conditions as they make decisions about pursuing, persisting in, or redirecting their leadership trajectories.

Together, radical feminism (Osborne, 2001) and KCM (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) shaped the study's attention to both institutional power and women's navigation of their careers. Radical feminism informed questions about how institutional cultures, policies, structures, and expectations shape access to and persistence in leadership. KCM informed questions about how participants describe their pathways, interpret their experiences, and make decisions about pursuing and sustaining leadership roles. Across these questions, meaning-making refers to how participants connect these layered experiences over time to understand their careers and themselves as leaders.

Research Questions

Consistent with a critical qualitative and narrative orientation, the research questions for this study focus on how participants interpret and navigate the organizational structures and conditions that shape their access to and persistence in leadership roles. The research questions guiding this study are:

- (R1) How do millennial women in higher education describe and interpret their pathways toward leadership roles?
- (R2) How do millennial women in higher education describe and interpret the ways institutional cultures, policies, and expectations have shaped their persistence in leadership trajectories?
- (R3) How do institutional structures, norms, and expectations shape millennial women's decisions about pursuing and sustaining leadership roles?

Significance of the Study

This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by focusing specifically on millennial women's experiences in pursuing senior leadership roles within higher education, a generational cohort that remains significantly underexamined in leadership research. While existing scholarship confirms the ongoing gender disparity in senior leadership globally (O'Connor, 2020) and documents the persistently low percentages of women in top roles (Klenke, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2025), few studies interrogate how younger women, particularly millennials, are navigating increasingly complex institutional landscapes shaped by neoliberalism, corporatization, and the retraction of equity initiatives (Samalavičius, 2018).

Existing research emphasizes how gendered expectations, self-efficacy, structural barriers, familial responsibilities, and decision-making cultures rooted in patriarchal norms continue to inhibit advancement for women (Morley, 2013). Drawing on Blackmore's (2017) argument that leadership reflects and shapes institutional identity, this study explores how these dynamics are reproduced, resisted, and negotiated in the leadership trajectories of millennial women. By centering participants' narratives, this study examines how millennial women

interpret these conditions and navigate leadership pathways within contemporary higher education contexts.

Millennial women navigate leadership alongside financial, family, and workplace pressures: student loan debt (American Association of University Women, n.d.), shifting family roles ("Millennials, Women 'Sandwiched,'" 2020), and evolving work-life expectations (Trifan & Pantea, 2024), all within institutions that increasingly adopt for-profit bureaucratic ideology and managerialism. By highlighting the voices of mid-career women, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how millennial women experience and interpret the conditions shaping leadership pathways within higher education.

This study seeks to generate insight into the invisible labor, emotional costs, and organizational resistance that millennial women may encounter in leadership pathways, as well as how they describe strategies such as resistance, boundary-setting, and redefinition in navigating these contexts. These findings can inform leadership development programs, succession planning, and equity initiatives by centering the lived experiences of those most affected by current institutional practices. Furthermore, by centering millennial perspectives, the study invites institutions to reconsider how leadership is cultivated, supported, and sustained across generations and what systemic shifts are needed to ensure more inclusive, supportive, and sustainable leadership models in the future.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, key terms are defined as follows:

- **Gendered Organizations:** Organizations in which structures, practices, and norms are implicitly shaped by gendered assumptions, often privileging masculine models of leadership and work (Acker, 1990).

- **Institutional Culture:** Institutional culture encompasses the shared values, beliefs, norms, and practices that shape behavior, meaning-making, and expectations within an organization (Manning, 2024). In higher education, culture operates both explicitly and implicitly, reinforcing what is valued, who belongs, and how success is defined (Manning, 2024).
- **Leadership Pathways:** Leadership pathways refer to the formal and informal processes through which individuals access, navigate, and persist in leadership roles within higher education institutions (Kezar, 2018; Manning, 2024). These pathways are shaped by organizational structures and institutional norms that influence access to opportunity and leadership legitimacy (Blackmore, 2017). At the same time, pathways are experienced and interpreted by individuals within specific institutional contexts, where leadership expectations, meanings, and opportunities vary across settings and are understood through lived experience (Eftenaru, 2024).
- **Meritocracy:** Meritocracy is commonly understood as a system in which advancement and reward are based on individual achievement, performance, and demonstrated ability. Within higher education, however, organizational theory highlights that what counts as "merit" is not neutral but socially constructed through institutional norms, values, and power structures (Manning, 2024).
- **Mid-Level Leadership:** Mid-level leadership refers to formal roles within higher education that carry delegated administrative, managerial, or supervisory responsibilities and remain directly accountable to more senior institutional leaders (Rosser, 2004). Positioned between senior administration and the faculty or staff they lead, mid-level leaders navigate relationships and expectations upward, downward, and across

organizational structures while translating institutional priorities into practice (Branson et al., 2016).

- **Millennial Women:** Women born between approximately 1981 and 1996 (Dimock, 2019).
- **Organizational Structure:** Organizational structure refers to the formal arrangement of roles, responsibilities, hierarchies, and decision-making processes within an institution (Manning, 2024). In higher education, structures are often decentralized and complex, with overlapping authority between administrative and faculty governance systems (Manning, 2024). These structures can both enable and constrain leadership pathways, often reinforcing existing power distributions (Kezar, 2018).
- **Senior Leadership:** Senior leadership refers to individuals occupying the highest levels of organizational authority who are responsible for strategic decision-making, resource allocation, and institutional direction (e.g., presidents, provosts, vice presidents) (Black, 2015). These roles hold formal power to shape priorities, culture, and policy within institutions (Kezar, 2018). From a critical perspective, senior leadership positions are often gendered spaces that reflect and reproduce dominant norms of authority and legitimacy (Blackmore, 2017).

Chapter Summary

This chapter established that the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles within higher education is shaped by deeply embedded organizational structures and cultural norms that influence access to power, decision-making, and institutional influence. Leadership pathways are not governed solely by formal criteria such as experience and credentials but are also shaped by informal processes, including access to networks, expectations surrounding

leadership behavior, and norms related to availability and institutional commitment. These dynamics create conditions in which women must navigate competing expectations while assessing the sustainability and desirability of leadership roles. Although prior research has documented disparities in representation and identified persistent barriers, it has tended to focus on outcomes rather than the processes through which leadership pathways are constructed and experienced within institutional contexts.

This study addresses this gap by examining how millennial women interpret, navigate, and make meaning of the organizational structures and conditions that shape their leadership pathways. Grounded in a critical feminist framework (Acker, 1990; Osborne, 2001) and informed by the Kaleidoscope Career Model (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008), the study conceptualizes leadership advancement as a socially constructed and contextually negotiated process rather than a neutral progression. By centering the experiences of millennial women—who are navigating leadership within a shifting landscape of organizational expectations and professional values—this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how leadership pathways are constructed and potentially reimagined within contemporary higher education institutions.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

The modern landscape of higher education leadership reflects a persistent contradiction between representation and access to power. Women represent the majority of higher education employees and degree earners, yet they remain significantly underrepresented in senior leadership roles (Meza-Mejía et al., 2023). Existing scholarship frequently attributes this gap to pipelines, self-efficacy deficits, or limited professional development, indirectly positioning women as the problem to be solved (Burkinshaw & White, 2017; O'Connor, 2020). However, emerging research suggests that the issue is not a lack of leadership readiness, but the persistence of deeply embedded patriarchal structures that shape institutional culture, advancement pathways, and definitions of leadership legitimacy.

These structural inequities are experienced differently across generational cohorts, particularly for millennial women navigating contemporary institutional contexts. Millennial women are entering their prime leadership-building years within institutions shaped by economic uncertainty, neoliberal governance, and shifting cultural expectations. Influenced by these expectations, they often prioritize authenticity, balance, and meaningful challenges in their careers—preferences that frequently conflict with traditional, hierarchical leadership models in higher education.

This literature review situates millennial women's leadership pathways within broader organizational, cultural, and theoretical contexts. Specifically, it synthesizes research on higher education organizational structures, institutional culture, women's leadership experiences, generational differences in career desires and expectations, feminist theoretical critiques, and the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) structure (Acker, 1990; Manning, 2024; Sullivan &

Mainiero, 2008). Together, these bodies of literature provide the foundation for understanding how leadership pathways are interpreted and navigated within higher education.

Higher Education Organizational Structures

Higher education institutions are shaped by both formal governance structures and the cultural contexts in which those structures operate. Governance models define how authority, decision-making, and leadership roles are organized, while institutional culture influences how these structures are experienced, interpreted, and enacted in practice (Manning, 2024; O'Connor, 2020; Tierney, 1988). Together, these dimensions shape not only the formal pathways to leadership but also the informal norms, expectations, and conditions that determine who is recognized, supported, and advanced within higher education organizations.

Governance and Formal Structures

Organizational structures in higher education shape how leadership is defined, accessed, and enacted within institutional contexts. Manning's (2024) *Organizational Theory in Higher Education* offered a comprehensive framework for examining the multiple models through which higher education institutions operate, emphasizing that universities rarely function according to a single structural framework. Instead, they are complex, layered organizations in which multiple structural frameworks coexist and compete. Understanding these organizational models is essential because each structure produces distinct assumptions about power, authority, communication, and advancement that influence not only institutional decision-making processes but also perceptions of leadership opportunity and readiness (Manning, 2024).

Institutions employing bureaucratic models often rely on hierarchical authority, standardized processes and procedures, and policy-regulated systems that shape performance (Manning, 2024; O'Connor, 2020). Leadership ascension depends upon formal credentials,

tenure, and institutional loyalty, reinforcing linear and time-based career advancement. Manning (2024) articulated that “though many decry the red tape and glacial pace of bureaucracies, it is difficult to imagine administrative operations without this form” (p. 13). In contrast, the collegial model, most often associated with faculty, emphasizes shared governance, autonomy, and prioritizing professional expertise and peer recognition (Manning, 2024). While each model serves a distinct organizational function, they do not operate in isolation. Instead, they coexist within the same institutional structures, producing an ongoing tension between formal authority and distributed expertise. This push and pull can generate structural ambiguity, as expectations for decision-making, accountability, and advancement are shaped by competing logics.

The political model views institutions as arenas of competing interests, alliances, and negotiation, positioning leadership advancement as contingent on strategic influence and resource control. Manning (2024) emphasized that the understanding of universities as political organizations can help illuminate how power and competing interests shape decision-making and leadership pathways within higher education. Organized anarchy models, particularly relevant to large research universities, reflect decentralized decision-making, loose coupling between units, and inconsistent communication patterns (Manning, 2024). Consequently, this model lends itself to ambiguous goals, varied participation, and complex communication structures that stall progress (Manning, 2024), all antithetical to the idealized norms that millennials seek in their career spaces.

These structural variations significantly influence leadership pathways by shaping expectations for behavior, defining leadership potential, and determining access to decision-making spaces. In bureaucratic and political contexts, advancement often depends on navigating power networks and demonstrating institutional allegiance. In collegial environments, leadership

may be tied to trust, visibility, and community alignment. In more decentralized structures, advancement may require sustained engagement across institutional systems and networks. Regardless of structure, these dynamics shape how individuals interpret leadership opportunities and construct their professional identities. Cross-institutional movement requires developing the ability to read and respond to competing governance models, while also adapting to differing expectations and navigating complex systems of power.

Institutional Culture as a Structure

Institutional culture operates alongside formal structures as a powerful force shaping leadership access, legitimacy, and development. Culture functions as a meaning-making system that defines norms, expectations, values, and the unwritten rules of engagement that determine who is viewed as legitimate, who is supported, and who is marginalized (Tierney, 1988). For aspiring leaders, these cultural dynamics influence belonging, credibility, and psychological safety, all of which are foundational to leadership confidence and advancement (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

As institutional cultures have evolved over the past two decades, a "third space" within higher education has emerged: a hybrid sector where professional staff increasingly operate within academic spheres and faculty assume expanded administrative responsibilities (Briody et al., 2022). Whitchurch (2008, 2012) conceptualized this third space as an organizational zone characterized by permeable boundaries, blended identities, and fluid role expectations. While this space offers opportunities for innovation and cross-functional collaboration, it also creates murky and nonlinear career pathways where advancement criteria are uncertain and competing ideas of legitimacy persist. In many institutions, third-space professionals struggle for recognition because traditional academic hierarchies continue to privilege faculty-centric definitions of

expertise and leadership, thereby reinforcing patriarchal structures of authority (Blackmore & Sachs, 2007).

Both millennials and third-space professionals grapple with similar challenges in higher education. As they navigate and contest university structures, they often undertake the work of disrupting dominant narratives, redefining professional agency, and exposing the limitations of traditional hierarchical organizational models that continue to impede persistence and advancement into higher-level leadership roles (Veles, 2024). Although existing research does not indicate that third-space professionals are predominantly millennials, it is noteworthy that the rise of third-space roles in higher education has coincided with the full entry of the millennial cohort into the academic workforce (Veles, 2024; Whitchurch, 2024). The existing struggles of both cohorts indicate lower levels of career satisfaction and an increased likelihood that an individual will not persist within the organization (Mitchell et al., 2025; Whitchurch, 2024).

Leadership development in higher education remains largely informal and relational, relying heavily on access to mentorship, sponsorship, and professional networks that are unevenly distributed across faculty, staff, and third-space professionals (Eddy & Ward, 2017; Kezar & Lester, 2009). Institutions with cultures of transparency and intentional leadership cultivation tend to foster environments where emerging leaders can envision themselves in positions of influence and receive meaningful support in developing those capacities (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). Conversely, unclear advancement processes and limited institutional support can create barriers to women's pursuit of leadership opportunities (Mayya et al., 2021). Psychological safety provides a useful lens for considering how institutional culture may shape leadership development. It concerns whether team members feel safe taking interpersonal risks, such as asking questions or acknowledging uncertainty, and is associated with team learning

behavior (Edmondson, 1999). Applied to leadership pathways, this concept directs attention to whether institutional environments allow aspiring leaders to seek guidance, question expectations, and discuss challenges without fear of interpersonal consequences. Institutional culture therefore warrants attention alongside formal structures when examining access to and participation in leadership.

Women in Higher Education Leadership

Women's leadership experiences in higher education are shaped by persistent disparities in representation, as well as by the gendered organizational dynamics that influence access to advancement and leadership legitimacy. Although women's participation in the workforce has increased, their presence in senior leadership remains limited, reflecting broader patterns of structural inequality within the academy (Mayya et al., 2021; O'Connor, 2020). These disparities are produced and sustained through gendered organizational structures, advancement and evaluation processes, and variation across institutional contexts. Examining representation and the leadership gap, the role of gendered organizational structures, mechanisms of advancement and evaluation, and differences across institutional settings provides a comprehensive understanding of how leadership pathways are shaped for women in higher education.

Representation and the Leadership Gap

Although women now constitute a substantial proportion of the higher education workforce, they remain significantly underrepresented in senior leadership roles (Mayya et al., 2021). Women's representation diminishes at successive levels of the academic career ladder, reflecting persistent barriers to advancement (Allen et al., 2021). This pattern, often described as the leaky pipeline or leadership labyrinth, illustrates the persistent disconnect between workforce participation and institutional power (Ayman & Korabik, 2010; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Harvey

and Jones (2022) further demonstrated how women's leadership contributions in learning and teaching can be difficult to claim when institutional recognition processes privilege formal positions over distributed forms of leadership. Rubin and Lough's (2015) examination of intercollegiate athletics offers another example of this disconnect in higher education, as women may gain access to opportunities without receiving equitable resources, institutional support, or control over the systems governing those opportunities. Women created and sustained athletic programs when institutional support was limited, yet "women lost control of their own athletic governance" as resources increased and men assumed greater control (Rubin & Lough, 2015, p. 123). Their findings demonstrate that expanded participation does not necessarily translate into equitable access to leadership, authority, or the resources required for continued advancement.

These patterns reflect the operation of gendered organizations, where leadership norms, definitions of merit, and ideal worker assumptions are implicitly male (Acker, 1990). In higher education, these gendered dynamics manifest in who is considered a credible leader, whose scholarship is deemed central to institutional prestige, and who is responsible for the institution's hidden workload (Hart, 2016). Despite increased numerical representation, men continue to dominate positions associated with prestige, authority, and strategic control (Crimmins et al., 2023; Meza-Mejía et al., 2023).

Gendered Organizational Structures

Over the past three decades, women's participation in leadership has expanded, yet progress remains slow and uneven. Institutions may promote women into leadership roles while simultaneously restructuring authority in ways that limit their influence (Burkinshaw & White, 2017). Such changes create symbolic progress without substantive redistribution of power. Policy shifts related to affirmative action, diversity initiatives, and Title IX had contributed to

incremental gains, but recent changes have rolled back many opportunities (Alonso, 2025; High et al., 2025; O'Connor, 2020). These changes highlight how systemic barriers continue to constrain women's advancement opportunities, reflecting entrenched cultural and structural norms within the academy that resist change or bend to political influence.

Research consistently identifies barriers such as limited access to mentorship and sponsorship (Ibarra et al., 2010), exclusion from informal power networks (O'Connor, 2020), and inequitable workload distribution (Mayya et al., 2021). Women frequently advance despite institutional systems rather than because of them, relying on informal strategies, lateral moves, and personal resilience. Collectively, these dynamics reveal that women's underrepresentation is not a pipeline issue but a systemic one.

These structural conditions extend beyond immediate barriers and begin to shape women's broader career trajectories. Juffer (2021) theorized that, rather than progressing through clearly defined career opportunities, women often find themselves taking on multiple, simultaneous responsibilities without corresponding increases in compensation, title, or authority. Because internal advancement pathways are frequently unclear or inaccessible, women are pushed into navigating serial roles across institutions as a means of career progression (Allen et al., 2021). This positions women for uncertain and unstable professional trajectories that offer limited upward mobility while intensifying stress, workload, and professional dissonance (Worth, 2016).

Research has documented extensive expectations for women to perform invisible labor or office housework—including committee service, student support, diversity work, and emotional labor—tasks essential to institutional function but rarely recognized in promotion decisions (Hart, 2016). Mayya et al. (2021) identified caregiving responsibilities and expectations

surrounding women's family roles among the barriers to pursuing administrative positions. These expectations contribute to slower advancement, reduced leadership visibility, and heightened burnout.

Even women without children may encounter bias rooted in gendered assumptions about caregiving priorities and emotional responsibility. Maternal bias continues to shape leadership experiences, even for women without children. Martínez (2011) demonstrated that leadership roles in higher education, particularly department chair positions, are shaped by gendered institutional norms that feminize and devalue these roles. Often framed as extensions of service or care labor, this cultural coding positions women leaders as caretakers rather than decision-makers, limiting their advancement pathways and diminishing the legitimacy of their leadership. Such dynamics reproduce patriarchal expectations about who is perceived as a "real" leader and render women's labor both essential and invisible.

Cultural narratives surrounding motherhood and leadership may influence how commitment and availability are interpreted, shaping both evaluative processes and women's perceptions of their own professional efficacy. For women entering key childbearing years while also pursuing early-career advancement, these sociocultural pressures constrain perceived possibilities and influence decisions about when, how, and whether to pursue leadership roles. The ideal worker norm—rewarding uninterrupted productivity, long hours, and physical presence—continues to disadvantage women, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities (Bishu et al., 2023). Hart (2016) showed that, even when women have supportive partners and deliberately position themselves as "ideal workers," they still confront the reality that they cannot be fully recognized as such because the very definition of the ideal worker is built on masculine, gendered assumptions. This insight directly reinforces Acker's (1990) argument that

the ideal worker norm is structurally unattainable for women. As a result, women's labor, particularly relational and emotional labor, remains undervalued, diminishing their professional visibility and constraining their access to leadership-building opportunities, which in turn reproduces systemic inequities across career trajectories. Such norms render leadership pathways structurally incompatible with women's lived realities.

Advancement Mechanisms and Evaluation

Gender disparities are reinforced through organizational practices that advantage men's access to informal networks and sponsorship while positioning women in roles that emphasize support over advancement (Ibarra et al., 2010; Mayya et al., 2021; O'Connor, 2020). Research demonstrates that men are more likely to benefit from informal networks and professional relationships that support advancement, while women frequently encounter gatekeeping or exclusion from these networks (O'Connor, 2020). These inequities extend into interview and evaluation processes, where men are often judged on their potential and presumed leadership presence, while women are assessed based on demonstrated performance and interpersonal style. Women's leadership behaviors may be interpreted differently depending on gendered expectations, with assertiveness viewed as competence in men but as aggression or lack of collegiality in women. As a result, leadership readiness is not assessed through neutral criteria but through norms that reflect historically masculine models of leadership.

These dynamics are further reinforced through gendered distinctions between mentoring and sponsorship. Women are more likely to receive developmental support that does not translate into advancement opportunities, including access to sponsorship and informal networks that more readily support men's career progression (Ibarra et al., 2010). At the same time, women report having their leadership styles more heavily scrutinized, with behaviors perceived as

assertive and strategic when enacted by men being interpreted as aggressive or lacking collegiality when enacted by women (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Hart, 2016). Women's failures are equated with personal shortcomings, a dynamic that makes leadership roles more precarious for women and shapes who is perceived as "ready" for advancement (Knowles & Mainiero, 2021; Worth, 2016). As a result, women's failures are more readily individualized, particularly in precarious leadership contexts such as glass cliff appointments, where they are held accountable for systemic challenges (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). These dynamics create self-reinforcing cycles of exclusion, wherein women's risks are amplified and men's minimized, shaping both perception and practice in leadership evaluation (Ryan & Haslam, 2005).

Institutional Context and Variation

Leadership experiences vary significantly across institutional contexts. Research-intensive universities often present the steepest barriers due to rigid promotion structures and narrow definitions of legitimacy (Berheide et al., 2022). Community colleges, while less prestigious, are often perceived as offering more accessible leadership pathways for women (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006).

Minority-serving institutions, particularly Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), present distinct dynamics. While Black women hold a greater share of leadership roles, these appointments frequently occur during institutional crisis, resulting in heightened scrutiny and shortened tenure (Lynch, 2024). These patterns demonstrate that institutions shape who is granted access to leadership and the conditions under which those opportunities are extended, often in ways that reinforce existing inequities.

Recent work examining institutions that have received formal recognition for gender equity initiatives (e.g., Athena SWAN awards in the UK) shows that even where policies and

charters are in place, women still report limited influence over strategic decisions and persistent barriers to progression (Crimmins et al., 2023). Institutional context cannot be understood solely through mission statements or policy adoption; instead, attention must be paid to how equity initiatives are enacted, whose voices are centered, and whether reward systems shift.

Generational Context and Career Dynamics in Higher Education

Career pathways in higher education are shaped not only by organizational structures and gendered dynamics but also by generational context. Individuals enter the workforce with expectations, values, and approaches to leadership that reflect the broader social, economic, and historical conditions in which they were formed (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Twenge et al., 2010). These generational influences shape how employees evaluate leadership opportunities and make decisions about advancement and persistence within institutional settings. At the same time, these experiences are not uniform; gender continues to influence how generational expectations are enacted and experienced in practice (Allen et al., 2021). Examining who millennials are, how gender shapes their career trajectories, and how their perspectives compare to those of earlier generations provides important context for understanding how leadership pathways are interpreted and navigated within higher education.

Who are Millennials?

To contextualize these dynamics, it is first necessary to define the millennial cohort and the conditions that have shaped their entry into the workforce. Millennials represent a distinct generational cohort shaped by shared social, economic, and technological conditions that influence their approach to work and leadership. Commonly defined as individuals born between 1981 and 1996 (Dimock, 2019), millennials are the largest and most highly educated generation in the workforce (Rueff-Lopes et al., 2025). They entered professional environments during

periods of significant disruption, including the 2008 financial crisis, rising student debt, and rapid technological change (Twenge et al., 2010).

Millennials are often described as possessing strengths such as visual thinking, adaptability, and the ability to navigate multiple streams of information, enabling efficient collaboration and communication (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). However, they also entered increasingly competitive labor markets characterized by limited advancement opportunities and constrained leadership pathways (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). Notably, generational categories are not scientifically fixed or universally agreed upon. The boundaries that distinguish one generation from another are socially constructed, fluid, and inconsistently applied across research contexts (Dimock, 2019; Parker, 2023). Popular narratives about millennials often function as expressions of cultural anxiety rather than empirically grounded depictions of generational behavior. Rudolph et al. (2021) argued that generational thinking oversimplifies individual attitudes and reinforces stereotypes that lack scientific grounding. As a result, many millennials distance themselves from the label due to its association with deficit-oriented assumptions in professional contexts (Baker Rosa & Hastings, 2018; Rudolph et al., 2021). This distancing underscores the extent to which generational labels function as mechanisms of workplace bias and devaluation.

For the purposes of this study, "millennial women" are not treated as a fixed generational category but rather as a contextual frame used to situate participants within shared historical conditions, age-related positioning, and career life stage. This framing enables analysis of how broader social, economic, and institutional conditions shape leadership pathways, while avoiding assumptions of uniformity or inherent generational traits. Within this framing, several structural conditions are particularly salient in shaping millennials' relationships to work and leadership.

Economic instability and the rise of the digital economy have been especially influential. Entering the workforce during or shortly after the 2008 financial collapse, many experienced disrupted career trajectories characterized by employment precarity and diminished expectations of long-term organizational loyalty (Worth, 2016). Millennials also came of age during a postfeminist cultural context that framed feminism as largely unnecessary, asserting that gender equality had already been achieved (Gill, 2007; Osborne, 2001). Together, these conditions situate millennials within institutions that are frequently misaligned with their lived realities and professional expectations. As such, their perspectives provide critical insight into how leadership pathways are constructed, constrained, and reimagined within these institutional contexts.

Literature consistently positions millennials as valuing work environments that align with personal meaning and professional growth, emphasizing flexibility, transparency, and a sense of belonging within organizational contexts (Deal et al., 2010; Deloitte, 2024; Twenge et al., 2010). They seek workplaces that support mentorship, psychological safety, and alignment between personal values and organizational mission, preferences that often conflict with higher education's increasingly corporatized governance structures (Giroux, 2014). Across the literature, millennials are described as seeking sustainable and growth-oriented work (Minzlaff et al., 2025; Rueff-Lopes et al., 2025). When these conditions are not met, they are more likely to disengage from or exit organizational structures that require prolonged or uncertain pathways to advancement (Allen et al., 2021). Extending this work, Barnes and Gearin (2022) found that millennial professionals tend to approach leadership through relational, collaborative, and purpose-driven orientations, reflecting broader generational values related to authenticity and impact. However, their research focuses primarily on how millennials conceptualize and enact

leadership not the structural and organizational processes through which leadership roles are accessed and sustained.

Gender Differences

Although generational context provides important insight, gender remains a critical factor shaping how career pathways are experienced and navigated. Within all generational cohorts, gender significantly shapes career experiences. Women encounter persistent wage gaps, caregiving expectations, and leadership barriers that do not mirror those of their male counterparts (Allen et al., 2021). Research demonstrates that women navigate organizational contexts shaped by disproportionate expectations for women and persistent biases in how agency and likability are evaluated (Allen et al., 2021; Gabriel et al., 2018; Ibarra et al., 2010). These conditions are reinforced by enduring assumptions about women's roles as relational leaders, which shape how their leadership potential is perceived and evaluated (Correa et al., 2025). Despite these structural constraints, women's ability to sustain and project confidence in their competence becomes a critical mechanism for navigating leadership pathways. As Thien et al. (2025) noted,

> Women in academia are often held to a higher standard, requiring them to outperform to be considered for leadership roles. This need to constantly deliver exceptional results, such as top-tier publications or effective student supervision, demands an underlying self-belief that they can meet and exceed these standards. This belief is the embodiment of self-efficacy. (p. 6)

Women are frequently expected to contribute relational and service-oriented labor that is essential to institutional functioning yet undervalued in promotion and leadership deliberations (Kezar, 2018). This reflects a structural contradiction in which institutions depend on women's

relational labor while simultaneously rendering it invisible or inconsequential in determining leadership potential. These dynamics reinforce perceptions that women are well-suited for service-oriented roles but insufficiently assertive for senior executive positions. Alternatively, traits that are framed as deficits may instead represent the capacities necessary to navigate hierarchical systems by adapting to heightened expectations of performance and relational accountability.

Women's leadership aspirations must be considered alongside the gendered barriers that influence whether those aspirations translate into advancement (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Knowles & Mainiero, 2021). Men are more likely to be evaluated based on leadership potential, while women must demonstrate competence through sustained performance and navigate competing expectations of authority and likability (Chesterman et al., 2005).

Generational Comparison of Millennial, Gen X, and Boomers

Comparing generational perspectives requires attention to both changing career conditions and the stereotypes used to explain them. Sullivan and Baruch (2009) described how changing organizational conditions and personal priorities have expanded career possibilities beyond traditional linear advancement, including protean, boundaryless, and kaleidoscope careers. Millennials are often portrayed as less loyal to institutions and more interested in flexible or nonlinear careers. However, these portrayals require caution because generational labels can obscure differences related to age, life stage, and organizational context (Rudolph et al., 2021). Such stereotypes can position millennials as responsible for adapting to existing organizational norms. Baker Rosa and Hastings (2018) advised millennials to "proactively combat the common millennial stereotypes through demeanor, work ethic, and realistic expectations" (p. 928). This advice places responsibility on those being stereotyped, raising

questions about how organizations might instead address the assumptions and practices that sustain these perceptions.

However, most contemporary research finds little evidence of meaningful generational differences in the quality of work, career motivation, or overall performance (Rudolph et al., 2021). Instead, research suggests that career behaviors are better explained by life stage and broader labor-market conditions than by generational cohort alone (Parker, 2023; Zacher & Froidevaux, 2021). Millennials, for example, are often portrayed as having markedly different career desires than their predecessors, yet workplace conflict tends to arise more from generational stereotyping than from actual divergence in values (Minzlaff et al., 2025). While millennials do, on average, place greater emphasis on work-life balance, mentorship, personal goal alignment, and flexible work arrangements (Aydogmus, 2019; Minzlaff et al., 2025), these preferences reflect evolving workforce norms rather than significant deviation from prior generations expectations.

Baker Rosa and Hastings (2018) noted that "each generational cohort occupies a status that is largely defined by others, such as members of different generations" (p. 921) and those in positions of power, particularly managers, play a central role in socially constructing generational identities. As a result, both men and women are subjected to persistent negative stereotyping, which can undermine their perceived and actual career efficacy (Baker Rosa & Hastings, 2018; Rudolph et al., 2021). This form of generational gatekeeping, grounded in assumptions that millennials are self-centered and less committed, reinforces and amplifies existing gender inequities in leadership pathways. Rudolph et al. (2021) conceptualized modern-day ageism as "generationalism," defined as "sanctioned ambivalence and socially acceptable prejudice toward people of particular ages" (p. 954). These dynamics underscore how

generational stereotypes intersect with gender to produce compounded barriers for millennial women.

Theoretical Frameworks

Understanding how leadership pathways are structured and experienced in higher education requires a framework that accounts for both systemic inequality and individual navigation within those systems. While prior sections have highlighted how organizational structures, institutional cultures, and generational dynamics shape leadership opportunities, theoretical grounding is necessary to explain how these conditions are produced and sustained, as well as how individuals interpret and respond to them. Radical feminist theory provides a lens for examining the structural and power-based dimensions of leadership inequities, positioning institutions as sites where gendered norms and hierarchies are reproduced (Acker, 1990). In contrast, the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) offers insight into how individuals make career decisions within these contexts, emphasizing the role of authenticity, balance, and challenge in shaping leadership trajectories (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). Together, these frameworks enable an analysis that captures both the structural constraints and the agentic strategies that define millennial women's leadership experiences in higher education.

Radical Feminist Theory

Radical feminist theory emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a transformative movement grounded in the belief that gender inequality is rooted in the structural and systemic organization of society rather than in individual attitudes or isolated acts of discrimination (Thompson, 2001). Duriesmith and Meger (2020) argued that although contemporary feminist scholarship has moved away from explicitly naming radical feminism, its core tenets remain foundational to feminist thought. Foundational radical feminist scholars such as Shulamith

Firestone, Kate Millett, Andrea Dworkin, bell hooks, and Mary Daly argued that patriarchy functions as a pervasive social system that institutionalizes male dominance and female subordination through political, economic, cultural, and symbolic means (Duriesmith & Meger, 2020; Frisinger, 2022; Osborne, 2001). Rather than emphasizing gradual reform or equal access within existing systems, radical feminism frames patriarchy as a structural system in which men collectively hold power over women (Osborne, 2001), recognizes sexual and gender relations as central mechanisms of that power, and argues that genuine equity requires transformative change through the dismantling of oppressive sex and gender roles (Duriesmith & Meger, 2020). These tenets advance an ideology of freedom from oppression premised on collective resistance, consciousness-raising, and the transformation of power dynamics.

Central to radical feminism is its commitment to exposing and challenging the structural conditions that sustain inequality, ones that are normalized through everyday practices, cultural narratives, and institutional arrangements. The movement emphasizes not only critique but also action and transformation, positioning lived experience as a legitimate source of knowledge and a catalyst for structural change. In this sense, radical feminism reframes inequality not as a problem to be solved by improving individual women's capacity to succeed within oppressive systems, but as evidence of the need to fundamentally reimagine and redesign those systems themselves.

Radical feminist theorists further assert that patriarchal power operates through the reproduction of institutional logics, such as the ideal worker norm and hierarchical governance that naturalize gendered inequalities (Duriesmith & Meger, 2020). Within this framework universities are understood not as neutral or meritocratic spaces but as gendered organizations that rely on gendered divisions of labor, leadership norms, and evaluative criteria to maintain

male dominance (Acker, 1990). Radical feminism therefore provides a structural account of inequality that moves beyond interpersonal bias and surfaces the embedded operations of power within organizational life.

Fit of Radical Feminist Theory

Radical feminist theory offers a compelling investigative anchor for examining millennial women's leadership advancement in U.S. higher education because the university is itself a deeply structured patriarchal institution. Frisinger (2022) examined the implications of millennial women coming of age in a post-feminist era, noting that many experience a shared sense of grief and betrayal after being socialized to believe that gender equality had been achieved, only to encounter persistent structural and cultural inequities in adulthood. Despite championed commitments to equity, universities historically evolved within male-dominated cultural contexts and continue to operate through hierarchical governance, competitive productivity standards, and definitions of merit deeply rooted in gendered and racialized norms. Popular media and institutional discourse emphasized individual empowerment and merit-based success, framing feminism as a personal identity or consumer orientation rather than a collective political project (Frisinger, 2022). As a result, millennial women were socialized to believe that credentials and talent would be sufficient to secure equitable outcomes within professional hierarchies. When these women entered academia, they encountered a stark contradiction between the promise of gender equality and the persistence of structural exclusion embedded within academic institutions (Acker, 1990; O'Connor, 2020). Within this study's theoretical framing, an emphasis on individual achievement can obscure the institutional conditions shaping advancement and position barriers as individual shortcomings rather than organizational problems. This dissonance reinforces the hierarchical nature of academic leadership, where claims of neutrality and merit

function to protect existing power structures while delegitimizing critiques of inequality. Leadership opportunities are mediated by hidden rules, controlled by gatekeepers, and justified through narratives of neutrality and merit.

Radical feminism exposes meritocracy as an ideological veil that obscures power relations (Zheng, 2018). The corporatization of higher education has reinforced organizational priorities related to efficiency, performance, and accountability (Levidow, 2000; Samalavičius, 2018). Individuals may devote substantial time and effort to work that remains unacknowledged or poorly understood within their institutions, especially effort that requires considerable relational or invisible work (Hamblin et al., 2020). Moreover, radical feminism aligns with emerging critiques of professional development models that individualize responsibility for advancement instead of interrogating structural barriers.

Research on gendered inequality in higher education identifies organizational practices that shape women's career experiences and distribute faculty service unevenly (Bhopal, 2020; O'Meara et al., 2017). These studies provide empirical context for this study's radical feminist interpretation of institutional power and leadership opportunities. For millennial women, radical feminism provides a framework for understanding why career values collide with institutional norms and why resistance becomes both necessary and generative. By applying radical feminist theory, this study centers systemic causes of inequity, interrogates leadership structures rather than individual characteristics, and positions resistance as a legitimate leadership strategy for millennial women navigating patriarchal institutions.

Radical Feminist Theory Influence on Research Design

Radical feminist theory shapes the research design through its commitment to structural critique, participant empowerment, and the pursuit of transformative knowledge production. In

terms of problem framing, the study conceptualizes leadership inequities not as deficits in women's ambition or preparation but as consequences of institutional cultures and power structures that constrain access and limit recognition of women's leadership legitimacy. This framing draws from radical feminist critiques of organizational patriarchy, neoliberalism, and gendered labor regimes (hooks, 2000). This theoretical stance informs research questions that examine how millennial women experience, resist, or navigate institutional constraints, and how organizational values, expectations, and power dynamics shape their leadership trajectories. This approach aligns with feminist methodological commitments to democratizing knowledge and centering marginalized perspectives (Code, 2014).

Radical feminism also guides decisions about sampling and participant relationships, prioritizing relational and collaborative interactions rather than hierarchical researcher–participant dynamics. Including both faculty and staff voices challenges the hierarchical silencing present in traditional academic structures and acknowledges that leadership work occurs beyond formal titles. Ethical and positionality commitments emphasize transparency, reflexivity, and accountability to participants, recognizing the risk of institutional retaliation for women—especially staff—who critique leadership systems. Radical feminist research requires interrogating researcher power, institutional loyalties, and the risks participants face (Hesse-Biber, 2014). This holds particularly true for staff whose positional precarity or supervisory relationships may expose them to retaliation (Worth, 2016).

Analytically, radical feminist theory directs attention to coding categories related to power, resistance, material conditions, gatekeeping, emotional labor, and institutional culture. Rather than coding purely for thematic patterns, analysis prioritizes structural meaning-making and identifies sites of constraint and transformation. Representational strategies, including the

use of arts-based narrative methods, align with radical feminism's emphasis on consciousness-raising and storytelling as tools for collective liberation. Arts-based representation challenges dominant epistemologies, resists narrative extraction, and foregrounds embodied, affective, and experiential knowledge (Roulston, 2022). Together, these representational approaches foreground participants' experiences and create opportunities for them to reflect on how those experiences are interpreted and represented.

Alignment and Tensions with Other Feminist Traditions

When evaluating feminist perspectives, it is important to recognize that no single, fixed definition of feminism exists; rather, each author articulates feminism through their own theoretical lens, and it is both the author and the reader who determine how that definition is understood and evaluated (Thompson, 2001). While radical feminism offers a critical foundation for this study, it does not stand alone; intersections with other feminist traditions enrich and complicate its application. Intersectional feminism, rooted in the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, is essential for addressing the ways that race, class, sexuality, disability, and other identities shape leadership pathways (Duriesmith & Meger, 2020). Intersectionality addresses critiques of early radical feminist scholarship for centering white, middle-class women and ensures that the study examines the layered nature of oppression rather than treating gender as a singular axis (Hesse-Biber, 2014; Thompson, 2001). Intersectionality informed attention to how gender operates alongside other systems of oppression (Cho et al., 2013), while the study's primary analytic focus remained on gendered organizational conditions shaping leadership pathways.

In contrast, liberal feminism emphasizes access, inclusion, and equal opportunity within existing systems. While liberal feminism has been influential in expanding women's participation in higher education, its reformist orientation is insufficient for addressing structural

inequities because it seeks to integrate women into systems that remain fundamentally patriarchal (Osborne, 2001). Radical feminism departs from liberal feminism by insisting on structural transformation rather than assimilation and by challenging dominant leadership norms rather than encouraging women to conform to them.

Poststructural feminism contributes valuable insights into discourse, identity construction, and the performative nature of gender (Kruks, 2014). However, its focus on language and meaning-making can at times underemphasize the realities of inequality, and in elevating particular voices, it may inadvertently silence others (Kruks, 2014). Radical feminist theory fills this gap by grounding critique in systemic power and material constraints, while still benefiting from poststructural insights into identity and representation (Duriesmith & Meger, 2020). Together, these perspectives inform the framework of this study. While this research draws on radical feminist theory as a structural critique of power, it is methodologically grounded in a broader critical feminist qualitative approach that emphasizes narrative, reflexivity, and meaning-making. This integration offers a multi-layered approach that situates millennial women's leadership experiences within both discursive and material contexts.

Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) as a Generational Framework

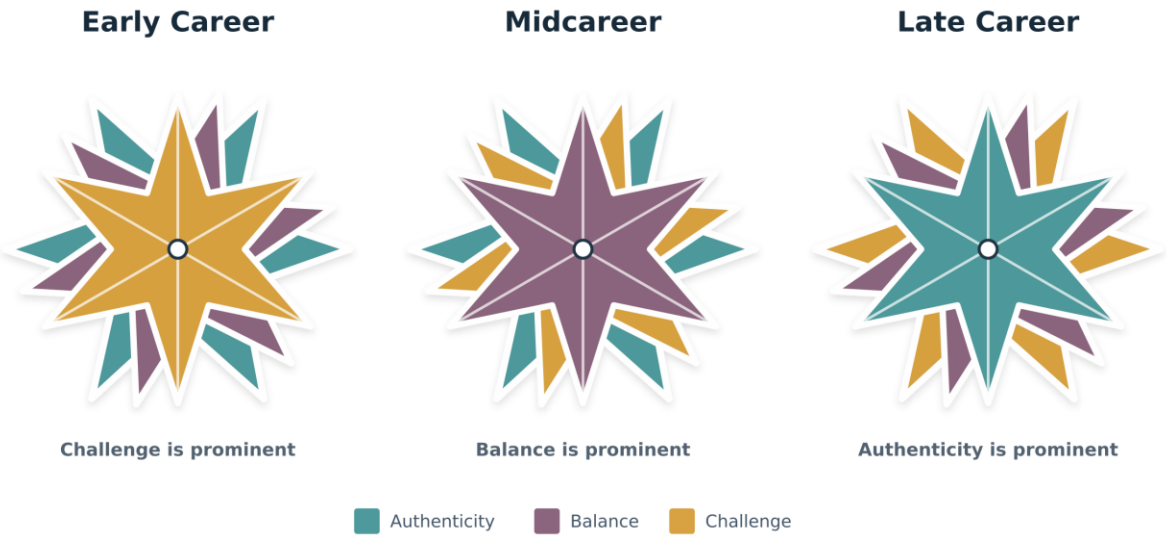
The Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM), developed by Mainiero and Sullivan (2005), offers an alternative to career theories that assume steady progression through a single organization. Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) introduced the model in response to popular accounts of an "opt-out revolution," which often portrayed women's departures from demanding organizational careers as evidence of diminished ambition or a preference for domestic life. They argued instead that career decisions are embedded within a web of relationships and are made in response to the changing demands of work and life. Leaving an organization, reducing one's

participation, or redirecting a career may represent an effort to construct a more viable career rather than abandonment of work or leadership.

The model draws its name from the operation of a kaleidoscope. A kaleidoscope contains the same pieces, yet a change in the position of one piece alters the pattern produced by the whole. Similarly, KCM proposes that careers are shaped through three interacting parameters—authenticity, balance, and challenge—that remain present but shift in prominence as circumstances change (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). These parameters function as decision-making signposts rather than independent needs. Authenticity concerns congruence between a person's work, identity, values, and desired way of living. Balance concerns the fit among work and nonwork demands and the tradeoffs required to manage them. Challenge concerns opportunities for learning, advancement, and meaningful accomplishment. A career decision may respond most visibly to one parameter, but it changes the overall configuration through which the other two are experienced. Figure 1 illustrates the original career-stage pattern of the KCM.

Figure 1

Original Career-Stage Pattern of the Kaleidoscope Career Model



Note. Challenge, balance, and authenticity remain active across career stages, although their relative prominence shifts. Figure created by the author based on the Kaleidoscope Career Model developed by Mainiero and Sullivan (2005).

Mainiero and Sullivan's (2005) original formulation described a gendered pattern in the relative prominence of the three parameters across the career. For many women, challenge was expected to become prominent during early career, balance during midcareer, and authenticity during later career. The authors did not suggest that one parameter disappears when another moves forward; rather, the kaleidoscope turns as relational responsibilities, career opportunities, and personal priorities change. The model therefore differs from a fixed stage theory even though its original account identified a common sequence. Later applications have further emphasized that these configurations vary across people and contexts and need not follow a uniform order (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008).

KCM is particularly useful for examining millennial careers because authenticity and balance may become prominent earlier than the model's original career sequence suggests (Bishu

et al., 2023; Lyons & Kuron, 2014). Millennial women's personal and professional lives do not necessarily follow a common timetable, particularly amid changing family structures and less predictable career movement. In this study, the three parameters are therefore understood as simultaneously present and continually renegotiated. Their prominence may shift, but earlier priorities and relationships remain part of the career configuration.

Career recalibration, however, does not occur under neutral conditions. Organizational structures shape whether women can pursue work that reflects their values, exercise control over their time, and access opportunities that support advancement. KCM explains how women interpret and respond to these conditions, while radical feminist theory reveals how gendered power shapes which career configurations are available and sustainable.

Theoretical Fit of Kaleidoscope Career Model

The KCM offers a lens for examining how authenticity, balance, and challenge shape career decisions (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). Read alongside scholarship on gendered organizational conditions in higher education (O'Connor, 2020), KCM helps frame these priorities as negotiated within institutional contexts. In this study, the model guides interpretation of how millennial women evaluated leadership opportunities, considered alignment between professional roles and personal values, and weighed the sustainability of advancement. This application directs attention to both participants' evolving priorities and the institutional conditions supporting or constraining them.

The KCM also helps illuminate how generational values can be misinterpreted within organizational contexts. Research on millennial employees highlights feedback as an important workplace expectation and links employee communication with engagement and organizational commitment (Magni & Manzoni, 2020; Walden et al., 2017). However, this feedback-seeking is

often mischaracterized by managers as entitlement or narcissism rather than as an expression of engagement and developmental intent (Baker Rosa & Hastings, 2018). Such misinterpretations reinforce both generational and gendered stereotypes, undermining leadership identity development and workplace confidence. Together, these dynamics highlight a structural mismatch between millennial career priorities and traditional leadership models embedded in higher education institutions. In this sense, KCM complements structural and critical feminist perspectives by offering insight into how individuals interpret, negotiate, and respond to these misalignments in the context of leadership decision-making.

Influence of KCM on Research Design

The KCM informs the research design by shaping both the conceptual focus of the study and the development of the interview protocol. Consistent with the model's emphasis on authenticity, balance, and challenge, the study is designed to elicit participants' reflections on how these dimensions influence their leadership trajectories within higher education. Interview questions are structured to explore how participants experience alignment or misalignment between personal values and institutional expectations (authenticity), how they negotiate professional and personal responsibilities within leadership roles (balance), and how they evaluate opportunities for growth, advancement, and meaningful contribution (challenge). These dimensions are explored not as discrete categories but as interrelated factors that shift over time and across contexts.

In addition, KCM supports the study's focus on leadership navigation as an ongoing, dynamic process rather than a fixed outcome. This aligns with the use of semi-structured interviews and narrative and thematic analysis, which allow participants to articulate how their priorities evolve and how they make decisions about pursuing, persisting in, or stepping away

from leadership roles. By integrating KCM into the research design, the study captures not only the structural conditions shaping leadership pathways but also the individualized ways in which millennial women interpret and respond to those conditions.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed literature on higher education organizational structures, institutional culture, women's leadership experiences, and generational differences in career expectations to situate millennial women's leadership pathways within broader structural and institutional contexts. The literature demonstrates that leadership in higher education is shaped by complex and often contradictory organizational dynamics, including hierarchical governance models, informal networks, and culturally embedded norms that influence how leadership is defined, evaluated, and accessed. Within these contexts, women continue to encounter systemic barriers to advancement, including underrepresentation in senior leadership, inequitable access to mentorship and sponsorship, and expectations for invisible labor that remain undervalued in promotion and evaluation processes.

Building on this foundation, the chapter highlighted how generational context further shapes leadership experiences, with millennial women navigating institutional environments that often conflict with their values of authenticity, balance, and meaningful work. Despite strengths such as adaptability and a strong commitment to professional growth (Baker Rosa & Hastings, 2018), structural barriers within hierarchical and credential-driven systems continue to constrain advancement opportunities (Curran & Prottas, 2017). By integrating critical feminist theory (Acker, 1990; Harding, 1987) and the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008), this study positions leadership pathways as both structurally constrained and actively negotiated. This framework enables an examination of how millennial women interpret and

navigate higher education organizational structures, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of leadership as a site of both constraint and agency within higher education.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological framework that guided the study. Grounded in a critical qualitative research paradigm (Denzin, 2017; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) and informed by radical feminist theory (hooks, 2000), the research centered participants' narratives as sources of knowledge about how institutional power, gendered norms, and organizational expectations shape leadership pathways within higher education. Consistent with feminist methodological commitments, the design prioritized reflexivity, relational engagement, and the ethical responsibility to represent participants' experiences in ways that illuminate structural inequities rather than individualizing barriers to advancement.

In this chapter, I describe the research design and methodological approach that guided the study, including participant selection, recruitment strategies, data collection procedures, and analytic processes. I give particular attention to the role of narrative interviews as sites of meaning-making through which participants articulated and interpreted their professional experiences. The chapter also explains how thematic and narrative analysis were conducted and how findings were represented through a single arts-based composite narrative that synthesized themes across participants' accounts while protecting their identities. The final sections address trustworthiness, researcher positionality and reflexivity, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study design.

Research Design

In this study, I employed a critical qualitative research design grounded in radical feminist theory. Critical qualitative inquiry recognizes that research is inherently shaped by power, positionality, and institutional context rather than neutrality or objectivity (Denzin, 2017). Drawing from feminist scholarship, the study positioned women's lived experiences as essential

sources of knowledge for understanding how power and privilege operate within organizations (Bhattacharya, 2017; Blackmore, 2017; Harding, 1987). From this perspective, participants' narratives were understood as socially situated interpretations that illuminate how institutional structures shape leadership pathways.

Drawing from Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) understanding of narrative inquiry, "authoring" refers to the process by which individuals interpret, reframe, and present their experiences as coherent stories shaped by personal agency and broader socio-institutional contexts. In this study, participants' narratives were understood not only as personal accounts but also as critiques of the institutional structures that produce and sustain gendered inequities. A critical qualitative interview methodology, grounded in a critical feminist framework, was well suited to the aims of this research. Career advancement and leadership attainment are deeply intertwined with issues of social justice, equity, and access (Ely et al., 2011). Narrative interviews allowed participants to reflect critically on their experiences, while thematic analysis informed by a critical feminist lens enabled the researcher to connect individual accounts to broader patterns of power, privilege, and constraint (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This methodological approach aligned directly with the study's research questions by supporting examination of how millennial women interpreted leadership preparedness, negotiated institutional power, and made career decisions within gendered organizational structures. A critical qualitative interview design also allows for systematic comparison across narratives while maintaining attention to the structural forces shaping individual experience (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015).

While this study was informed by elements of both narrative inquiry and critical ethnography, it was intentionally designed as a critical qualitative interview study and did not

adopt either methodology in full. Narrative inquiry centers the preservation and analysis of individual stories as cohesive, temporally situated accounts of lived experience, often emphasizing continuity, personal meaning, and the integrity of individual narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In contrast, this study did not seek to present or preserve individual narratives as complete or bounded stories. Instead, participant narratives were engaged as sites of meaning-making that contributed to a broader analysis of shared patterns, tensions, and structural conditions shaping leadership pathways.

Similarly, while this study drew conceptually from critical ethnography's focus on interrogating systems of power and inequality, it did not meet the methodological requirements of ethnographic research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Critical ethnography typically involves prolonged immersion within institutional settings and incorporates multiple forms of data collection—such as participant observation, document analysis, and sustained engagement with organizational culture—to produce thick descriptions of social contexts (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This study did not involve extended fieldwork or direct observation of institutional environments. As such, adopting an ethnographic label risked overstating the scope of the research design and misrepresenting the nature of the data collected.

Instead, in this study, I centered interviews as the primary site of knowledge generation, positioning them as dialogic spaces in which participants interpreted and constructed meaning about their experiences within higher education. This approach aligns with traditions of critical narrative analysis, which emphasize understanding how individuals make sense of their lived experiences through storytelling while situating those narratives within broader social and institutional contexts (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Interviews were therefore not treated as neutral instruments for gathering information but as relational and interpretive processes through

which participants articulated how they understood leadership, institutional culture, and organizational dynamics.

Consistent with postmodern and feminist epistemologies, participant narratives were analyzed as interpretive accounts rather than objective representations of reality (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This orientation centers the role of discourse in shaping how individuals understand and navigate systems of power. While narrative elements were central to the study, the analytic focus was not on reconstructing individual life stories, but on examining how participants' accounts collectively revealed patterns of power, constraint, and possibility within higher education institutions.

I used semi-structured interviews to elicit rich, participant-driven accounts of leadership experiences, providing both consistency across participants and flexibility to explore emergent themes (Roulston, 2022). Within this framework, narratives functioned as a means of interrogating broader institutional structures rather than as ends in themselves. This distinction is critical: the study privileged participants' narratives as essential to sense-making and truth-making while also analyzing those narratives as reflections of the systems that shape them.

I conceptualized leadership advancement not as a linear or meritocratic process, but as one shaped by patriarchal norms, organizational hierarchies, and cultural expectations embedded within higher education institutions (Acker, 2006; Morley, 2013; O'Connor, 2020). By centering participants' interpretations of their experiences, the study shifted attention away from individual-level explanations and toward the structural conditions that influence leadership trajectories. This approach aligned with feminist critiques of leadership research that challenge the tendency to locate barriers within women rather than within institutional systems (Ely et al., 2011).

Framing the study as a critical qualitative interview design ensured methodological coherence between the research questions, theoretical framework, and analytic approach. It allowed for in-depth engagement with participants' narratives while maintaining a clear focus on interrogating the institutional and structural forces that shape leadership pathways. In doing so, the study remained transparent about its scope: I did not seek to produce a full ethnographic account of higher education institutions or to preserve individual narratives in their entirety, but rather to analyze how participants interpreted and navigated leadership within complex, gendered organizational environments.

Participants

Participants included millennial women born between 1981 and 1996 (Dimock, 2019) who were employed in higher education settings at the time of participation, including colleges, universities, community colleges, and minority-serving institutions. Using purposeful sampling, I recruited participants in mid- to upper-level professional roles who had experience pursuing, occupying, or persisting in leadership pathways. Sampling sought variation in institutional setting and role type to broaden the range of perspectives represented, though the study did not aim to compare those categories. Instead, I selected participants based on their capacity to provide information-rich accounts of leadership navigation within higher education.

To be eligible for participation, individuals were required to meet the following inclusion criteria: (a) hold a mid- to upper-level professional or leadership role at the time of participation, or occupy a position within a leadership pipeline characterized by decision-making authority, supervisory responsibility, or institutional influence; (b) aspire to hold a senior-level leadership position in higher education; (c) have at least five years of professional experience working in higher education; and (d) be willing to participate in one to two interviews lasting approximately

60 minutes each. Leadership was defined broadly to avoid reinforcing hierarchical and gendered assumptions about authority that privilege formal titles over relational and distributed leadership (Blackmore, 2017; Morley, 2013). As feminist scholars have argued, narrowing leadership definitions often renders women's contributions invisible (Harding, 1987; hooks, 2000). Including both faculty and staff participants reflected a critical recognition that leadership in higher education is frequently enacted outside of formal titles, particularly by women, and that restricting leadership to positional authority alone would reproduce the very hierarchies this study sought to interrogate (Blackmore, 2017; Kezar & Lester, 2009; Whitchurch, 2012).

I recruited participants through professional networks, social media, and snowball sampling. Recruitment materials emphasized voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the separation of research participation from employment evaluation. To support participant privacy and voluntary participation, I avoided institutional listservs and supervisory channels during recruitment.

For the purposes of this study, the term senior leadership included roles such as deans, associate deans, vice presidents, provosts, and other cabinet-level administrative positions (Black, 2015; Kezar, 2018). Mid-level professionals were defined as individuals in both faculty and staff roles who held responsibilities that extended beyond entry-level duties but did not occupy senior executive leadership positions (Branson et al., 2016; Rosser, 2004). These roles typically involve programmatic oversight, personnel supervision, or meaningful contributions to decision-making processes, while remaining accountable to senior leadership. For staff, this could include positions such as program directors, department managers, or assistant/associate directors. For faculty, this could include roles such as program coordinators, department chairs, associate deans, or other leadership positions that involve administrative responsibility without

full executive authority. Classification depended on the scope of authority and institutional context rather than title alone; an associate dean could therefore occupy a mid-level or senior leadership role. Additionally, this inclusive approach allowed for the representation of individuals who occupied “third space” roles; those whose work exists between or across traditional faculty and administrative boundaries as evidenced within many administrative titles (Whitchurch, 2012).

A planned sample of approximately eight to 12 participants was consistent with qualitative interview research emphasizing depth, saturation, and analytic richness over representativeness (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In alignment with this approach, I began with an initial target of eight participants to allow for in-depth, narrative-focused interviews and early-stage thematic development. Beginning with a smaller sample supports the intensive, iterative nature of qualitative analysis, in which data collection and analysis occur concurrently and inform one another (O’Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015).

Recruitment resulted in nine participants, providing sufficient depth for analysis of shared patterns and meaningful variation. Saturation in this study was understood as the point at which additional interviews no longer yielded substantially new insights, themes, or variations in how participants interpreted and navigated leadership pathways (Fusch & Ness, 2015). As I compared the interviews and revisited my analytic memos, later accounts elaborated patterns already identified rather than introducing substantially different thematic directions. The nine interviews provided sufficient depth and variation to address the research questions. I paid particular attention to both thematic redundancy and the depth of narrative complexity across participants, ensuring that the data adequately captured shared patterns as well as meaningful variation in experiences across institutional contexts and leadership roles.

This flexible approach to sample size is consistent with critical qualitative research, which prioritizes the richness and interpretive value of participants' narratives over breadth or generalizability (Denzin, 2017). Given the study's focus on millennial women's meaning-making and navigation of leadership within gendered organizational structures, the goal was not to achieve statistical representation but to develop a nuanced understanding of how participants experienced and interpreted leadership pathways. Recruitment and analysis remained responsive to the emerging accounts, and the final sample included nine participants.

Table 3.1. Participants

Participant pseudonym	**Institution type/classification**	**Public/Private**	**Leadership level**	**Functional area**
Haley	R1	Public	Senior leader	Student affairs/faculty
Kasey	R1	Public	Aspiring	Community engagement
Leah	R1	Public	Senior leader	Academic affairs/faculty
Lindsey	Community College	Public	Mid-level	Student Affairs
Madison	R2	Private	Mid-level	Student affairs
Morgan	Regional – Master's	Public	Senior leader	Enrollment management
Sydney	R2	Public	Senior leader	Student success
Taylor	R1	Public	Mid-level	Residence life
Whitney	R1	Private	Mid-level	Academic affairs

Note. Table 3.1 provides an overview of participants' institutional settings and leadership levels at the time of their interviews. Pseudonyms are used, and characteristics are presented in broad categories to protect participant confidentiality.

Data Collection

I gathered data through in-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews, using a relational and dialogue-centric orientation characteristic of critical narrative inquiry (Denzin, 2017;

Roulston, 2022). This method is well suited to exploring experiences that cannot be observed directly and require participants' interpretation and reflection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Before participating, individuals were asked to complete a brief online demographic questionnaire to confirm eligibility and provide contextual information about their professional role, institutional setting, and career trajectory. Semi-structured interviews allow for consistency across participants while maintaining flexibility to follow emergent topics and participant-led meaning-making (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Roulston, 2022).

In the interviews, I invited participants to narrate leadership-relevant life histories, pain points, career indecision, and experiences of constraint and resistance within their institutional contexts. Interview questions were designed to elicit narratives related to career trajectories, leadership aspirations, institutional culture, organizational structure, and moments of persistence, resistance, or redirection. Narrative interviewing enables participants to share lived experiences in their own terms while offering insight into how individual stories reflect broader structural patterns (Clandinin, 2023). I assumed a relational stance, co-constructing meaning with participants through reflective questions, empathetic listening, and acknowledgment of positionality, as recommended for feminist interviewing (Roulston, 2022). Consistent with feminist ethical commitments, I gave participants control over pacing, scheduling, and the depth of disclosure to support psychological safety (Bhattacharya, 2017). Participants selected interview times and private locations that supported their comfort and confidentiality. I conducted nine interviews between July 2 and July 29, 2026, with each participant' completing one interview lasting approximately 60–75 minutes. The interview protocol served as a flexible guide: participants addressed its content through their narratives or through follow-up questions within the same interview. A second interview was therefore unnecessary.

I conducted interviews virtually via Zoom to increase accessibility and geographic reach, a practice supported in qualitative research when in-person interviews are not feasible (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). I audio-recorded the interviews with participant consent and used Zoom-generated transcripts. I reviewed each transcript against its corresponding recording and corrected transcription errors to ensure accuracy. I also maintained reflective field notes capturing emotional tone, context, and relational dynamics. I obtained informed consent prior to participation, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any time without consequence (Kansas State University, n.d.).

Data Analysis

As O'Reilly and Kiyimba (2015) explained, critical theory seeks to empower individuals by exposing and resisting the social structures that constrain them. By combining critical theory and radical feminist theory, I examined how gendered power dynamics, institutional norms, and organizational cultures intersect to influence millennial women's career advancement (Acker, 1990; Osborne, 2001). Participants' stories were treated not merely as personal narratives but as evaluations of broader structural inequities. Narrative analysis focused on how participants constructed leadership identity and how stories illuminated broader institutional and structural conditions. Following a critical narrative approach, data analysis moved beyond thematic description to examine how power, patriarchy, constraint, possibility, and resistance were embedded in stories, as well as how participants positioned themselves within dominant cultural narratives about leadership, gender, meritocracy, and work.

In alignment with radical feminist commitments to consciousness-raising and collective knowledge production, findings included an arts-based narrative representation in the form of a composite narrative synthesized from participant accounts (hooks, 2000; Osborne, 2001). This

representation brought participants' experiences into conversation while protecting their identities (Roulston, 2022). Care was taken to ensure participants' stories were not presented in ways that made painful experiences seem polished, minimized, or harmful. I shared the Chapter 4 draft with participants for member checking and invited their reflections on how their experiences were represented in the thematic findings and Danielle's composite narrative.

Data analysis followed a critical thematic and narrative analytic approach, integrating Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework with feminist and critical qualitative principles (Denzin, 2017). Analysis involved iterative engagement with transcripts, beginning with In Vivo coding to center participants' language and resist researcher dominance (Björkvall et al., 2024; Saldaña, 2021). I moved from initial coding to focused coding, revisiting the transcripts and comparing emerging patterns across participants as I developed and refined the themes (Saldaña, 2021).

I interpreted themes through a critical feminist lens to highlight how gendered power dynamics, organizational norms, and institutional structures shape leadership experiences (Acker, 2006; Blackmore, 2017). This analysis was further informed by the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM), which provided a framework for understanding how participants made career decisions through shifting priorities of authenticity, balance, and challenge (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). When applied alongside a feminist perspective, KCM allowed for examination not only of how these priorities evolved, but also how they were constrained, negotiated, or reconfigured within gendered organizational contexts (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008).

I analyzed narratives not only for content but also for how participants positioned themselves in relation to leadership, authority, and institutional expectations (Denzin, 2017). This approach prioritizes meaning, power, and resistance rather than frequency alone, consistent

with feminist critiques of decontextualized thematic analysis (Lawless & Chen, 2019). I used analytic memos and reflexive journaling iteratively to document developing interpretations, revisit coding decisions, and examine how my positionality shaped the analysis (Björkvall et al., 2024).

Table 3.2. Participants

Analytic phase	**Illustrative progression**
Participant excerpt	"I could sort of be simmering in my career… so that when the time as right, I could really, like turn up the flame and not be starting from scratch.
First-cycle codes	Agency; strategic persistence; career reconstruction
Focused coding	Sustaining career momentum while advancement was constrained
Developing category	Negotiating career viability within gendered caregiving and partner-career expectations
Final theme	Negotiating Worth, Work, and Leadership

Note. This example illustrates the development of selected first-cycle codes into a final theme. Analysis was iterative, and the final theme was developed across participant accounts.

In addition to thematic analysis, I used an arts-based composite narrative to synthesize and communicate shared experiences and the emotional complexity of millennial women's leadership pathways in higher education. Arts-based research approaches recognize that traditional academic prose may not fully convey the layered, relational, and affective magnitude of lived experience (Leavy, 2015). Feminist scholars similarly argue that narrative and creative forms of representation can make visible forms of knowledge that are often marginalized or obscured in conventional research reporting (hooks, 2000; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

Following thematic analysis of interview transcripts, I synthesized key patterns, tensions, and narrative threads into a composite arts-based representation. Composite narratives are frequently used in qualitative and feminist research to preserve participant confidentiality while emphasizing patterns that emerge across multiple experiences (Willis, 2019). In this study, I did not present participants' identities and individual stories as discrete case studies. Instead, I wove

together narrative elements to highlight recurring themes related to leadership preparation, institutional barriers, mentorship, identity negotiation, and strategies of resistance within higher education organizations.

To create the arts-based composite narrative, Danielle, I drew on participants' language, metaphors, and reflections while grounding the story in patterns identified across the nine interviews. I presented those patterns through six themes before weaving them into Danielle's leadership journey. I intentionally left her specific role, institutional setting, and professional responsibilities undefined so that she could reflect experiences across faculty and staff positions without being identifiable as any one participant. Informed by the Kaleidoscope Career Model (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) and the organizational conditions described in participants' accounts, the composite illustrates how women interpreted and navigated leadership without presenting Danielle as a single participant or a universal career pathway. This approach allowed the study to maintain analytic rigor and transparency while honoring feminist commitments to participant protection and collaborative knowledge production.

Importantly, the arts-based representation was not intended to replace analytic interpretation but to complement it. The thematic findings derived from Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis guided the construction of the narrative synthesis and informed the interpretation of themes presented in the findings chapter. The creative representation therefore serves as an additional analytic and communicative layer that helps illustrate how millennial women interpreted and navigated leadership within gendered organizational structures.

Trustworthiness

I attended to trustworthiness in this study through criteria aligned with qualitative and feminist research, including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I invited participants to review the Chapter 4 draft and respond to its interpretation and representation of their experiences (Creswell & Miller, 2000; O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). Five of the nine participants responded. Their feedback affirmed the resonance of Danielle's composite narrative, the care with which their experiences were represented, and the difficulty of identifying any one person within the data. I considered these responses as evidence of resonance among those who replied, without assuming the nonresponse indicated agreement. I used reflective practice throughout data collection and analysis to account for my positionality and potential influence on the data interpretation (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Rather than striving for objectivity, I prioritized transparency, ethical accountability, and relational validity, consistent with feminist epistemological commitments that recognize knowledge as situated and co-constructed (Bhattacharya, 2017; Harding, 1987). Quality was therefore evaluated through criteria such as credibility, resonance, and transferability, which emphasize trustworthiness and meaningful representation in qualitative research (Roulston, 2022; Tracy, 2010). I supported credibility through reflexive engagement with the interview transcripts, comparison of patterns across participant accounts, and participants' reflections on the Chapter 4 draft. Consistent with radical feminist goals, I sought to produce findings that could prompt participants, readers, and institutions to reflect on gendered organizational conditions and consider possibilities for change (Tracy, 2010). Arts-based and narrative forms support this by making research accessible, affective, and socially impactful (Roulston, 2022). I

addressed ethical considerations by protecting confidentiality, using pseudonyms, and inviting participants to review and respond to how their experiences were represented. Throughout the research process, I remained attentive to power, vulnerability, and the potential institutional consequences of participation. The approved Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol outlined confidentiality and privacy protections for participants.

Positionality and Reflexivity

Qualitative research acknowledges that knowledge is socially constructed and that researchers inevitably bring personal experiences, assumptions, and positionality into the research process. Rather than striving for neutrality, critical qualitative inquiry emphasizes reflexivity, an ongoing process of examining how the researcher's background, perspectives, and relationships to the research context shape the interpretation of participants' experiences (Denzin, 2017; Hesse-Biber, 2014). Within feminist research traditions, reflexivity is particularly important because it recognizes that knowledge production occurs within relationships of power and that researchers must remain attentive to how their own social location influences the framing, interpretation, and representation of participants' narratives (Bhattacharya, 2017; Roulston, 2022).

This study was situated within a critical qualitative interview framework that drew methodological inspiration from elements of narrative inquiry and critical ethnography while remaining distinct from both approaches. Narrative inquiry emphasizes the importance of personal stories as a means through which individuals interpret their experiences and construct meaning about their lives and professional trajectories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this study, participant narratives served as central sources of knowledge, offering insight into how millennial women interpreted leadership pathways and made sense of the institutional conditions

shaping their professional experiences. At the same time, the study drew from critical ethnographic traditions that interrogate the systems, structures, and cultural norms that produce and sustain inequality within organizations. While the research did not involve prolonged institutional immersion characteristic of ethnography, the analytic lens remained alert to the institutional power structures that shape participants' experiences. In this way, participant narratives functioned not only as personal accounts but also as interpretive critiques of broader organizational systems that influence leadership opportunities and professional legitimacy.

My own positionality as a millennial woman working within higher education inevitably shaped my engagement with this research. I have worked in higher education as a full-time professional for thirteen years, with an additional two years of experience as a graduate assistant. During this time, I have held roles across multiple functional areas within higher education institutions, including student affairs, housing and residential life, adjunct teaching, career services, curriculum development, and registrar functions. These experiences have provided insight into how governance structures, organizational hierarchies, and institutional decision-making processes operate across different divisions within higher education. Across these roles, I have encountered tensions related to just culture, authority, influence, and professional legitimacy, both in my own experiences and in those of colleagues navigating similar institutional environments.

Throughout my professional career, I have observed patterns that reflect broader gendered dynamics within higher education organizations. Regardless of whether individuals held faculty or staff positions, the devaluation of women's labor was often evident in both formal and informal organizational practices. Women who occupied leadership roles frequently encountered barriers related to promotion pathways, access to decision-making spaces, and

recognition of professional contributions. I have witnessed situations in which women's leadership potential was constrained by structural practices such as the elimination of termination protections, dismissive treatment within faculty governance structures, or the removal of opportunities for women to lead or contribute meaningfully to institutional decision-making processes. In other cases, women were encouraged to participate in committees or service activities framed as "value-added" contributions, yet these roles were rarely compensated or formally recognized in ways that translated into professional advancement.

These institutional dynamics have also intersected with broader political and policy shifts affecting higher education. In recent years, federal and state level policy decisions have increasingly targeted diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives that previously provided platforms for historically marginalized voices, including women and faculty and staff from Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color. The erosion of these initiatives has, in many cases, reduced institutional support structures that helped ensure representation and participation in decision-making processes. Observing these changes has further reinforced my interest in understanding how institutional structures shape leadership opportunities and how women interpret and navigate these shifting organizational environments.

At the same time, my experiences in higher education have also reinforced my belief in the transformative potential of the field. I continue to believe strongly in the value of higher education and in the commitment that faculty and staff bring to supporting student success and intellectual development. My critique is therefore not directed toward the mission of higher education itself but toward institutional practices that may undermine the well-being and persistence of the professionals who sustain that mission. I remain particularly interested in how leadership models grounded in feminist values—including collaboration, relational leadership,

emotional intelligence, and creativity—may offer alternative approaches to leadership within institutions that often prioritize hierarchical authority and traditional governance structures.

Recognizing my own experiences within higher education required careful attention to reflexivity throughout the research process. My familiarity with institutional environments could provide contextual understanding that supported deeper interpretation of participants' narratives; however, it also carried the potential risk of assumption or over-identification. To examine these risks, I used reflexive practices to identify moments when my interpretations may have been shaped by prior experiences rather than participants' expressed meanings. These practices helped ensure that participants' narratives remained the central source of knowledge within the study.

Approaching this research reflexively also required acknowledging that higher education institutions are complex environments in which both positive and negative experiences can coexist. My goal in conducting these interviews was not to assume that all institutional contexts reproduce identical patterns of inequality. No single institutional type—whether public, private, research-intensive, or minority-serving—is inherently exempt from producing either supportive or challenging professional environments. Each participant entered the study with a unique professional history, organizational context, and interpretation of leadership experiences. As such, the research approach emphasized listening carefully to the complexities of participants' narratives and allowing their interpretations to guide the analysis.

Finally, I recognized that my own perspectives could shape how I interpreted participants' experiences and the themes that emerged through analysis. Efforts to reduce bias and protect the authenticity of participants' lived experiences remained central to the research process. By maintaining reflexive awareness, engaging in transparent analytic practices, and prioritizing participants' voices in the interpretation of findings, this study sought to honor the

complexity of millennial women's experiences while critically examining the institutional structures that shape leadership pathways in higher education.

Limitations of the Study Design

The findings of this study should be interpreted within the boundaries of its design, participant sample, and analytic purpose. As a critical qualitative inquiry, the study was designed to develop an in-depth understanding of how millennial women interpreted their pathways into and through higher education leadership. It was not intended to produce statistically generalizable conclusions about all millennial women or all higher education institutions. The findings instead offer analytically transferable insights that may inform understanding of similar career and organizational contexts.

The study included nine participants who met the established criteria for age, higher education experience, and leadership position or aspiration. The sample allowed for substantial depth across participants' career narratives but could not represent the full range of experiences among millennial women working in higher education. Participants represented different functional areas, institutional environments, positions, and career stages. This variation strengthened the study's ability to identify patterns occurring across organizational contexts, but it also limited direct comparison among participants working within any single institutional type, professional area, or level of leadership.

The study also included women who remained employed in higher education at the time of data collection. This criterion supported the study's focus on persistence but necessarily excluded millennial women who had left higher education entirely. The findings therefore illuminate how participants sustained careers within the field, including through movement between institutions, but do not fully capture the circumstances under which women determine

that a viable higher education career can no longer be maintained. Including women who exited the field may have revealed different limits of persistence or additional organizational conditions contributing to departure.

The study relied on retrospective accounts of participants' careers. Participants interpreted earlier experiences from the perspective of their current knowledge, positions, and understandings of leadership. Experiences that initially appeared accidental, disappointing, or unclear may have acquired different meaning as participants constructed coherent narratives of their professional development. Retrospective interpretation is central to understanding how individuals make meaning of their careers, but it does not provide a contemporaneous record of how participants understood each event when it occurred.

Although the study examined millennial women as a generational group, neither "millennial" nor "woman" represents a uniform experience. Participants' careers were also shaped by race, ethnicity, social class, sexuality, disability, parental status, caregiving responsibilities, geographic mobility, institutional position, and other intersecting identities and circumstances. The sample and study design did not permit systematic comparison across all these dimensions. Consequently, the findings should not be interpreted as suggesting that organizational structures affect all millennial women in equivalent ways. Where demographic groups were represented by only one or a small number of participants, protecting confidentiality also limited the extent to which some intersecting experiences could be described in detail.

The use of an arts-based composite narrative created both analytic possibilities and limitations. Danielle enabled experiences shared across participants to be placed into conversation and made visible as a connected leadership journey. The composite form protected confidentiality while illustrating patterns that might have remained fragmented if presented only

as isolated thematic excerpts. However, Danielle does not represent the complete career of any individual participant, nor should her narrative be interpreted as a typical or universal millennial woman's leadership trajectory. The act of combining experiences required interpretive decisions about sequence, emphasis, voice, and connection. Although these decisions were grounded in participant accounts and accompanied by analytic reflection, the resulting narrative necessarily reflects the researcher's analytic construction.

Finally, the study examined participants' interpretations of organizational structures rather than independently evaluating the formal practices of their employing institutions. Organizational policies, supervisory decisions, governance practices, and advancement processes were understood through participants' experiences of them. The study therefore cannot determine whether a participant's experience reflected an institution-wide pattern, the practices of a particular unit, or the actions of an individual supervisor. This limitation is itself relevant to the findings concerning localized organizational knowledge, but it constrains claims about any specific institution's structures or intentions.

These limitations establish appropriate boundaries around the study's conclusions without diminishing the significance of the patterns identified across participants. The findings do not claim to represent every millennial woman or every higher education organization. Rather, they offer a theoretically informed interpretation of how nine women constructed and sustained leadership careers while navigating organizational environments that distributed pathways, time, recognition, and authority unevenly. These boundaries also identify directions for future research, which are discussed in Chapter 5.

Summary

This chapter described the critical qualitative design, participant recruitment, narrative interviews, and analytic process used to examine how millennial women interpret and navigate leadership in higher education. It also explained how the six themes and arts-based composite narrative were developed, alongside the steps taken to support trustworthiness and protect participants' identities. Chapter 4 presents the findings generated through this process.

Chapter 4 - Findings: Navigating Leadership Pathways

The purpose of this critical qualitative study was to explore how millennial women interpreted and navigated leadership within higher education, with particular attention to the organizational structures and conditions that shaped their pathways toward and persistence in leadership. Centering the lived experiences of millennial women provided an opportunity to examine how they pursued leadership and made meaning of their careers within institutions that remain shaped by historically gendered structures and expectations. This study was guided by three research questions:

- (R1) How do millennial women in higher education describe and interpret their pathways toward leadership roles?
- (R2) How do millennial women in higher education describe and interpret the ways institutional cultures, policies, and expectations have shaped their persistence in leadership trajectories?
- (R3) How do institutional structures, norms, and expectations shape millennial women's decisions about pursuing and sustaining leadership roles?

In this chapter, I present the findings generated through analysis of the nine participants' narratives. Consistent with the study's critical qualitative orientation, the findings center the meanings participants assigned to their careers, relationships, decisions, and encounters with higher education institutions. The analysis paid close attention to the distinctiveness of individual accounts while also identifying patterns that became visible across them.

Chapter 4 is organized into three interconnected sections. The first presents the six thematic findings that emerged across participants' accounts. These themes describe how participants developed leadership careers within institutional environments where pathways were

not always visible, preparation did not consistently lead to opportunity, and relationships often provided knowledge and access that formal structures did not. Participant voices remain central throughout this section, grounding each theme in the accounts from which it emerged.

The second section brings the themes together through a collective narrative centered on Danielle, a composite character constructed from participants' experiences. Rather than treating the themes as discrete categories, the narrative illustrates how they intersected and accumulated over the course of participants' careers. It preserves the complexity of their experiences while protecting individual identities and making shared patterns visible.

The final section synthesizes the collective narrative in relation to the thematic findings. It identifies the broader patterns that shaped participants' leadership trajectories and establishes the foundation for interpreting the findings in Chapter 5. Together, the thematic and narrative presentations illuminate shared organizational and relational conditions without reducing participants' careers to a single pathway.

Thematic Findings

The thematic analysis resulted in six interrelated themes that capture how participants constructed careers in higher education leadership, encountered organizational conditions that shaped advancement, and developed increasingly intentional understandings of themselves as leaders. Participants' careers were rarely characterized by clearly established routes into or through higher education. Instead, they discovered possibilities through experience, reconstructed pathways as opportunities emerged or disappeared, relied upon relationships to access knowledge and opportunity, and learned to interpret organizational expectations that were not always formally articulated.

The six themes were: Finding a Career Without a Map; Advancement Without a Pathway; Women and Relational Infrastructure; Learning the Unwritten Rules; Negotiating Worth, Work, and Leadership; and Becoming the Leader You Can Live With. Although presented separately for analytic clarity, these themes frequently overlapped within participants' accounts. Career decisions were inseparable from organizational conditions, relationships influenced access to both information and opportunity, and participants' experiences of recognition and constraint shaped how they understood leadership itself. Together, the themes demonstrate not a uniform leadership trajectory but the repeated work of constructing, interpreting, and reconsidering a career within higher education.

Finding a Career Without a Map

Participants did not describe entering higher education through predetermined career plans or progressing through clearly established leadership ladders. Instead, their careers developed through exposure to higher education as a profession, recognition from others, movement across positions and institutions, and decisions made in response to opportunities and constraints. What often began unintentionally became increasingly purposeful as participants identified the work they valued and pursued experiences that allowed them to continue growing.

For several participants, higher education became visible as a career only because someone else named the possibility. Taylor's entry into student affairs was accidental:

> I started in student affairs by accident, like most people I was a very involved student leader, graduated mid-recession from college in 2010, and was like, I need something to do. So, my assistant dean of students at the time was like, "Hey, you could look into this, you know, student affairs thing." And I was like, "Okay." So, I did a couple applications.

> I got into all of the schools I applied but then decided I didn't want to go to school. So, I was like, I'll take a gap year, figure things out.

Taylor eventually enrolled in a higher education master's program, although even that decision did not produce a linear entry into the profession. She left the program, worked at several institutions, briefly left student affairs altogether, and then returned. Looking back more than a decade later, she interpreted those disruptions differently than she had while experiencing them: "I think for where I am now as a professional, all of those experiences have paid off in their own dividend ways till now." Her account illustrates how a career that initially appeared fragmented could later be understood as cumulative preparation.

Lindsey similarly discovered higher education through proximity to the work. She had worked on college campuses since she was 18, beginning as a peer educator before becoming an orientation leader and resident assistant. She described how those experiences changed her understanding of both herself and higher education:

> When I got kind of that, like, taste of leadership as a freshman in college, I was like, "Oh, this is fun." Like, you know, like talking to people and, like, joining clubs, joining organizations, being a part of something bigger than me. I think that's what drew me to leadership, and also watching other people who were, like, really cool administrators that, you know, I still keep in touch with. Like, watching them grow and watching them lead, I think also helped me be kind of drawn to that and that pathway. I mean, I didn't even know student affairs existed until I talked to someone who's like, "You should do the master's program." I was like, "What's that?"

Similar moments of exposure appeared across participants' accounts. Madison entered college expecting to become a music teacher before experiences as a resident assistant and student leader

introduced higher education as "a path I could take." Leah initially pursued another professional direction before discovering greater satisfaction in educating others and concluding, "This is my jam. I think I found my home." Kasey recalled an encouraging response from undergraduate mentors when she disclosed that she was considering higher education: "Great, we've been waiting for you." Across these accounts, higher education became a career through experience and recognition before it became an intentional professional plan.

Importantly, unplanned entry did not result in unintentional careers. As participants accumulated experience, their decisions became increasingly deliberate as they constructed careers that were both viable and meaningful. This intentionality was reflected in participants' willingness to pursue the experiences, responsibilities, and environments that supported their continued growth. Progression frequently required movement across positions, functional areas, institutions, or geographic locations because the experience or opportunity participants sought was not available where they were. Taylor eventually came to treat institutional movement as an expected feature of advancement. Reflecting on her career, she explained:

> I have very much signed on to the higher ed mantra, in order to move up, you have to move out. So I have never worked at an institution longer than five years, and really four because I would have left my first director job, but COVID happened. . . . When I took that [next] role, I was like, I'm here to finish my doctorate degree. Like, I'm gonna work and I'm gonna get this degree done, put jobs on paper for it, and then when it's done, I'm gonna move up.

Movement in Taylor's account had become strategic rather than accidental. She anticipated that advancement might require changing institutions and planned education and job searches accordingly. Even then, movement was not immediate. Her director search took approximately a

year and a half, leading her to describe advancement as an “arduous process” for which she now mentally prepared years in advance.

Lindsey’s trajectory illustrates a different tension within institutional movement. She spent approximately a decade at one institution she described as “the best higher education training ground I could have ever asked for.” When she first felt ready to advance, she pursued her supervisor’s position and was unsuccessful. She remained, gained a new supervisor who “showed me truly how to be an administrator,” and several years later pursued another internal opportunity. She was again unsuccessful. Despite those experiences, she continued to value the institution and the development she had received there before eventually determining that continued movement required leaving. Her experience demonstrates that departure did not necessarily represent disengagement from an institution or from higher education. Participants could value where they were and still recognize that staying might limit where they could go.

Other participants similarly used movement to acquire experiences unavailable in their current positions. Whitney described changing roles every two or three years as she pursued new skills and responsibilities, concluding that conventional advice about demonstrating institutional loyalty “has not worked for me.” Kasey’s career included geographic and institutional moves shaped by financial viability, values alignment, and the availability of opportunities for growth. Reflecting on one transition, she explained that she moved because she was “looking for steps up” and there were “not a lot of opportunities for growth within the school that I was at already.” For these participants, movement was not synonymous with promotion. A lateral or cross-functional move could provide experience that made later advancement possible.

Across these trajectories, participants constructed careers through exposure, movement, education, redirection, and opportunities that became visible over time. Their careers were not

unintentional simply because they lacked predetermined destinations. Rather, intentionality emerged through the repeated work of determining what they valued, what they still wanted to learn, and whether their current environments could provide it. A lateral move could create preparation for later advancement, leaving could preserve continued growth, and an unexpected opportunity could alter a direction previously imagined. Participants were not simply climbing toward predetermined positions. They were constructing pathways as they traveled them.

Advancement Without a Pathway

As participants moved further into higher education leadership, they became distinctly aware of the difference between professional development and organizational advancement. They could become more capable, educated, experienced, and prepared without gaining greater clarity about what came next or whether an opportunity would become available. Formal organizational processes, including organizational roles, promotion processes, and performance evaluations, provided unclear guidance about how readiness translated into advancement.

Participants described advancement pathways as difficult to identify and, at times, inconsistently applied. Lindsey could not identify "a clear defined path" from her position into more senior leadership. She had observed senior roles filled through interim appointments and external searches while seeing few examples of internal progression. Morgan had advanced within the same division but found that movement did not follow the same process for everyone. Reflecting on what she had observed, she explained:

> There have been some males that have been promoted without proper interview protocol, where I've had to interview for everyone, every single role that I've had to move up within this office and this institution. So that is something that I struggle with too because

> I just don't feel like there's equity there, and I know that is a point of contention with a lot of the females in the office as well.

For Morgan, the uncertainty was not simply about what position came next, but whose readiness was presumed and whose required repeated demonstration. She described having to interview for every advancement while observing men receive promotions without the same requirements. Her account suggested that formal procedures did not operate equally for everyone: following the established pathway required her to repeatedly establish her legitimacy while others were afforded a less scrutinized route to authority.

Differences between faculty and staff career structures made this ambiguity particularly visible, although neither pathway successfully provided a clear route into academic administration. Sydney described faculty progression as more explicitly structured than staff advancement, but her account also demonstrated that creating a formal staff framework did not necessarily resolve the problem:

> On the faculty side, there's much more, you know, I think faculty are kind of their own bird with there's very, very, like, role-specific, like tenure process and all that. Theirs is very mapped out, whereas on the staff side, there's a lot more ambiguity depending on the types of roles. I know we more recently have an academic advising kind of ladder framework that brought a little bit more to that advancement conversation, but it's struggled in campus-wide adoption just because our budget's not. It's not all centrally managed. And so, when promotions came up, it was like, well, now I think I'm an advisor two, well, that college doesn't have the money to promote them, and so you will remain an advisor one, right? And so I think we kind of, it wasn't a bad exercise, but I think it shed light on just kind of different problems.

Sydney's account illustrates two related limitations. Staff experienced greater ambiguity about how advancement occurred, but even a formalized career ladder could identify someone as eligible for advancement without producing the resources necessary to provide it. Structure made the pathway more visible without necessarily making advancement possible.

Faculty participants encountered a different version of the same problem. Leah described having a roadmap for advancement through faculty rank but no comparable roadmap for moving into academic administration. The structure explained how to progress as faculty without necessarily explaining how a faculty member became an academic leader. Madison encountered the inverse problem as a staff professional in a faculty-led institution. Senior leaders affirmed her leadership potential, but the apparent route into positions such as associate dean seemed to require progression through faculty rank. Beginning that pathway after accumulating substantial staff experience offered no obvious way of recognizing what she had already learned. Across these accounts, participants could understand how advancement worked within a particular employment category while remaining uncertain about how to move from that category into formal leadership.

Participants consequently distinguished between becoming ready and having an opportunity to advance. They intentionally pursued education, additional responsibilities, and new experiences to strengthen their preparation for more senior roles, but filling perceived gaps did not necessarily produce advancement. Opportunity remained dependent upon institutional conditions such as vacancy, restructuring, leadership turnover, available resources, and how the organization chose to distribute responsibility.

Kasey connected her own advancement to the departure of the person who previously occupied a more senior position. Her preparation positioned her to respond when the opportunity

appeared, but it did not create the opening. Leah similarly continued developing professionally for years before a leadership change created greater opportunity for institutional influence. Readiness could therefore precede opportunity by years, leaving participants prepared for positions that did not yet exist or were not yet available to them.

Even performing higher-level work did not ensure that an institution would recognize someone as eligible for the corresponding position. Taylor spent six months performing director-level responsibilities without being considered for the permanent role. Morgan likewise described assuming substantially greater responsibility when a position above her became vacant:

> She left after a year, and now I was faced with being responsible, fully responsible for the [multiple academic programs] programs and working with and trying to appease multiple faculty and staff and chairs with very limited support. So, I did that for about a year solo before I had to essentially interview for my promotion. It wasn't just given to me because I was in the role. I had to go through the same protocols everybody else did.

Morgan had already been performing the work yet occupying that responsibility did not itself establish eligibility for the title. She still had to demonstrate readiness through the formal selection process. Taylor reached a similar conclusion after her experience, eventually adopting the higher education mantra that "in order to move up, you have to move out." Together, their accounts demonstrate that institutions could rely on participants' increased capacity without necessarily converting that capacity into formal advancement.

Performance evaluations provided little additional guidance about how strong performance might translate into future opportunity. Sydney described a process that was much

more useful for documenting problems than for identifying or developing employees who were ready for greater responsibility:

> It's done because I think there's this old, like, because it's this assumption that we need to do them. I think that the current process is, like, useless. It is not useful. I mean, unless someone has blaringly bad marks, which I think then goes to the other side, right? Which then is written more of if there's a performance, something being written up or something. Whenever a performance review is referenced, it's only ever in, like, for me in those experiences, is looking at those. But we've never looked at them for the good. Yeah. I think there's opportunity to connect them in a meaningful way.

Sydney did not reject evaluation as inherently meaningless. Rather, she identified a disconnect between evaluation and development. Reviews could document inadequate performance, but they were not consistently used to recognize strong performance, discuss readiness, or connect employees with future opportunities.

Leah experienced the same disconnect from the perspective of someone receiving positive institutional feedback. "My evals are good, I get awards," she explained, yet those indicators did not automatically alter her rank, compensation, or access to greater responsibility. Positive evaluation could confirm that participants were performing well in the positions they already occupied without clarifying what that performance made possible.

Some participants who supervised others deliberately tried to provide the developmental guidance they had found missing. Taylor emphasized clear expectations and ongoing conversations about performance, while Haley argued that supervisors should recognize what employees do well and "be the first to tell them if they are ready for the next step." Their approaches suggest that participants did not necessarily want evaluation to guarantee promotion.

They wanted stronger connections between current performance, future development, and conversations about what might come next.

When those connections were not available through formal processes or supervisors, participants assembled the information themselves. They studied position descriptions, institutional websites, professional biographies, and the career trajectories of people occupying roles they might someday want. Whitney captured the frustration of having to reconstruct a leadership pathway this way: “We shouldn’t have to Google people to figure it out.” Her call for “direct paths to leadership” reflected a desire not for guaranteed advancement, but for greater visibility into what opportunities existed and how someone might intentionally prepare for them.

Across participants’ accounts, the challenge was therefore not simply that promotion was difficult or uncertain. Formal structures did not consistently connect performance, development, readiness, and opportunity in ways participants could see and use. Participants could receive evidence that they were performing well, intentionally develop additional expertise, perform higher-level responsibilities, and even be told they were ready for more without knowing whether those efforts could translate into advancement. Professional development was something participants could actively pursue. Organizational advancement depended upon whether institutions created, recognized, resourced, and communicated a pathway through which that preparation could matter.

Women and Relational Infrastructure

Where formal organizational structures offered limited guidance, participants often relied on relationships to help them navigate their careers. Women appeared throughout participants’ accounts as especially important sources of support. Female supervisors, mentors, faculty members, colleagues, and professional peers helped participants recognize possibilities, interpret

expectations, develop confidence, and gain entry into spaces they might not otherwise have accessed. These relationships did not replace formal organizational structures, but they frequently provided guidance and opportunities where those structures were limited or absent.

For some participants, women provided visible models before they had fully developed their own leadership identities. Leah traced her interest in academia partly to the women faculty she encountered as a student:

> I think one of the biggest reasons for why I always had it in the back of my mind that I would probably do is honestly because I had certain faculty members in my school who I really admired and I really looked up to in terms of their leadership and their womanhood, I guess, right? Like these are female faculty that I'm referring to that were very, like, shall I say formative for me. . . . These women, sort of watching how they carried themselves, watching their confidence, watching how they communicated and just kind of moved about in the world was really fascinating to me.

Leah remembered noticing not only how these women taught but "the way that they sort of carried themselves." Their influence made academia imaginable before Leah had decided to pursue it herself. Years later, after entering higher education, another woman mentor expanded her understanding of what an academic career could look like:

> There was one mentor in particular who I feel like really showed me . . . how you could be a very serious, respected academic and scholar, while also maintaining, like, work-life balance and being just sort of, like, a fun, silly, fun person to be around as well. And something about her particularly, like, really showed me the next level of, like, what I wanted to do, of, like, you don't have to, you don't have to choose necessarily. Like, you

> can be a respected scholar and still be, like, the goofy, silly, fun person and protect that part of your life as well.

Leah described this mentor as helping her understand "how I could do this and how I could make this work in my life." Across the two stages of her career, women did more than provide encouragement. By observing how other women inhabited academic work, Leah gained models through which she could imagine both entering the profession and constructing a version of professional success that felt possible for her.

Relationships also provided developmental guidance participants did not consistently receive through formal supervision. Kasey described colleagues becoming an informal support system through which they collectively addressed some of those gaps:

> I mentioned that I feel like a support system and my colleagues are a support system, and we kind of, like, support each other. And we fill in in areas where my supervisors lack, like talking about career growth opportunities. I feel like we fill that in for each other. And so, since I've kind of grown into this role of supporting the slightly younger staff members, I'm like, oh, wait, this is what I'm doing. This is what a supervisor should be doing. This is what a director of an office should be doing.

The relationship worked in two directions. Kasey received career support from colleagues, but providing that support to others also changed how she understood her own leadership capacity. She explained that "seeing some of those gaps makes me feel like, oh, I can do that. I could do that." In the absence of consistent developmental guidance from formal supervisors, colleagues helped one another understand career growth while simultaneously developing their own leadership identities.

Taylor approached relational support more intentionally as her career developed. Rather than expecting a single mentor to provide everything she needed, she described encouraging professionals to create a personal "board of directors":

> I think early career professionals struggle with mentorship because, on one hand, it's kind of like, well, I don't know if I could ask this person to be my mentor. Like, why would they want to mentor me? But the other part of it is I feel like for a lot of early career professionals, they don't really know what they're looking for. So, it's hard to have a mentor. So, one of the things that I have done and I do pretty frequently is, like, when I go to these regional conferences, national conferences that I present, I will typically have some, even if it's just a line, about, like, mentoring and creating a board of directors. Because you don't necessarily, I think we have traditionally told people that you need to have a mentor.

Taylor's "board of directors" distributed career support across multiple relationships. Different people could help her think through professional challenges, prepare for interviews, interpret organizational situations, or advocate for her when opportunities emerged. Rather than locating professional development within one formal mentoring relationship, Taylor had learned to assemble a network capable of providing different forms of guidance across her career.

The absence of this relational infrastructure could be equally consequential. Morgan described having few women mentors or advocates she could look to professionally and relying instead on peers and informal communities:

> Another huge challenge is I would say I really don't have many or really any female mentors or advocates professionally that I feel like I look up to, or people that shape my approach to things. So, I really try to rely heavily on my peer network and my informal

> communities. So, I think because of that, it's hard to feel empowered, and it's hard to get over, like, those self-limitations.

Morgan's experience differed from Leah's early exposure to women she could imagine becoming. Without comparable women mentors or advocates in her professional environment, she constructed support through peer relationships and informal communities. Her account suggests that relational infrastructure was not equally available to participants. When it was absent, participants had to locate or construct alternative networks themselves.

Participants also described becoming increasingly intentional about providing others with the development they themselves had sometimes lacked. Leah connected her current investment in developing others to periods in her own career when she had wanted similar support:

> I find a lot of satisfaction in mentoring, and I find a lot of, like, reward and satisfaction and authenticity in helping people develop and helping them kind of become the best versions of themselves and sort of reaching their full potential or their full actualized, like, person that they could be. I find that really rewarding and satisfying. And maybe it's because I don't feel like, I feel like there were lots of chapters in my life where I really craved that in higher ed, but I didn't have it. I didn't get it.

Leah described this as a form of "paying it forward." Her earlier experiences with both receiving and lacking developmental support shaped how she approached leadership once she had greater ability to provide it. She was "very intentional and very thoughtful" about helping others develop rather than responding to their growth as a threat. Relational infrastructure therefore did not only flow downward from established mentors to emerging professionals. Participants who benefited from, sought out, or lacked this support could later become part of the infrastructure available to others.

Relationships among women, however, were not uniformly supportive or stable. Haley described a woman mentor who had been instrumental throughout her early career and had supported multiple professional opportunities. As Haley's own professional standing changed, so did the relationship. Looking back, she struggled to identify exactly when the shift occurred:

> I think she wanted me to be supported. I think she felt it was time for me to move on, and so she felt it was time for me to move on to the next opportunity. . . . I do, as I reflected back and I've had some conversations, think there was a moment where almost it became like, "Oh, does he want her in my role?" And so I think she started to feel threatened by the work I was doing there, and so our relationship took a really weird place. We still worked together really well, had a long-term relationship, and so there were good days and there were bad days, but it definitely felt different.

The change became particularly visible when Haley sought support for a professional development opportunity and needed her mentor's recommendation. After previously receiving support for other opportunities, Haley recalled wondering, "Why wouldn't she want to write me a letter of recommendation?" The relationship that had once facilitated development no longer provided access in the same way.

Haley's experience complicates any assumption that shared gender automatically produced solidarity or sponsorship. Women could model possibilities, create opportunities, advocate for one another, and provide developmental support, but those relationships still existed within organizational environments shaped by hierarchy, competition, positional authority, and limited opportunities. Relational infrastructure was consequential precisely because relationships could affect what information, experiences, and opportunities became available to participants, but access to those relationships was neither guaranteed nor permanent. Shared gender did not

place either woman outside these power relations. Haley's account suggested that support could become conditional when her development was perceived as a possible challenge to her mentor's position. The relationship therefore revealed how organizational arrangements could constrain solidarity among women when advancement became associated with potential displacement.

Across participants' accounts, women repeatedly appeared as people through whom important developmental resources traveled. They modeled possibilities, recognized potential, shared information, interpreted expectations, advocated for others, and created access to experiences and spaces. Kasey's description of colleagues "fill[ing] in" what supervisors did not provide captures the broader pattern. When organizational systems did not consistently provide career guidance, developmental feedback, or visible routes toward leadership, relationships frequently carried those functions instead. Participants relied on this relational infrastructure to navigate what formal infrastructure left unclear, and as some gained greater authority themselves, they became increasingly capable of providing that infrastructure for others.

Across these accounts, women's relationships carried developmental responsibilities that formal organizational systems did not reliably fulfill. Their support expanded other women's possibilities while also compensating for institutional deficiencies. This distinction matters because women could become responsible for sustaining one another's leadership pathways without gaining the organizational authority needed to change the conditions that made such support necessary.

Learning the Unwritten Rules

Whereas the preceding theme examines relationships as sources of developmental support and opportunity, this theme examines what participants learned about the operation of organizational power. Relationships sometimes enabled that learning, but the central finding

concerns participants' growing understanding of how access, knowledge, hierarchy, and influence interacted. As participants accumulated experience, they became more adept at reading how their organizations actually worked. They learned that formal policies, reporting structures, and stated expectations explained only part of how authority was exercised and decisions were made. Navigating leadership therefore required interpreting the unwritten rules that shaped whose knowledge reached decision-making spaces and whose contributions could influence what happened there.

Participants sought proximity to spaces where they could better understand how decisions were made. They attended meetings, served on committees, built relationships across organizational boundaries, and observed senior leaders. For Whitney, access to decision-making spaces depended substantially on a supervisor who was willing to bring her into them:

> She views me as an equal, and she is another person that has told me she sees me one day being in a provost office. So she's one of those other people that, like, see that future in me, and she brings my chair to the table a lot. Because I think you can sit there and voice things as much as you want, but if you don't have people that will listen to you, it's not going to do anything. And that's what I have learned throughout my many different offices: having someone that will go to bat for you. . . . And she'll bring me into meetings. And if there is, like, higher-up meetings she can't go to for whatever reason, she will let me step in for her. So I would say the ability to have that voice I have is because of her.

Whitney's account demonstrates that having expertise or an opinion did not necessarily provide the opportunity to influence a decision. Someone with greater organizational access could create the conditions through which her knowledge reached the spaces where it could matter. Access

also allowed Whitney to observe those spaces herself rather than relying on information after decisions had already begun to take shape.

The distinction became particularly visible during organizational changes. Whitney described senior leaders periodically coming to her office to ask questions about her work and then leaving, only to return later with a proposed change. She was able to influence what happened, but only through fragmented conversations occurring outside the larger decision-making space:

> So it was very, like, I was never lucky enough to be, like, pulled into the overall meetings where I could have just voiced things and let us talk about it in real time. It was, like, this weird, okay, we're gonna come in your office for two seconds, ask you a question, leave. . . . So I was like, they do listen to me, but it's not like they call me into the big meetings where they're talking about it, which is very odd.

Whitney was visible enough that leaders sought her knowledge, but visibility did not provide equivalent access to the conversation in which that knowledge was interpreted and decisions were made. Her frustration was not simply that leaders failed to seek her input. They did seek it. What remained unavailable was participation in the larger discussion surrounding how that input would be used.

With greater access, however, participants also gained a clearer understanding of the complexity of leadership. Decisions often required balancing competing priorities, and contributing to those decisions required participants to understand how to operate within existing hierarchies. Lindsey described deliberately moderating herself in relation to her supervisor:

> I sort of had to balance not always being the person in the room that knows everything because of my experience, and so not letting my supervisor be the supervisor, and so

> balancing, like, being like, "Yeah, that sounds really great. Hey, let's work together." . . . So I try to not always say what I think is right, in my opinion, because the experiences that I've had, I know that I can do my supervisor's job, like, no problem. But I also want to make sure that she doesn't feel like I am overpowering her and being the supervisor of her. . . . And sometimes I kind of, like, pull back a little bit, and I'm like, you know, we're gonna do it your way, and it's gonna be great, and I'm just gonna sit over here. And when it crashes and burns, I will be like, "Hey, what about this?"

Lindsey's account illustrates an unwritten dimension of hierarchy. Possessing relevant experience did not mean she believed she could use that expertise without considering how doing so might affect the authority of the person above her. She sometimes chose not to say what she believed was correct, not because she lacked confidence in her knowledge, but because maintaining the working relationship required her to consider how that knowledge would be received.

Participants increasingly described leadership as requiring judgment about when to speak, when to push, when to wait, and when preserving influence required a more strategic response. Organizational politics were not understood only as maneuvering for personal advancement. Political judgment also shaped participants' ability to advocate for students, protect employees, maintain relationships, and influence decisions. Whitney's understanding of this changed once she became responsible for decisions she had previously observed from a different position:

> I think the biggest change for me has been, like, the ability to understand. Because, like, my last supervisor I had, I was very hard on him. Like, I, in my mind more than to him, but I kept being like, "Well, I would make this decision differently." . . . And now as a

> leader, I have had people that my team probably are like, "What are they doing?" . . . And I think that realization to me that having those lived experiences are important, and leaders are learning to lead while they are doing it. And it's funny because I still work at the same institution, and I actually have had lunch with my old supervisor recently, and I told him, I was like, "I get it now. I really, I do."

Becoming a leader did not cause Whitney to agree with every decision she had previously questioned. Instead, greater proximity exposed her to considerations that had been less visible from outside the role. She described recognizing "all the different voices that leaders have in their head" and learning that there were places where she could push successfully and others where she was "not going to win." Even then, she emphasized, "that's not me saying, like, I'm not going to keep pushing." What changed was her understanding of timing and of the constraints surrounding a decision.

Greater organizational access also exposed participants to tensions between what they knew, what could be said, and how information was represented within decision-making spaces. Earlier in her career, Lindsey associated leadership position and experience with a level of knowledge she later came to question:

> Oh, just because you, just because you have a fancy title, just because you've been at an institution forever, doesn't mean you know everything or are a good person. And that's really hard to swallow sometimes because I always try to see the best in people and, you know, try to find that nugget of leadership in them.

Although Lindsey's reflection included judgments about the quality of individual leaders, it also represented a broader shift in how she interpreted positional authority. Titles and longevity did not guarantee complete knowledge. Participants who gained greater proximity to leadership

similarly encountered decisions made through partial information, competing interpretations, and expertise distributed across different parts of the institution.

This realization complicated what it meant to gain access to leadership spaces. Participants had initially sought proximity partly because they expected greater access to provide information they did not yet possess. With experience, they began to recognize that missing information was not always being intentionally withheld. Sometimes the people making decisions were also working with incomplete knowledge. Understanding an organization therefore required knowing not only where formal authority resided, but where relevant knowledge existed and whether it reached the people making decisions.

Sydney described this responsibility from the perspective of someone increasingly aware of the tables she already occupied and those she might not yet know existed. For her, access created an obligation to remain informed, particularly when she was participating in decisions affecting people who were not themselves in the room. Her account shifted the significance of being "at the table" from personal visibility toward responsibility for what knowledge entered the conversation.

Across participants' accounts, learning the unwritten rules meant becoming increasingly attentive to the relationship among access, knowledge, hierarchy, and influence. Participants learned how to get closer to decision-making spaces and how to operate once they entered them. They learned that expertise could require strategic communication, that pushing effectively depended partly on timing and relationships, and that positional authority did not ensure complete understanding. Greater proximity made organizational processes more visible, but it also revealed their limitations. Participants became better able to understand how decisions were

made while simultaneously recognizing that no individual leader or decision-making space necessarily held the entire picture.

Negotiating Worth, Work, and Leadership

Participants' accounts revealed a tension between the leadership they found meaningful and what their institutions recognized and rewarded. They often understood leadership through the impact they had on students, employees, colleagues, and institutional practices rather than through title alone. Yet the work participants associated with effective leadership was not always easily visible through conventional measures of performance, nor did meaningful contribution consistently result in greater compensation, authority, or advancement.

For some participants, formal leadership became desirable because it could extend the reach of work they already valued. Whitney described entering leadership because she wanted to become an "escalated voice for students." Earlier in her career, she could identify student concerns and bring them forward, but her position limited what she could do to resolve them. Leadership offered the possibility of acting on concerns rather than simply communicating them. Sydney similarly described discovering the possibility of applying effective practices beyond individual interactions and creating a "greater impact at scale." Advancement mattered in these accounts because authority could increase participants' capacity to act, not simply because a more senior title represented success.

Participants nevertheless questioned whether positional authority was the only source of meaningful influence. Leah recalled seeking advice during a period when she wanted to contribute more broadly but did not see a clear path toward doing so within her institution. A mentor offered a distinction that changed how she understood what she was pursuing:

> I remember one very wise, very just very respectable person, nationally, actually internationally, in my sort of area of expertise, say, "You have to ask yourself in your career: do you want to have authority, or do you want to be the authority?" And that really helped me, because, I mean, honestly, the question that I asked her at the time was, "Can I do these things on this broader scale in terms of scholarship and kind of being a thought leader in a certain area if I don't necessarily have that voice, or I don't have, like, a formal title in my institution?" . . . And I always remember her saying that, of, like, "Do you want it to just be a title, or do you want to actually be the authority in something?" And at that moment, I was like, that really helped me of, like, no, I don't want to just have authority. Like, I want to be authority. I want to be known for something that I actually know and can do, not just have a title, you know?

Leah began constructing a professional identity through expertise rather than waiting for positional advancement to provide evidence of her leadership. She continued developing her scholarship and professional involvement and considered the possibility that she might become a recognized authority without ever obtaining a formal institutional leadership title. When a leadership opportunity later became available, she described having to do some "unthinking" because she had already constructed another way of understanding her professional influence. Her experience complicated the assumption that professional worth could be measured solely through movement into increasingly senior positions.

At the same time, participants did not suggest that titles and institutional recognition were meaningless. Formal authority changed what they could influence, compensation communicated how institutions valued work, and titles affected access and opportunity. The tension was that

institutional markers of success did not necessarily capture the labor participants believed made leadership effective.

Leah described this disconnect as particularly visible in the work required to produce outcomes others eventually recognized:

> I think in order for things to be pretty high quality in higher ed, there is a lot of, like, invisible work, or just maybe not even invisible, but, like, a lot of hard, hard work. Being willing and able and even interested in, like, putting in hours and hours of invisible work that you know that no one's actually going to see. But what they see is, like, the fruit of it, right? . . . I think for me what's difficult is that there's, like, this assumption that all of that came very easily, or all of it just was sort of, like, given. And there's no way to sort of inform or show or illuminate all of the, like, blood, sweat, and tears that was behind it. All people see is, like, the finished product or the final product.

The distinction between the work and its "fruit" was significant. Outcomes could become visible through a successful initiative, advancement, recognition, or a change in role while the cumulative labor that produced them remained difficult to observe. Leah later described that work as "so cumulative" and "so invisible over years and years." What appeared externally as a finished accomplishment could obscure the sustained effort required to reach it.

Haley identified supervision as another form of consequential work that organizations could underestimate. For her, effective supervision required considerably more than assigning responsibilities or evaluating whether employees completed them:

> People do underestimate how much it takes to do good supervision. . . . When you have, like, entry-level folks or folks that have not moved into senior leadership, they need more guidance. They need mentorship. They need folks to advocate for them, help them

> understand things, and that just takes time. And so you spend a lot more time doing supervision.

The time Haley described was not incidental to leadership. Mentoring employees, advocating for them, helping them interpret organizational expectations, and creating opportunities for development were part of what she considered responsible supervision. Yet much like Leah's invisible work, the investment required to develop others was not necessarily reflected in the outcomes an institution could most readily observe.

The gap between contribution and institutional recognition became more consequential when participants believed they were performing increasingly responsible work without corresponding changes in title, compensation, or authority. Haley described reaching a point at one institution when she no longer believed her contributions would be recognized in the way she sought. She had raised concerns about both her title and compensation while continuing to perform work she believed warranted reconsideration. When she ultimately decided to leave, she explained:

> It became very clear that "I was never going to be valued there and truly allowed to do the work." . . . I'm going to go to a place that values me. I've asked you multiple times to reconsider my position title, my pay. I feel like I've been doing really good work, and you won't consider those things.

Haley's decision demonstrates why distinguishing professional worth from institutional recognition did not make recognition irrelevant. She believed in the quality of her work, but that confidence did not require her to remain indefinitely in an environment that she believed would neither recognize that contribution nor provide the authority necessary to do the work as she

thought it should be done. Leaving became one way of acting on her own assessment of what her work was worth.

Participants also reconsidered what forms of advancement were worth pursuing. Earlier in her career, Haley recalled believing that she was "supposed to aspire to be the VP." Greater exposure to senior leadership caused her to question whether reaching that position would actually preserve the work she valued:

> I just felt like I kept pushing myself through degrees and doing it because that's what I was supposed to do. "I was supposed to aspire to be the VP." But as I got into the inner workings of student affairs and higher education, I really started to notice how the people who I thought I wanted their jobs weren't doing the things that I enjoyed most. They weren't engaging with students. They weren't getting that meaningful time. And so I really started to question, like, "Why do I want to be a VP?" . . . "Am I just doing it to get a job title, or am I doing it because I want to learn?"

Haley did not abandon ambition. Instead, she began separating advancement from an assumed destination. She described finding value in positions that allowed her to retain meaningful connection to students while also influencing institutional policy. The question was no longer simply how far she could advance, but whether advancement would allow her to continue doing the work that made leadership meaningful to her.

Participants therefore did not simply conclude that recognition did not matter. They became more discerning about what recognition represented and whether it corresponded with the work they valued. They could believe deeply in the significance of work an institution failed to reward, pursue authority because it expanded their ability to act, build expertise outside formal advancement, or leave when the distance between contribution and recognition became too great.

Negotiating worth meant holding both realities at once: institutional recognition had material consequences, but it did not possess exclusive authority to determine whether their work, leadership, or professional contributions had value.

Becoming the Leader You Can Live With

As participants accumulated experience, they became increasingly deliberate about how they wanted to lead. Their experiences helped clarify both the kind of leader they wanted to become and the practices they did not want to repeat. Leadership development therefore became as much about alignment with their values as it was about gaining experience or authority. Participants were also deciding how they wanted other people to experience their leadership and which values they wanted their authority to express.

Positive leadership experiences provided models participants wanted to carry forward. Taylor contrasted experiences in which supervisors restricted her authority with leadership that allowed her greater autonomy and trust. Those differences influenced how she thought about her own responsibility to employees. She described wanting to create an environment in which people could "grow and learn," while still providing clear expectations and accountability. Her experiences taught her that developing employees did not require controlling how they performed every aspect of their work. Trust itself could be a leadership practice.

Harmful experiences were equally informative. Taylor connected her attention to employee well-being and boundaries to earlier experiences in which work had consumed more of her time and energy than she believed it should have. Rather than treating those expectations as an inevitable part of professional success, she became more deliberate about not reproducing them for the people she led. Her own exhaustion became information about the kind of environment she did not want to create for someone else.

Haley similarly described trying to remember what it had felt like to occupy positions with less authority. As a leader, she became particularly attentive to the ways employees could underestimate their own readiness or fear that expressing interest in advancement would be interpreted as disloyalty. She described intentionally using her position to counter those dynamics:

> I'm also a big proponent. If somebody is ready for that next step, I'm gonna be the first one to tell them. Not because I want them to leave. I've invested a lot of time in you, and I want you to be good. But if you're ready for the next step: "I'm not gonna hold you back." And sometimes we create this culture of fear that if you say, "Oh, I'm looking for the next step," then people start to think, "Oh, they're not committed here anymore." You can be committed there too. And so I think creating that culture, like: "If we can't create the opportunity for you, we're gonna give you all the skills and help you there."

Haley's approach was informed by her own experience of navigating unclear pathways and uneven developmental support. Having learned how consequential it could be for someone else to recognize readiness, she treated recognizing and naming that readiness as part of her responsibility as a leader. She later reflected that it was important to "never forget your experiences coming up." Leadership experience had not simply taught her how to operate from a more senior position. It had given her experiences she could use to decide how she would exercise authority once she had it.

That responsibility also extended to how organizational pressures reached the people participants supervised. Haley described becoming conscious of the power senior leaders possessed and the likelihood that employees would not always speak to them with complete openness. During periods of organizational instability, she attempted to absorb some of the

pressures occurring above her team rather than simply passing them downward. Her approach reflected a belief that leadership included responsibility for how employees experienced the organization, not merely responsibility for implementing its decisions.

Participants' increasing intentionality did not mean they abandoned adaptation. They recognized that leadership required attention to organizational culture and the consequences of how that culture was communicated. Instead, experience helped participants distinguish between adaptations they considered strategic and compromises that moved them too far from their own judgment or values. Kasey, for example, described working within an environment where employees could be expected to "drink the Kool-Aid." She could outwardly navigate what the environment required without necessarily adopting those expectations as her own. Adaptation could preserve her ability to function within the organization without requiring complete identification with its culture.

For Leah, the distinction became particularly visible when she considered whether opportunities aligned with the person she understood herself to be. She described authenticity as central to how she made career decisions:

> I think for me it's all about being authentic. And I really, I'm usually pretty reflective in my thinking and in decisions that I make in life, and they have to, I know this sounds really kind of woo-woo, but I really, they have to feel right. Like they have to feel authentic. They have to feel real to me. And that's difficult sometimes.

Leah described declining an opportunity during a period when she was frustrated with her existing circumstances. On paper, leaving could have provided the kind of advancement she had been seeking. Yet she recalled having "a gut feeling" that the opportunity was not right and questioning herself afterward: "What the hell did I do? Why did I say no to that? This is a

ridiculous decision." She ultimately remained confident that declining it had been the right choice. Advancement alone was no longer sufficient justification for a career decision. The opportunity also had to align with what she wanted her life and leadership to become.

Experience also altered how participants understood their responsibility to those coming behind them. Lindsey described herself as "a lot stronger" than she had been earlier in her career, but that strength was accompanied by greater awareness of how poorly authority could be exercised. Reflecting on leaders she had encountered, she observed that "just because you have a fancy title" or have been at an institution for a long time does not mean "you know everything" or know how to lead people well. Her experiences gave her models to emulate, but they also gave her examples she did not want to repeat.

Participants therefore did not describe becoming intentional leaders by arriving at a fixed leadership style. Their approaches remained responsive to people, circumstances, and organizational environments. What changed was their ability to recognize the difference between adaptation and surrendering their own judgment. They had accumulated enough experience to know what harmful leadership felt like from below, what supportive leadership could make possible, and how organizational expectations could pull leaders away from the practices they claimed to value.

Across these narratives, participants became increasingly intentional about the relationship between authority, values, and responsibility. They learned from leaders they admired and those whose practices they rejected. They adapted when necessary without necessarily accepting organizational expectations as their own. They protected people, created opportunities, and reconsidered environments that demanded compromises they were no longer willing to make. Earlier questions often centered on whether they could become leaders, whether

others would recognize their readiness, and whether they could gain access to greater authority. With experience, another question became increasingly important: what kind of leader would they be once they had that authority? Becoming the leaders they could live with meant using what they had learned to make increasingly deliberate choices about how others would experience their leadership.

From Themes to a Collective Narrative

Taken together, the six themes describe interconnected participant experiences rather than a sequential model of leadership development. Participants found careers without established maps, encountered advancement structures that did not consistently connect readiness to opportunity, relied upon women and other relationships to supply developmental knowledge and access, learned organizational rules that were not always formally articulated, negotiated differences between meaningful work and institutional recognition, and became increasingly intentional about how they exercised leadership. These experiences became increasingly interconnected as participants accumulated experience and developed a broader understanding of the organizations in which they worked.

Continued analysis, however, revealed another pattern across these themes. What changed over participants' careers was not simply their position within an organization, but their vantage point from which they understood it. Earlier experiences frequently centered on discovering possibilities and attempting to understand what was required of them. With greater experience, participants learned to interpret relationships, opportunity, and organizational expectations more strategically. Eventually, some participants described experiences that reflected a different orientation altogether: rather than primarily asking how they could navigate

the organization, they began questioning the organizational conditions that made such navigation necessary.

These differences informed three broader interpretive movements: discovering the ecosystem, learning to navigate the ecosystem, and seeing the ecosystem. These movements do not represent universal stages through which all women progress, nor do they replace the six themes identified through thematic analysis. Rather, I used these movements to organize Danielle's composite narrative and illustrate how participants' understanding of organizational systems appeared to change across their careers. They brought the six themes together within the story without establishing additional themes or a sequence experienced by every participant. A theme such as advancement without a pathway could therefore appear across multiple movements; what changed was how participants interpreted and responded to that condition.

The use of a composite narrative also allowed more revealing experiences to be represented without connecting extended accounts to individual participants. Because some experiences contained combinations of roles, relationships, institutional circumstances, or career events that could increase the likelihood of identification, the thematic findings relied primarily on shorter excerpts to demonstrate patterns across participants. Danielle provides space to preserve the complexity of those experiences while intentionally obscuring which details originated with any one participant.

Danielle: A Collective Narrative

The collective narrative that follows represents this interpretive progression through Danielle, a composite woman constructed from participants' collective experiences. Danielle does not represent any single participant or reproduce any participant's career trajectory. Her

story instead draws the thematic findings together to illustrate how participants' understanding of the organizational ecosystem changed as their careers developed.

Discovering the Ecosystem

Danielle did not grow up dreaming about working at a university. She entered college with a major, a career plan, and an idea of the life that might follow it. Changing that plan was harder than she expected because it required releasing a version of herself before she had another one ready to take its place. Each change became a little less frightening as Danielle learned that she did not always have to know where a decision would lead before making it. Sometimes the only way to know whether something fit was to try it.

Somewhere along the way, higher education began to look like a place where Danielle's interests and strengths could come together. She liked people and solving problems, wanted to continue learning, and needed her work to feel like it mattered. A master's degree gave her language for those interests and made higher education appear to be an intentional destination rather than another uncertain possibility. For the first time, she could imagine work that would challenge her while also feeling deeply meaningful.

Unfortunately, finishing the degree did not immediately produce the career for which she believed she had prepared. Entry into higher education seemingly required some combination of waiting, working elsewhere, or reconsidering the kind of institution she imagined herself working at. In fact, maybe getting there was going to require being willing to start somewhere she had not expected. Eventually, someone suggested an opportunity she had not considered, and someone else recognized abilities she was not yet prepared to name. By then, Danielle had enough experience with the unknown to jump at a possibility without knowing precisely where it

would lead. Maybe that was what all the work had been for. It could not guarantee when the right opportunity would appear, but it could help her recognize one when it did.

Once inside higher education, the work made sense to her. Students arrived with questions about courses, programs, policies, and possibilities, but Danielle quickly learned that the question being asked was rarely the only one that needed to be answered. Sometimes money was running out, sometimes a student feared disappointing someone, and sometimes they had chosen the wrong path but could not imagine admitting it. Danielle understood that last one especially well. She knew what it felt like to let go of the future she had talked about before she had another one ready to take its place. She became skilled at listening to the question underneath the question and figuring out what might help someone move forward.

The work gave Danielle something she had been looking for without knowing what she was looking for. She was good at it and, most importantly, what she did mattered to people. She could see herself building a life around work like this. Higher education had not been her original plan, but it increasingly felt like a place where she could become more fully herself.

The first several years carried the satisfying momentum of becoming good at something that had once been unfamiliar. Problems that once required help became hers to solve, and she gradually became someone others trusted to figure things out. There was still plenty she did not know, but each new challenge seemed to confirm that she was capable of learning it. Learning felt like progress, and progress felt like evidence that she had made the right decision.

Eventually, becoming good at the work created another question. Danielle could see how much she had learned, which made her wonder where that learning might lead. At a performance review filled with familiar responses, she finally asked, “How do I grow from here?” Her supervisor encouraged her to become more involved in the institution, and Danielle took the

advice seriously. She said yes when opportunities came and gradually found herself being trusted with work beyond the boundaries of her role. It felt like something was changing. More people knew who she was, and she was being invited into work she would not have been part of a few years earlier. For a while, Danielle assumed this was what growth looked like.

The culture around her reinforced that interpretation. Calendars were packed, lunches occurred at desks, and messages continued long after the workday supposedly ended. People hurried between meetings while answering emails on their phones and joked about how impossible it was to find 30 minutes on a shared calendar. Danielle absorbed a lesson no one needed to state directly: successful people were busy because they were needed, and being needed meant their work mattered. At this point in her career, challenge expanded easily because balance was treated as something that could be accommodated later.

Danielle did not experience that tradeoff as a sacrifice at first. Staying late demonstrated commitment, another project offered experience, and evening email made her feel responsive rather than overextended. The work was meaningful and she was still energized by discovering what she could do. Ambition did not yet feel separate from availability because both were rewarded with additional responsibility.

For quite some time, the approach appeared to work. Danielle's responsibilities continued to grow, and she became someone others trusted when the work mattered. Even as budgets tightened and "doing more with less" became routine, she understood that growing trust as evidence that she was becoming ready for more. When the next opportunity appeared, she assumed the organization would recognize what she had already been preparing herself to do.

Years passed through another strong evaluation, another project, and another responsibility. Her résumé grew and her institutional knowledge deepened. Yet the distance

between additional responsibility and additional opportunity was not closing as quickly as she expected. So, she pushed harder. Effort, after all, remained the part she knew how to control. Predictably, people came to depend on her even more, but greater responsibility brought no clearer explanation of what came next. Danielle began to wonder whether she had become exceptionally good at moving quickly without being able to identify where she was going.

Then someone she worked with moved into a more senior position. Danielle was genuinely happy for her colleague and had no reason to question that person's ability to succeed. What unsettled her was how little she understood about how the opportunity had emerged. She did not remember seeing a position posted, hearing that a search was underway, or learning what someone needed to demonstrate to be considered ready. One day they were colleagues. The next, Danielle was standing amid all the additional work her effort had earned her while her colleague stepped into a different level of authority.

When Danielle asked how the promotion had occurred, no one offered a clear explanation. There were possible explanations, of course, but nothing that helped her understand how someone became eligible for an opportunity like this or how she might position herself for one. Danielle did not resent the promotion. She wanted to understand why a route had been available for someone else when she had been unable to locate it for herself.

Danielle had spent years doing what had been asked of her and looking for ways to become ready for whatever came next. If she lacked a skill, she could develop it, and if she needed a particular experience, she would pursue it. What she needed was something concrete enough to work toward. Instead, people kept telling her she was doing well and that her opportunity would come. No one could tell her what she was supposed to do to get there.

For the first time, Danielle was no longer satisfied with that answer. She began noticing the way people talked about certain colleagues. Someone was “being developed.” Someone else was a person the institution could not afford to lose. Somehow, leaders had begun imagining futures for them before those futures existed. Danielle wondered when those conversations happened and how someone became the kind of person people talked about that way.

She did not imagine a secret committee methodically determining everyone’s future. It seemed much less organized than that, which somehow made it harder to understand. Her evaluation told her how well she was doing the job she already had, but somewhere beyond that conversation, people seemed to be forming ideas about what someone might do next. Danielle wanted to know how she could become someone they imagined in those conversations.

A pattern that had been present throughout Danielle’s career was becoming harder to ignore. She had prepared for each next step by becoming better at the work in front of her, trusting that growth would eventually lead somewhere. When it did not, she responded the way she always had: she worked harder. But now she wondered if all that effort was doing something else. What if, instead of preparing herself to move forward, she was simply making herself irreplaceable where she already was?

Perhaps someone had to imagine Danielle in the next position before that position became possible. That was harder to know what to do with. She knew how to work harder and how to become better at something once she knew what was expected of her. She did not know how to enter a conversation she could not find or get into a room she did not know existed.

Until now, Danielle had assumed that uncertainty meant there was something she had not learned yet. If she kept asking questions and paying attention, eventually she would figure it out. But she was beginning to wonder whether there were some things she could not learn simply by

becoming better at her job. “What do I still need to prove?” was becoming a different question: “How are these decisions made, and how do I get close enough to understand them?”

Navigating the Ecosystem

Somewhere along the way, Danielle had politely crossed the threshold of 30, and she barely noticed. Life had filled in around a career she was still not entirely certain she had chosen on purpose. She was no longer the 22 year old who had stumbled into higher education wondering whether she belonged. By now, she had been around long enough to know that how institutions were supposed to work and how they worked could be very different things.

Danielle was also becoming more comfortable in her own skin, even when the confidence she projected appeared before she fully felt it. Other people increasingly treated her as though she knew what she was doing, which was both satisfying and a little strange, especially when she remained so aware of everything she had not figured out. She could offer thoughtful guidance to someone earlier in their career and mean every word of it, then find herself wondering what exactly she was doing with her own. Experience was not the arrival of certainty she had once imagined it would be. Maybe it was learning to trust herself even when the answers never fully came.

Eventually, Danielle would start to feel that familiar itch. Something no longer fit quite the way it once had, and once she noticed it, she found it difficult to ignore. The feeling carried a familiar instruction: *Move. Figure out what comes next.* Danielle had once assumed that greater experience would replace instinct with a more sophisticated way of making decisions. Instead, experience seemed to give her better language for understanding what her instincts had already detected.

By now, Danielle could offer career advice almost without thinking. She could help a colleague make sense of why something no longer fit and reassure her that wanting something different was reason enough to consider moving on. The words came easily when they belonged to someone else. Danielle had a harder time believing them when they applied to her. For herself, the realization usually arrived first as a feeling: *This does not fit anymore. Move. Figure out what comes next.* Only afterward could she find the language to explain why. The difference was that her decisions now affected more than the next line on her résumé.

Danielle's newest role had felt like a stretch when she accepted it, and she liked that. The work asked more of her and brought her closer to decisions she had once watched from a distance. People asked what she thought, and sometimes they even listened. Danielle could feel herself growing again, but this time growth did not simply mean becoming better at the job she already had. She was beginning to imagine what she might be capable of beyond it.

Danielle had also learned that there were politics beneath every title. Wanting the work was one thing; being seen wanting it too much could be another. So she learned to soften the edges of her ambition, just enough to move through those spaces without giving up what she wanted. She could still look herself in the mirror and recognize the choices she was making as her own. The ambition had not faded. She had simply learned to carry it differently.

Danielle could feel the nature of her work changing. She was no longer simply carrying out someone else's plans; increasingly, people trusted her to think about what should happen and how to make it work. She had learned that leadership did not always require formal authority because she was already doing it without the title. Yet when she looked toward the positions that might come next, the conversation returned to what she had not done. Somehow, she could be

trusted to lead beyond her role and still be told she needed experiences her role had never given her the opportunity to gain.

Supervision was one of those gaps. Danielle's office included several employees, but only a few positions carried formal supervisory authority, and hers was not one of them. When she examined leadership postings, supervisory experience appeared repeatedly among the qualifications. She needed to supervise people to become eligible for a position that would allow her to supervise people. The irony was not lost on her.

She encountered the same contradiction in institutional decision-making. Danielle needed exposure to senior-level conversations to demonstrate that she could contribute to them, yet access to those conversations was often reserved for people who already held senior positions. Her broad organizational perspective was valuable precisely because she had learned beyond the boundaries of her role, but the spaces in which that perspective might matter remained controlled by title. Access was treated as evidence of readiness even when access itself was unevenly distributed. How was she expected to demonstrate a capacity she had not been permitted to practice?

If experience was the price of admission, Danielle would find a way to accumulate it. That was what she had always done. But for the first time, she found herself wondering who set the price, who decided when someone had paid enough, and why some people seemed to get through the door without paying it in quite the same way.

Hustle was familiar territory. Danielle knew how to become the person who said yes when something difficult needed to be done, especially when figuring it out might take her somewhere she had not been before. And it worked. Each time she proved she could carry more, people trusted her with more. Danielle gained the experience she had been looking for, but

somewhere along the way, the institution learned something too: if there was more to carry, Danielle probably would.

The approach worked until life required something different from her. Someone Danielle loved needed more of her than she could give from whatever remained after work had taken its share. The particulars mattered deeply, but the problem itself was simple. Someone she loved needed something Danielle had previously spent freely on her career: time. And there were no more hours to manufacture.

Danielle did not stop; she simmered. The distinction mattered because simmering did not mean her ambition disappeared. She still wanted responsibility, imagined what might come next, and continued learning and contributing. She simply could no longer keep every part of her life at a rolling boil. Challenge remained important, but it could no longer consume everything balance was asking her to protect.

She began drawing boundaries around time she had once casually surrendered to work. Danielle was still good at her job, but she was becoming less willing to treat constant availability as evidence that she cared about it. She began acknowledging that "you work to work," even when the work was meaningful and connected to a larger purpose. Work could matter deeply without being entitled to every hour she had left. That distinction took some getting used to.

Danielle began recognizing an invisible currency in being the person who could stay late, accept another project, rearrange a personal obligation, travel when asked, or respond long after the workday ended. She had spent years accumulating that currency without realizing how much of herself she was exchanging for it. Now she wondered what would happen when she stopped paying. Would 40 excellent hours look insufficient after years of giving more? Did boundaries look like fading ambition?

More painfully, Danielle wondered whether she had believed it too. She had finally learned to name her ambition without apologizing for it just as another part of her life required her to remain still. For so long, growth had meant movement, and Danielle knew how to move. She was less certain what it meant to stay where she was without believing she had stopped becoming… something. Maybe this season required a different kind of ambition? Danielle had to learn that stillness was not the same as retreat.

She stayed warm. Danielle kept doing work that mattered and learning when she could, even as opportunities passed that she might once have chased. Sometimes that was harder than she expected. She could watch someone else move and feel the old itch without being willing to follow it. The ambition was still there; it simply could not have all of her right now. And from this slower place, Danielle began noticing things she had missed when she was moving so quickly.

She began noticing that people were not always asked to become ready in the same ways. Some seemed to be invited closer before they had proven they belonged there, while others were expected to somehow acquire experiences they had never been given the opportunity to practice. Danielle had encountered these contradictions before, but she had usually been too busy figuring out her own next move to spend much time considering them. Simmering gave her time to notice.

What she saw made it harder to explain every gap as evidence of something she still needed to become. Danielle was not ready to stop asking what she could learn or where she could grow, but she was beginning to consider that not every obstacle was hers to overcome. Some things could not be solved by becoming more prepared. Some required access she could not give herself.

Time passed, and things Danielle had once experienced as disconnected began to look more like patterns. Simmering had given her time to watch. She noticed where information traveled, who seemed to know something before everyone else, and how often a decision was already taking shape before it reached the meeting where it was supposedly being discussed. She began to understand the weary “I get it now” she sometimes heard from more experienced leaders. Knowing how to make a good argument was not always enough. Timing mattered. Relationships mattered. Sometimes understanding why something would not move mattered almost as much as knowing that it should.

That did not mean Danielle stopped pushing. She was learning to be more deliberate about where she spent that effort. There were times when pushing could create movement and others when she was unlikely to win, but “not that it stops you from pushing.” The difference was that Danielle no longer assumed every closed door required her to push harder. Sometimes she needed to understand why it was closed, who could open it, and whether getting through it was worth what it would require of her.

Eventually, Danielle understood where the room was. For years, she had tried to become visible within a space she could not locate. Now she knew who sat at the table, how people found their way there, and what she might contribute if she were given the chance. But knowing where the room was did not mean she had been invited inside.

Danielle had once assumed that if she worked hard enough and became visible enough, eventually the door would open. Now she knew it was not that simple. Some people were brought inside because someone already in the room imagined they belonged there. Others seemed to be handed a key before anyone asked whether they knew what to do with it. Danielle

had spent years preparing herself for the room without knowing whether anyone would ever open the door. Access was its own form of currency.

The distinction forced Danielle to confront another question: Did she want to "have authority or be the authority?" Danielle wanted what she knew to matter, but she was beginning to realize that knowing something and being able to do something about it were not the same. Maybe that was part of why she wanted into the room. She wanted enough authority to change the things she had spent years learning to see.

But wanting access raised a different concern. Danielle had learned how easily ambition could shape itself around whatever the institution rewarded. She had worked harder, stayed longer, made herself visible, and learned how to navigate spaces she once could not find. How much more was she willing to reshape herself to get through the door? She wanted in, certainly. She just wanted to recognize herself when she got there.

Earlier in her career, Danielle would have interpreted the closed door as another instruction to do more, become more, and prove herself again. Now she was less certain that additional preparation was the answer. She had spent years trying to become ready for opportunities she could not always see and experiences she could not always access. At some point, readiness had to be enough.

Still, Danielle wondered about the years she had spent simmering. Had they cost her time? Had other people kept moving while she stayed warm? Maybe. But she was no longer willing to measure those years only by how far they had moved her career. She had found the door, and that mattered. Danielle stepped forward, reached for the knob, and closed her hand around it.

And waited.

Seeing the Ecosystem

Danielle wore the suit like battle armor. Not because she needed it to make her feel capable anymore, but because it covered the small imperfections she had learned not to reveal. It was structured enough to make her stand taller, polished without appearing as though she were trying too hard. She paired it with the practiced smile of a woman who knew she belonged in the room, even if she still remembered all the years she had wondered whether she ever would. Danielle belonged here now. Crossing the threshold had simply taught her that belonging did not make every uncertainty to disappear.

The last stretch had been harder than she expected. Danielle had spent years preparing for a threshold she was never entirely certain she would be allowed to cross. Then, as she approached it, one of the relationships she had expected to help her through fractured. For a while, Danielle wondered whether that fracture would stop her. Somehow, painfully and imperfectly, she crossed anyway.

And then there she was. Not finished. Just on the other side.

Now she stood among people whose titles she had once assumed signified knowledge she did not possess. She reminded herself that nothing about her presence was accidental and that she had earned her place. Yet as she listened, Danielle recognized that “just because you have a fancy title” did not mean you knew everything or understood how to lead people well. Authority changed what someone could see, but it did not make anyone all-seeing.

The truth also seemed softer inside the room. Answers could be accurate while remaining incomplete, and problems somehow became smaller as they traveled upward while decisions became simpler as they moved down. More surprisingly, Danielle began to realize that

sometimes no one was withholding the missing piece. Everyone seemed to possess a different part of the story, each assuming someone else could see more of it.

Danielle had wanted into the room because she wanted to understand. Now she was inside, and she still did not have the complete story.

Except now people expected her to make decisions anyway.

She could ask harder questions now, but asking did not guarantee a complete answer. Danielle learned that pushing too directly could make someone defensive, shifting attention from the problem to the fact that she had challenged it. She hated that she understood the calculation and hated even more that she had begun making it herself. Sometimes getting something to move meant knowing when to push, when to soften, and when to wait.

More unsettling was realizing that she sometimes softened the truth for the people she led. There were things they did not need to carry and conflicts they had no power to resolve. Danielle wanted to "shelter and protect" them from dysfunction occurring above them, and sometimes she believed that was exactly what good leadership required. But she remembered the hallway. From there, protection could look an awful lot like someone deciding what she was allowed to know.

Her memories of the hallway shaped how she wanted to lead. Danielle remembered being capable of more without having a mechanism for demonstrating it and needing experiences her position could not provide. Someone had once chosen to "put energy into her," and that investment had changed what she could imagine for herself. Now she possessed enough influence to make that investment in someone else.

Danielle tried to "be the first to tell them if they are ready for the next step." She gave employees stretch assignments, brought them into conversations, explained organizational

context, and made introductions that expanded their access. She wanted people to have room to "grow and learn" without exhausting themselves to prove that they were committed. If the institution could not create an opportunity for them, she would help them develop the skills needed to pursue one elsewhere.

At first, this felt like the answer. Danielle could not rewrite the years she had spent searching for the room, but she could make the path less obscure for someone behind her. She could recognize potential before mastery, protect time, and make it possible for others to "push back without getting fired." In those moments, leadership felt like an opportunity to become the person she had once needed and to "be the change" she had hoped to encounter.

Yet the longer Danielle led, the more complicated that answer became. The people she invested in became more visible, while the people she invited into rooms gained access others did not receive. From Danielle's perspective, these choices represented cultivation; from somewhere else in the organization, they could resemble favoritism. Every invitation included someone while leaving someone else outside, and even advocacy required selection.

That realization hurt. Danielle knew what it meant for someone to see something in her and pull her closer, and she wanted to be that person for others. But now she could also see the person standing farther away, equally capable perhaps, waiting for someone to notice. What happened to her if no one did? Danielle could open doors for the people she knew, but she was beginning to understand the danger of a system that depended on someone like her being there to open them.

Danielle could imagine herself back in the hallway asking why a particular person had received the stretch assignment or leader's support. Those questions remained valid because opportunities were not always distributed equitably. Leaders sometimes selected people who

looked, thought, or worked like them, while others remained outside because those holding the door had never examined whom they repeatedly overlooked. Helping individuals navigate an inequitable process did not make the process equitable.

That recognition unsettled Danielle. She had assumed that leading differently meant protecting people from the institution's sharpest edges and providing the opportunities she had once lacked. Now she began to see that protection could conceal how sharp those edges remained. If she repeatedly absorbed the harm, translated the dysfunction, and helped individuals work around barriers, the institution could continue operating without confronting what made her protection necessary.

Good intentions did not repair a broken system. A supportive supervisor could make an unreasonable workload survivable without changing the workload. A mentor could open a door for one person without making access more transparent for everyone. Flexibility could help an employee manage competing demands without challenging the expectations that made such accommodation necessary. Danielle's leadership could improve people's experiences while leaving the underlying conditions largely intact.

The realization did not make individual support unimportant. People still needed supervisors who developed them, sponsors who advocated for them, and leaders willing to reduce unnecessary harm. Danielle understood, however, that these practices could not become substitutes for examining how work, access, recognition, and authority were distributed. Helping people survive the system was not the same as changing the system. Sometimes protection reduced the pressure that might otherwise force an organization to acknowledge that something was broken.

Danielle began asking different questions. It was no longer enough to decide whom she could bring into the room; she needed to ask who remained absent and why. She increasingly understood that there was no single solution. Change required acknowledging who was not in the room, considering the ramifications of leadership decisions, and asking whose voice she had not heard. Representation could not remain token presence; it required meaningful inclusion and a willingness to listen.

These questions turned Danielle's attention from individual opportunity toward organizational practice. Could stretch assignments be distributed through a visible process rather than private selection? Could developmental conversations become an expectation of supervision rather than a benefit available only to employees with exceptional mentors? Could access to decision-making spaces be widened before someone held the title? Could institutional leaders examine why particular employees repeatedly required protection instead of praising the supervisors who protected them?

Danielle also had to examine herself. There had been comfort in believing that the problem existed above her, where other people controlled information and decided who entered the room. Now people looked upward at Danielle, and she could not assume that occupying the position with better intentions prevented her from reproducing the practices she had criticized. She could be supportive in intention while remaining ambiguous in effect. Leading differently required more than believing she was different.

Seeing more did not make things simpler. Danielle understood things now that had once frustrated her from the outside. She understood why a decision might take longer than it seemed it should, why someone could not always tell the whole story, and why the best answer was not

always possible. Sometimes understanding made her more generous toward decisions she might once have criticized.

That bothered her too.

Understanding why something happened did not necessarily make it right.

Understanding made it harder for Danielle to divide leadership neatly into good choices and bad ones. Sometimes confidentiality really was necessary. Sometimes protecting her team was the kindest thing she could do. Sometimes opening a door for one person created an opportunity that might otherwise never exist. She could understand each choice because she had made some of them herself.

But understanding them made Danielle responsible for something more. She could no longer point to complexity as the reason nothing could change. If she could see the places where people were getting lost, left outside, or protected from problems that continued to exist, what was she going to do with what she could now see?

The more she saw, the less certain Danielle became that anyone could see the entire system. Information moved upward, decisions moved downward, and understanding traveled unevenly among people and departments. Danielle now sat at the table in a room she had once searched for, and her decisions affected people who might never know everything she had considered before making them. Sometimes she possessed information they did not have. Sometimes they possessed information she needed.

There was no battle armor for that responsibility. No tailored suit, practiced smile, or senior title could make uncertainty disappear. Danielle had spent much of her career believing that the next experience would make her ready, the next position would provide access, and the

next room would contain the answers. She understood more now than she ever had. That understanding made her increasingly aware of what she still could not see.

Perhaps seeing the system did not mean understanding it. Danielle was part of it now, shaping it while it continued to shape her. Every time she opened a door, she had to wonder who else was still looking for it. Every time she protected someone from something they could not change, she had to ask whether protection was enough. And every time she made a decision with only part of the story, she had to remember that someone else might be holding the piece she was missing.

Danielle no longer wondered whether she belonged at the table. She knew that she did. What unsettled her now was the possibility that she could become the kind of leader she once needed and still leave someone else searching for the room. She had spent years asking what she needed to learn, how she needed to move, and who she needed to become.

Now she found herself asking something else.

Would she use her authority to protect people from a broken system, or would she use it to build something they no longer needed protection from?

Synthesis of the Collective Narrative

Danielle's story does not represent three additional themes emerging from the data. Rather, discovering, navigating, and seeing provide a narrative structure through which the six themes identified through thematic analysis are brought back together within a composite career. The thematic findings separated recurring patterns across participants' accounts to examine pathways into and through leadership, conditions shaping persistence, and organizational structures and norms influencing the pursuit and sustainability of leadership. Danielle's narrative

reassembles those patterns to illustrate how they can coexist, accumulate, and change meaning across a career.

Across the narrative, the six themes intersect rather than unfold sequentially. Finding a Career Without a Map and Advancement Without a Pathway are particularly visible as Danielle enters higher education, becomes increasingly intentional about leadership, and struggles to identify how strong performance translates into advancement. Women and Relational Infrastructure and Learning the Unwritten Rules become increasingly consequential as she learns that access to information, developmental experiences, and decision-making is often mediated through relationships and proximity. Negotiating Worth, Work, and Leadership and Becoming the Leader You Can Live With extend across the narrative as Danielle negotiates ambition, caregiving, recognition, authority, and eventually her own responsibility for how others experience the organization. Discovering, navigating, and seeing therefore describe movement within Danielle's composite story rather than discrete findings or stages experienced uniformly by participants.

The Kaleidoscope Career Model (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) provides one way of understanding that movement. Challenge, balance, and authenticity remain present throughout Danielle's career, but their prominence and meaning shift as her circumstances and relationship to the organization change. Early challenge is expressed through learning, increased responsibility, and pursuit of advancement. Balance becomes more prominent when Danielle can no longer rely upon unlimited availability as a strategy for growth, while authenticity increasingly shapes questions about what she wants from leadership and who she wants to become within it. These dimensions do not replace one another. Instead, their changing

relationship helps illuminate how Danielle continually reconstructs what a viable leadership career can look like.

Radical Feminist Theory (Osborne, 2001; Thompson, 2001) provides a complementary lens for recognizing that these negotiations occur within organizational conditions Danielle did not individually create. Her narrative repeatedly complicates the assumption that career outcomes follow directly from preparation, performance, or individual choice. Access to developmental experiences, information, flexibility, sponsorship, and authority is unevenly available and often mediated through relationships and organizational position. Danielle's growing awareness of these conditions changes the questions she asks of herself and, eventually, of the institution. What begins as an effort to understand what she must do to advance becomes a recognition that individual adaptation alone cannot resolve every barrier she encounters.

Danielle therefore serves as an integrative representation of the study's findings rather than an additional layer of thematic analysis. Her story illustrates how pathways, persistence, organizational structures, relationships, and career priorities become entangled within the experience of constructing a leadership career. The implications of those intersections for the Kaleidoscope Career Model (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005), radical feminist theory (Osborne, 2001; Thompson, 2001), and higher education leadership are examined further in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

This study examined how millennial women entered and moved through leadership in higher education, how institutional cultures shaped their persistence, and how organizational structures and gendered norms influenced their decisions to pursue and sustain leadership careers. Guided by the Kaleidoscope Career Model (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) and radical feminist theory (Osborne, 2001; Thompson, 2001), the study centered participants' accounts of developing as leaders within institutions in which pathways to advancement were not always visible, consistent, or equally accessible. Through critical qualitative interviews and an arts-based composite narrative, in this study, I explored both the career decisions participants made and the organizational conditions within which those decisions became necessary.

Chapter 4 presented six interconnected themes describing participants' pathways, persistence, and navigation of higher education organizations: Finding a Career Without a Map; Advancement Without a Pathway; Women and Relational Infrastructure; Learning the Unwritten Rules; Negotiating Worth, Work, and Leadership; and Becoming the Leader You Can Live With. Collectively, the findings demonstrated that participants did not simply follow established routes into leadership. They constructed careers through relationships, professional experiences, credentials, mobility, and increasing clarity about the forms of work and leadership they considered meaningful. For participants, persistence meant choosing to sustain a viable career, not remaining loyal to a particular institution at any cost. They continually assessed whether their roles still supported their professional goals, personal lives, and ethical commitments. When those conditions no longer aligned, participants changed their paths rather than abandon their commitment to leadership in higher education. As they progressed, they also developed

increasingly sophisticated understandings of how institutional decisions were made, where authority resided, and which relationships and positions provided access to opportunity.

Across the findings, participants navigated organizations in which the connections among preparation, opportunity, authority, and advancement were inconsistent. Organizational reliability emerged as a central concern: whether access to development, recognition, and established policies remained dependable across supervisors, units, and changing circumstances. Participants exercised agency by constructing pathways and redirecting their careers, but the repeated need for these adaptations revealed how institutions relied on women's initiative and relationships to compensate for uneven organizational processes. Reliability therefore concerns not only whether supportive conditions exist, but whether women can access them without exceptional sponsorship or continual negotiation.

In this chapter, I first answer each research question by synthesizing the six themes and the collective narrative. I then interpret the findings in relation to prior scholarship and consider their implications for the Kaleidoscope Career Model (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005), radical feminist theory (Osborne, 2001; Thompson, 2001), and higher education practice. Finally, I offer recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

The six themes and Danielle's collective narrative answered the research questions by showing how participants constructed leadership careers, preserved their ability to remain in higher education, and learned to act within organizational systems that did not consistently make pathways or power visible. Discovering, navigating, and seeing the ecosystem were not additional themes or fixed career stages. They represented increasingly complex ways

participants understood the relationship between their own career decisions and the institutional conditions surrounding them.

Research Question 1: How do millennial women in higher education describe and interpret their pathways toward leadership roles?

The first research question examined how participants described and interpreted their pathways toward leadership roles in higher education. Participants did not describe advancement as movement through a recognizable institutional pathway. Their leadership capacity often developed before a formal role became available and before they understood themselves as pursuing leadership. Movement toward a leadership position occurred when another person recognized that capacity and created access to an opportunity. Participants therefore described their pathways as forged through relationships rather than guided by a transparent process for evaluating readiness.

Many participants entered higher education without a long-term plan to become institutional leaders. Their early positions introduced them to work they found meaningful, but those positions did not reveal where that work could lead. Leadership emerged gradually as participants became trusted with responsibilities that extended beyond their formal roles. They began to understand themselves as leaders through the work they were already doing and through the recognition of people who saw their capacity. Formal titles frequently confirmed an identity that had developed much earlier.

The findings complicate conventional descriptions of contemporary careers as nonlinear (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). However, describing careers as nonlinear does not fully capture the work participants undertook to construct leadership pathways. For many participants, no coherent leadership pathway was visible in the first place. This was particularly evident among

staff and third-space professionals, whose roles often fell outside traditional academic career structures (Whitchurch, 2008, 2012). Participants were not simply choosing alternatives to a linear route. They were attempting to determine what advancement meant within systems that did not clearly connect their current work to the next step.

Relationships made these incomplete pathways more legible by supplying developmental infrastructure that formal organizational systems lacked. Through relationships, participants developed an understanding of how leadership operated within their institutions and gained access to opportunities that were otherwise beyond their reach (Bhopal, 2020; Ibarra et al., 2010; Madsen, 2012). Someone had to notice their work, explain what might be possible, or bring them into a space where their leadership could become visible. Without that intervention, participants could be prepared for greater responsibility while remaining disconnected from the people and processes that determined advancement.

This dependence on relationships exposed the weakness of the formal pathways themselves. Participants did not describe a consistent institutional process that assessed their preparation and translated it into leadership opportunity. Similar levels of readiness did not necessarily produce similar possibilities for advancement. Instead, opportunity often depended on whether a person with influence recognized a participant's capacity and was willing to act on that recognition. Relationships did not merely help participants navigate the system. They frequently stood in for the system itself.

Participants interpreted this relationship-based advancement as both necessary and inequitable. The relationships at the center of their pathways were meaningful, and participants credited them with making leadership possible. At the same time, they recognized that access to those relationships was not distributed equally. A system that depends on individual recognition

cannot ensure that equally prepared employees will receive comparable opportunities. Readiness may exist without becoming visible, and visibility may produce opportunity without a transparent evaluation of readiness.

Chance also remained embedded in participants' accounts. A vacancy, reorganization, departure, or unexpected invitation could create movement where no pathway had previously existed. These moments were consequential, but they did not demonstrate that the institution had intentionally developed participants for leadership. Rather, they revealed how frequently advancement depended on the convergence of individual preparation with an opening the organization had not designed as part of a coherent developmental process. Participants could position themselves to respond, but they could not predict when or whether such an opportunity would appear.

To summarize, the answer to the first research question is that participants described pathways toward leadership that became visible through relationships and unplanned openings rather than through established institutional processes. They often developed leadership capacity before their institutions provided a formal role through which to recognize it. Participants interpreted this gap as evidence that readiness alone did not produce advancement. Their pathways were forged when someone with influence made their existing capacity visible and connected it to opportunity, leaving access to leadership dependent on relationships rather than a comparable institutional process.

Research Question 2: How do millennial women in higher education describe and interpret the ways institutional cultures, policies, and expectations have shaped their persistence in leadership trajectories?

The second research question examined how institutional cultures, policies, and expectations shaped participants' persistence in leadership trajectories. Participants interpreted institutional culture through everyday signals about whose work mattered, what commitment required, and whether stated values were reflected in practice. Expectations surrounding loyalty, availability, and relational labor influenced whether they felt supported and whether continued investment remained sustainable. Participants understood persistence as maintaining a viable leadership career, which could involve remaining within an institution, resisting its expectations, or leaving when its culture no longer supported their professional and personal commitments.

The Kaleidoscope Career Model helps explain these decisions through the changing prominence of challenge, balance, and authenticity (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). The findings, however, place greater emphasis on agency within each of these dimensions. Participants continued to seek challenge, but additional responsibility was not inherently developmental when it expanded their labor without increasing their influence. Balance was not an equal division between work and life. It was the ability to exercise meaningful control over time and decide what work could reasonably require. Authenticity became evident when participants refused to pursue versions of leadership that required them to separate their advancement from their values. Through these decisions, participants asserted control over their careers even when institutional norms encouraged uninterrupted availability, continued accommodation, or advancement at any cost.

Institutional culture shaped how much agency participants could exercise within a particular setting. Formal commitments to flexibility or employee development were only as reliable as the supervisors responsible for interpreting them. A policy could exist without creating meaningful access when employees feared that using it would call their commitment into question. This gap between formal policy and lived practice made career sustainability dependent on localized decisions rather than shared institutional expectations. Participants often could not control whether their institutions would create equitable conditions, but they could decide whether to continue participating under the conditions available to them. Their persistence sometimes required acting outside the institutional script for what commitment was supposed to look like.

The findings revealed that participants experienced institutions as depending on relational labor without consistently recognizing it as leadership work. This labor functioned as institutional maintenance by sustaining employees and making otherwise unclear systems navigable. Participants described the time and skill involved in developing others as insufficiently recognized within formal workload, evaluation, or advancement systems, even when that support was central to their advancement. Their accounts suggested that responsibility for bridging gaps in leadership pathways fell heavily on individuals willing to mentor and sponsor others.

This dependence placed strain on the same relationships participants needed to persist. Mentors and sponsors were expected to explain systems they had not designed and create access they did not fully control. Their support mattered, but it could not repair the structure that made extraordinary relational investment necessary. Advising women to find mentors or sponsors therefore leaves the central organizational problem unresolved. Institutions must also recognize,

reward, and distribute the developmental labor through which employees become visible and prepared for advancement. Senior leaders cannot treat the development of others as informal work that occurs elsewhere in the organization while continuing to benefit from its outcomes. Participants' accounts also challenged generational narratives that interpret mobility as evidence that millennials lack institutional loyalty. Their experiences suggested that loyalty was not reciprocal. Institutions benefited from participants' commitment and relational investment without consistently providing visible pathways or recognizing the work through which they sustained the organization. Participants remained committed to higher education leadership, but they did not accept that this commitment required loyalty to every institution in which they worked. When an institution could no longer support a viable career, leaving was not necessarily a failure to persist. It could be an expression of agency that allowed persistence to continue elsewhere.

The answer to the second research question, then, is that institutional cultures, policies, and expectations shaped both the constraints participants encountered and the agency they could exercise within them. Participants interpreted the distance between formal commitments and lived practice as evidence that continued advancement could not be assumed. When an institution no longer supported a viable leadership trajectory, they used the agency still available to change its direction. Their persistence reflected a continued commitment to leadership in higher education, not unconditional loyalty to a particular institution.

Research Question 3: How do institutional structures, norms, and expectations shape millennial women's decisions about pursuing and sustaining leadership roles?

The third research question examined how institutional structures, norms, and expectations shaped participants' decisions about pursuing and sustaining leadership roles.

Participants evaluated the arrangements governing advancement: how readiness was assessed, who controlled access to developmental opportunities, whether increased responsibility carried meaningful authority, and how policies operated across supervisors and units. These arrangements influenced which roles participants pursued, whether they accepted additional responsibilities, and when they sought opportunities elsewhere. Leadership decisions therefore reflected assessments of what a position actually made possible, including access to influence, recognition, development, and control over time.

Promotion structures were a significant source of incongruence. Formal criteria did not fully explain how advancement occurred or why similar levels of preparation produced different outcomes. Participants encountered institutions in which title, responsibility, and authority were not consistently connected. An individual could perform increasingly complex work without gaining greater influence or receiving recognition that altered her organizational standing. These experiences reflected the layered nature of higher education organizations, where bureaucratic, collegial, and political models can operate simultaneously and produce competing understandings of how leadership is earned (Manning, 2024). Participants therefore made decisions about leadership based on the conditions attached to a role rather than assuming promotion itself represented meaningful advancement.

Relationships often held these inconsistent structures together. Supervisors and other influential people interpreted policies, created access to opportunity, and helped participants understand how advancement operated within a particular setting. This support could make leadership possible, particularly when formal processes did not clearly connect readiness to opportunity. However, it also meant that institutional policies were not experienced consistently. A change in supervisor could substantially alter whether an employee received developmental

support or was seen as ready for advancement. Participants' accounts suggest that relationships often compensated for inconsistencies in formal advancement and development structures. While prior scholarship highlights the importance of mentoring and sponsorship (Ibarra et al., 2010), participants frequently relied on relationships to navigate organizational processes that were experienced as uneven or unclear.

Participants' decisions were also shaped by institutional expectations about time. Leadership was often associated with availability beyond formal work hours and a willingness to allow institutional demands to take precedence over nonwork life. Participants did not interpret control over time solely as a caregiving concern. Even those without caregiving responsibilities questioned the assumption that their institutions were entitled to unrestricted access to their time. The ideal-worker norm continues to define commitment through uninterrupted productivity and availability, reproducing gendered expectations even when policies appear neutral (Acker, 1990, 2006; Bishu et al., 2023; Hart, 2016). Participants became less willing to pursue or sustain roles that required them to surrender agency over their lives outside work as proof of leadership commitment.

Formal flexibility did not necessarily resolve this concern. Its value depended on whether supervisors treated it as a legitimate way of working or as an exception granted to an individual. When flexibility depended on a supportive relationship, participants understood that the arrangement could disappear when the supervisor changed. This made sustainability conditional rather than structural. Participants were more willing to remain in leadership when they could exercise meaningful control over time without having their commitment questioned. When that control was repeatedly undermined, they reconsidered the role or the institution.

Structural variation also existed within institutions. Participants described moving between departments or campuses and encountering substantially different conditions despite remaining within the same organization. A title could carry different authority or developmental potential depending on the local funding structure and supervisory environment. Compensation practices could also change across units, altering whether expanded responsibility produced meaningful career movement. These differences are consistent with higher education's decentralized and loosely coupled organization, in which local units can enact institutional priorities differently (Manning, 2024). As a result, participants did not experience the institution as a single, coherent environment. An internal move could make leadership more viable, while another unit within the same institution could make an equivalent role unsustainable.

These variations shaped whether participants experienced leadership as congruent with their values. The Kaleidoscope Career Model positions authenticity as alignment between work, identity, and a desired way of living, while balance reflects the ability to negotiate work and nonwork demands (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). Participants were willing to assume demanding roles when they believed the work remained meaningful and they retained sufficient agency over how leadership was enacted. They became less willing when institutional expectations required continued accommodation without reciprocal recognition or influence. In those circumstances, the issue was not whether participants remained ambitious. It was whether the available form of leadership required them to become increasingly disconnected from their values.

The structures participants encountered were gendered even when they appeared formally neutral. Promotion processes that depended on informal recognition advantaged employees with access to influential relationships. Expectations of unrestricted availability reproduced an ideal of

commitment historically organized around masculine work patterns. Roles could also expand women's responsibility without producing corresponding authority, reinforcing institutional dependence on labor that remained weakly valued in advancement decisions (Acker, 1990, 2006; Juffer, 2021; Mayya et al., 2021). Participants could adapt to these conditions, but their ability to adapt did not mean that the underlying structures had become equitable.

Therefore, the answer to the third research question is that institutional structures, norms, and expectations shaped participants' decisions by determining whether leadership remained congruent with their values and sustainable within their lives. Relationships could create access and temporarily compensate for inconsistent structures, but this support remained dependent on individuals rather than reliable institutional practice. Participants continued to pursue and sustain leadership when they retained meaningful agency and believed their investment could produce genuine influence. When structural deficiencies exceeded what relationships could sustain, they reconsidered the role, sought a different environment, or left the institution.

Discussion of Findings

The findings affirm scholarship demonstrating that higher education institutions operate through overlapping hierarchies, governance systems, political relationships, and decentralized practices that complicate access to leadership (Manning, 2024). They also reflect existing research on women's unequal access to sponsorship, the devaluation of relational labor, and expectations of availability grounded in the ideal-worker norm (Acker, 1990, 2006; Hart, 2016; Ibarra et al., 2010; Mayya et al., 2021; O'Connor, 2020). The findings extend this scholarship by showing how millennial women interpreted these organizational conditions and made decisions about leadership while working within them.

Relationships connected all three research questions. They helped participants recognize possible pathways toward leadership, supported their persistence when institutional conditions became difficult, and made inconsistent structures more workable. At the same time, the importance of these relationships revealed how much institutions expected individuals to provide what formal systems did not. Relationships made leadership possible, but they also allowed unclear and inequitable structures to remain functional.

From Nonlinear Careers to Constructed Pathways

Participants' pathways align in some respects with scholarship describing contemporary careers as nonlinear, boundaryless, or protean (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). Few participants advanced through an uninterrupted institutional hierarchy. Their movement also reflected the ambiguity experienced by third-space professionals, whose work does not fit neatly within traditional faculty or staff structures (Whitchurch, 2008, 2012, 2024). These frameworks help explain the shape of participants' careers, but they do not fully capture the intentionality with which participants approached advancement.

Although participants' careers were nonlinear in shape, their accounts revealed purposeful and methodical decision-making. Their careers were not predefined, but their decisions were methodical. They studied the expectations attached to future roles and attempted to build the preparation those positions required. When participants pursued additional education or moved between positions, these decisions were typically connected to an understanding of what would make future advancement possible. Nonlinearity described the route they traveled, not the purposefulness with which they traveled it.

Participants' experiences also revealed the difficulty of developing readiness when access to necessary experience was controlled by the same structures through which they hoped to

advance. Kasey recognized through her review of leadership job descriptions that she needed supervisory experience to qualify for the next level. Her current position did not provide an opportunity to supervise, yet positions that included supervision expected candidates to have already demonstrated that capacity. She could identify the gap in her preparation but could not close it through the opportunities available within her role.

This experience illustrates how participants could become caught in cycles of preparation without advancement. They understood what institutions expected but did not have equal access to the work through which those expectations could be met. The resulting lack of movement did not reflect an absence of ambition or strategic planning. It reflected an advancement structure that treated prior opportunity as evidence of readiness while overlooking how unequally that opportunity had been distributed.

Relationships frequently disrupted these cycles. A supervisor could expand a participant's responsibilities, a sponsor could connect her to an opening, or another leader could recognize experience that a formal process had failed to value. Prior scholarship establishes the importance of mentorship, sponsorship, and professional networks to women's leadership advancement (Bhopal, 2020; Ibarra et al., 2010; Madsen, 2012). Participants' accounts extend this scholarship by showing that relationships did not merely enhance an established pathway. In many cases, the relationship made a pathway visible or created one where no formal route had previously existed.

The importance of relationships also revealed an inequity in how readiness became recognized. Participants could make deliberate efforts to prepare for leadership, but preparation alone did not ensure that someone with influence would notice or act on it. Similar capacity could produce different outcomes depending on whether a participant encountered someone

willing and able to connect her readiness to opportunity. Advancement was therefore not simply the result of individual development. It depended on whether that development became legible to people with the authority to create movement.

Constructed pathways reflected both participant agency and institutional constraint. Participants were not aimlessly navigating careers without direction. They were building toward identifiable forms of leadership within systems that did not offer transparent or dependable routes forward. They developed skills methodically and responded strategically when available roles could not provide the experience required for advancement. Their movement became nonlinear because the institutional pathway was incomplete, not because the women themselves lacked intention.

This distinction reframes how their careers should be interpreted. A nonlinear career may describe movement across roles or institutions, but a constructed pathway explains why that movement became necessary. Participants did not abandon an established route. They assembled one from the opportunities they could access, often relying on relationships to bridge the distance between their preparation and the institution's recognition of it. The study therefore distinguishes a career without a predefined route from a career without purpose. Participants' pathways were not aimless. They were deliberate careers constructed within organizational systems that did not reliably connect readiness to leadership opportunity.

Persistence as Agency and Career Viability

Participants' accounts support the Kaleidoscope Career Model's rejection of the assumption that leaving, slowing, or redirecting a career reflects diminished ambition (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). Participants remained committed to leadership while reconsidering where and under what conditions that commitment could be sustained. Their

persistence resided in the continuation of the leadership trajectory rather than continued membership in a particular institution.

The findings place agency at the center of this process. Participants could not fully control institutional culture, but they could make decisions about their continued participation within it. This agency was constrained rather than absolute. Participants made choices from the options available to them, and those options were shaped by access to resources, professional relationships, and the risks associated with change. Even within these constraints, participants resisted the assumption that institutions alone could determine what persistence should require.

The Kaleidoscope Career Model (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) helps explain how participants evaluated career viability through challenge, balance, and authenticity. Challenge remained important when greater responsibility produced learning, influence, or meaningful contribution. Participants became more skeptical when additional responsibility expanded their labor without changing their authority or organizational standing. For participants, balance reflected their authority to determine the validity, value, and use of their time. Authenticity became visible in participants' refusal to sustain forms of leadership that required increasing distance from their values.

Persistence also functioned as resistance within institutions that offered limited or inconsistent opportunities. Participants resisted allowing an institution's inability to recognize their readiness to determine the boundaries of their leadership careers. They continued to pursue development and meaningful leadership even when doing so required them to revise the route through which that leadership would be achieved. Persistence was therefore not passive endurance. It was a refusal to allow institutional limitations to become permanent career limitations.

That resistance did not always require participants to stay. Remaining could represent persistence when a participant retained enough agency to continue building a viable career. Leaving could serve the same purpose when the institution required continued accommodation without providing a credible path forward. In both circumstances, persistence was directed toward the leadership trajectory rather than the preservation of institutional membership.

These findings align with research suggesting that millennial employees value meaningful work, flexibility, development, and alignment between their careers and broader lives (Aydogmus, 2019; Minzlaff et al., 2025). They also support scholarship cautioning against interpreting these priorities as evidence of reduced commitment (Baker Rosa & Hastings, 2018; Rudolph et al., 2021). Participants did not leave institutions because work lacked importance. In several cases, they left because they wanted to preserve the possibility of continuing work that mattered to them.

This interpretation complicates generational accounts of institutional loyalty. Millennial mobility is frequently treated as evidence of weaker attachment to employers, although generational scholarship cautions that apparent differences may reflect life stage, labor-market conditions, or stereotyping rather than stable cohort characteristics (Zacher & Froidevaux, 2021). Participants' accounts suggested that loyalty was not operating reciprocally. Institutions benefited from their commitment without consistently providing viable pathways or recognizing their investment. Participants remained loyal to their leadership work without accepting that such loyalty required them to remain indefinitely within an institution that constrained their trajectory.

Career persistence and institutional retention were therefore related but distinct outcomes. A participant could remain employed while her leadership possibilities narrowed. Another could leave and remain deeply committed to leadership in higher education. Persistence was not

demonstrated by staying at all costs. It was demonstrated through the continued exercise of agency in protecting a leadership trajectory that remained viable.

Relationships and Structural Reliability

The third research question revealed why relationships remained central even after participants entered leadership. Higher education institutions often presented formal structures that did not produce consistent experiences. Policies acquired meaning through local interpretation, and roles with similar titles could carry substantially different authority across units or campuses. These variations are consistent with scholarship describing universities as layered and loosely coupled organizations in which multiple structural models operate simultaneously (Manning, 2024).

Supervisors and other influential people made these structures workable. They interpreted policies, created developmental opportunities, and connected participants to decision-making spaces. A supportive relationship could make a difficult environment sustainable by giving a participant greater agency within it. A change in supervisor could alter that experience without any corresponding change in institutional policy. Participants therefore learned that formal commitments did not guarantee consistent practice.

Relationships also helped compensate for the absence of dependable advancement structures. Mentorship supported participants' development and helped them interpret their experiences. Sponsorship was more directly connected to visibility and opportunity, consistent with Ibarra et al. (2010). Neither relationship, however, could ensure that an institution would recognize readiness consistently. A participant could become increasingly prepared without gaining access to the authority through which preparation was converted into advancement.

Participants described developmental work that helped colleagues become visible and prepared for leadership yet was not consistently recognized in workload or evaluation practices. In this study, relational labor refers to mentoring, sponsorship, and other developmental work participants identified as sustaining leadership pathways. This usage is related to, but distinct from, Järvinen and Mik-Meyer's (2025) concept of relational work, which examines how academics negotiate service obligations and balance individual and collective interests. Participants' accounts suggest that developmental support frequently bridged gaps in formal advancement pathways while concentrating responsibility among those willing to invest in the development of others.

This arrangement placed strain on the relationships participants needed. Mentors and sponsors were expected to explain systems they had not created and compensate for processes they did not fully control. Their support mattered, but the level of dependence placed on them also exposed the weakness of the institution's formal structures. Relationships could help a participant endure or advance within an inconsistent environment, but they could not make the environment institutionally reliable.

Control over time provided another measure of that reliability. Expectations of uninterrupted availability reproduced the ideal-worker norm even when formal policies recognized caregiving or flexibility (Acker, 1990, 2006; Bishu et al., 2023; Hart, 2016). Participants did not understand control over time only as a caregiving concern. They questioned whether leadership should entitle an institution to claim their nonwork hours regardless of their family circumstances. A role became less viable when continued advancement required participants to surrender that agency as evidence of commitment.

Supportive relationships extended participants' willingness and ability to remain within structurally deficient environments. Participants sometimes continued because a supervisor, mentor, sponsor, or colleague made success possible despite broader institutional conditions. In this sense, relationships generated a form of credit for the institution. Participants remained invested because particular people had created trust, access, or protection that the formal organization had not provided.

That credit was not unlimited. Each time the institution relied on an individual relationship to offset an unclear pathway or inconsistent practice, it drew upon the goodwill that made remaining possible. Eventually, the structural cost of staying could exceed what the relationship was capable of sustaining. Participants did not necessarily leave because a supportive relationship had failed. They left because the institution required that relationship to compensate for more than any individual relationship could reasonably carry. This limit helps explain why departure could represent persistence rather than withdrawal. Once relational support could no longer make the environment viable, leaving allowed participants to preserve their commitment to leadership without continuing to absorb the costs of the institution's structural deficiencies.

From Individual Support to Structural Change

The findings affirm feminist scholarship arguing that increased representation does not necessarily redistribute organizational power. Women may gain access to leadership while evaluation, workload, authority, and advancement remain shaped by gendered assumptions (Acker, 1990, 2006; Burkinshaw & White, 2017; O'Connor, 2020). Participants encountered more opportunities than women in earlier generations may have experienced, but access did not ensure that leadership structures had become equitable.

Individual support produced meaningful differences in participants' careers. A supervisor could make flexibility usable rather than merely available. A sponsor could create an opportunity that otherwise would not have appeared. A mentor could help a participant understand a system the institution had left unclear. These actions improved participants' experiences and, in some cases, allowed them to remain in leadership.

The limitation was not that individualized support lacked value. The limitation was that its benefits remained dependent on the continued presence and willingness of particular people. When effective practices were not embedded across supervisors or units, participants could lose them through an ordinary organizational change. The same institution could therefore provide a sustainable leadership environment in one setting and an untenable one in another.

This distinction clarifies the difference between individual intervention and structural change. Individual leaders can reduce the effects of an inequitable practice, but structural change occurs only when a comparable experience no longer depends on encountering an exceptional supervisor, mentor, or sponsor. A leadership pathway becomes more equitable when readiness is consistently connected to opportunity. Flexibility becomes more reliable when employees do not have to negotiate its legitimacy repeatedly. Relational labor becomes institutionally valued when the development of others is recognized as part of leadership rather than treated as invisible service.

The findings do not suggest that higher education should become less relational. Relationships were among the most meaningful and consequential features of participants' careers. Instead, the findings question why institutions required relationships to carry so much of the responsibility for access and sustainability. Relationships should deepen leadership development, not compensate for systems that remain unclear or inconsistently applied.

The study's central interpretive contribution is therefore not simply that millennial women used relationships to navigate higher education. It is that higher education institutions relied on those relationships to make structurally deficient systems function. Participants exercised considerable agency within these environments, but agency did not eliminate the conditions requiring compensation. When relational support could no longer bridge the distance between participants' values and their institutional realities, they redirected their leadership trajectories.

Implications

The findings have implications for how women's career decisions are interpreted, how leadership development is conceptualized, and how higher education institutions evaluate progress toward gender equity. Participants demonstrated considerable agency in constructing and sustaining their leadership trajectories. Their experiences also revealed how heavily institutions relied on individual relationships to make unclear pathways and inconsistent structures workable. Responsibility for career viability therefore cannot be located primarily within women's ability to adapt.

The implications extend across the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005), radical feminist theory (Osborne, 2001; Thompson, 2001), and higher education practice. For the KCM, the findings demonstrate that career recalibration is organizationally mediated and may function as resistance to institutional definitions of advancement. For radical feminist theory, they illustrate how women's increased access to leadership can coexist with gendered structures that remain largely intact. For higher education practice, the findings shift attention from preparing women to navigate existing systems toward creating institutional

conditions in which readiness, persistence, and authority do not depend on encountering an exceptional relationship.

Implications for the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM)

The findings support the relevance of authenticity, balance, and challenge as dimensions through which women interpret career decisions (Knowles & Mainiero, 2021; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). These dimensions remained present throughout participants' careers, but their meaning changed as participants developed clearer understandings of leadership and the conditions under which they were willing to pursue it.

The findings extend the KCM (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) by demonstrating that career recalibration was not solely a response to changing personal preferences. Participants could determine what they valued, but they could not independently determine whether their institutions would support values-aligned leadership. Their decisions reflected an interaction between personal agency and the organizational conditions governing access to opportunity.

Challenge remained important throughout participants' careers. Participants methodically pursued the preparation they believed future roles would require. The difficulty was not a lack of ambition or direction. Institutions controlled access to the experiences through which readiness could be developed and demonstrated. A participant could identify the preparation required for advancement while remaining unable to obtain it within her current position. Challenge was therefore shaped by whether an institution connected deliberate development to credible leadership opportunity.

Balance represented agentic control over time rather than an equal division between work and life. Participants questioned expectations that leadership required unrestricted availability or institutional access to their nonwork hours. Notably, this concern was not limited to participants

with caregiving responsibilities. Control over time represented a broader ability to determine how leadership would fit within a life that remained larger than the institutional role. Balance became difficult to sustain when flexibility depended on supervisory permission or when using formal policies carried an implied cost to professional credibility.

Authenticity concerned the congruence between participants' values and the forms of leadership available to them. Participants became more discerning about whether greater responsibility would allow them to influence the institution in meaningful ways. A leadership role became less desirable when it required continued accommodation without corresponding authority or when institutional expectations created increasing distance from the kind of leader a participant wanted to become. Authenticity therefore depended not only on self-knowledge but also on whether the institution permitted values-aligned leadership to become consequential.

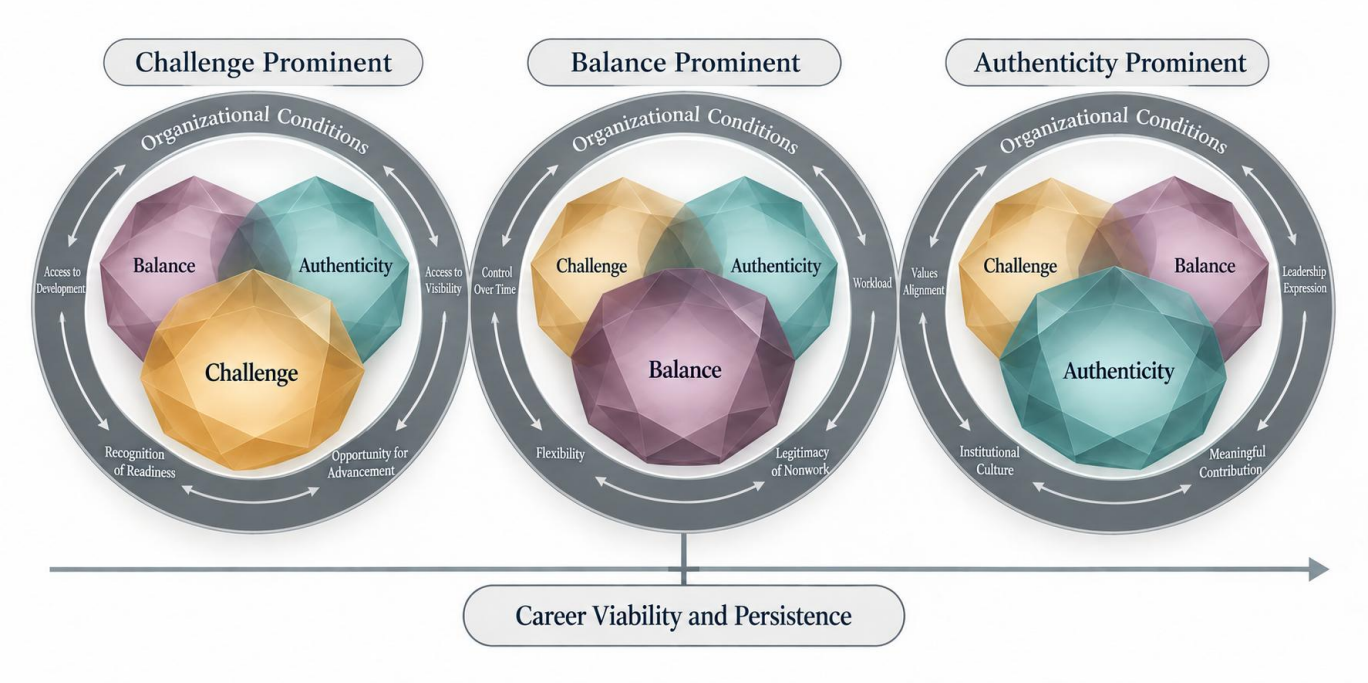
Career recalibration sometimes functioned as resistance to institutional limitations. Participants did not revise their trajectories because they lacked ambition. They did so when the available route required them to accept conditions that threatened the viability of continued leadership. Remaining could represent resistance when participants retained enough agency to continue building meaningful careers. Leaving could serve the same purpose when institutional membership became incompatible with continued growth or values alignment. In both cases, persistence was directed toward the leadership trajectory rather than the preservation of employment within a particular institution.

The findings therefore support an organizational interpretation of the KCM (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005), foregrounding the institutional conditions within which participants configured their career priorities. Women turn the kaleidoscope, but organizations influence the pieces available for configuration and the consequences associated with their arrangement. The revised

framework represented in Figure 2 makes these organizational conditions visible without diminishing women's agency. Career decisions emerge through the interaction between evolving priorities and institutional conditions rather than through an exclusively individual process.

Figure 2

Revised Kaleidoscope Career Model Framework with Organizational Implications



Note. Figure created by the author to illustrate an organizational interpretation of the Kaleidoscope Career Model (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005), informed by this study's findings. Authenticity, balance, and challenge remain present across configurations; their relative prominence may shift without following a fixed chronological sequence. The surrounding organizational conditions illustrate how institutions shape the possibilities for each configuration. The horizontal arrow represents the ongoing negotiation of career viability and persistence rather than progression through prescribed career stages.

Implications for Radical Feminist Theory

Radical feminist theory (Osborne, 2001; Thompson, 2001) shifts attention from women's individual career choices to the organizational conditions that make particular choices necessary or consequential. Many of the structures participants encountered appeared formally neutral. Advancement criteria, expectations of availability, and supervisory practices did not need to name women explicitly to produce unequal effects (Acker, 1990, 2006). This theoretical perspective prevents participants' success within these conditions from being treated as evidence that the conditions themselves were equitable.

The findings demonstrate that expanded access does not necessarily produce structural transformation. Participants had access to education, employment, mentorship, and leadership roles that may have been less available to earlier generations of women. Yet advancement remained difficult to anticipate, relational labor remained weakly recognized, and authority did not consistently accompany increased responsibility. These findings align with feminist scholarship showing that women's representation can increase while the organizational mechanisms governing power remain largely intact (Burkinshaw & White, 2017; O'Connor, 2020).

Relationships were central to this tension. They created meaningful opportunities and made leadership pathways possible. They also compensated for institutional processes that did not reliably connect readiness to advancement. Mentors and sponsors helped women succeed, but their effectiveness could conceal the extent to which the institution depended on individual intervention. When an equitable experience requires a particular supervisor or influential advocate, access has expanded without becoming structurally dependable.

The developmental work performed through these relationships was also gendered. Institutions relied on people willing to invest time in making others visible and prepared for leadership, but this work was not consistently represented in evaluation or workload systems. Relational labor remained essential to institutional functioning while receiving less recognition than work more directly associated with status or advancement (Hart, 2016; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2025). The people supporting women's advancement could therefore become overextended by the expectation that they compensate for deficiencies the institution had not addressed.

Individual support and structural change should not be treated as equivalent. A supportive supervisor may make flexibility usable, and a sponsor may create access to a consequential opportunity. These interventions matter. Structural change occurs, however, when comparable support no longer depends on the discretion of a particular person. A pathway becomes more equitable when employees can understand how readiness will be evaluated and receive meaningful access to the experience required for advancement. Flexibility becomes reliable when its legitimacy does not change with the supervisor.

Viewed through radical feminist theory (Osborne, 2001; Thompson, 2001), the findings illustrate how relationships can both challenge and sustain gendered organizational conditions. Relationships allowed participants to resist institutional limitations and continue pursuing leadership. At the same time, their success enabled institutions to continue functioning without addressing the structures those relationships were compensating for. The feminist question is not whether individualized support helps women. It is why institutional equity continues to require extraordinary relational intervention.

Implications for Higher Education Leadership and Organizations

The findings suggest that higher education institutions should evaluate leadership development according to the reliability of the connection between preparation and opportunity. Transparency about advancement criteria is necessary, but a pathway is not truly visible when employees cannot access the experiences an institution claims to value. Employees should have a reasonable way to develop the qualifications associated with the next level of leadership before those qualifications become prerequisites for consideration. Otherwise, institutions create cycles in which employees cannot advance without prior opportunity but cannot obtain that opportunity without first advancing.

Creating reliable pathways also requires greater consistency in how leadership authority is assigned across organizational boundaries. Participants demonstrated that similar titles could carry substantially different authority depending on the department or campus in which the work occurred. Institutions should review comparable roles across units to ensure that differences in decision-making authority, supervisory responsibility, and access to leadership opportunities reflect meaningful differences in responsibilities rather than uneven departmental practices. Although identical titles need not entail identical duties, employees should be able to understand what authority their roles carry and how those responsibilities prepare them for advancement. A credible pathway requires both opportunities to develop leadership capacity and organizational structures that allow employees to exercise it.

Relationships remain essential to this developmental process, but they cannot be expected to substitute for it. Encouraging women to find mentors and sponsors does not address the institution's dependence on the people performing that work. Developing others requires time, organizational knowledge, and a willingness to use influence on another person's behalf. When

this work is absent from workload and evaluation practices, responsibility becomes concentrated among a small number of relationally committed employees. Over time, the institution risks exhausting the same relationships on which leadership advancement depends.

Relational development should therefore be recognized as part of leadership rather than treated as informal work performed outside its central responsibilities. Senior leaders should participate in developing others and ensure that access to support does not depend on whether an employee happens to encounter an unusually committed supervisor. Mentors and sponsors should strengthen a functional leadership-development system, not serve as the system itself.

Institutional reliability must also extend to the enactment of policy. Flexibility has limited structural value when employees must renegotiate its legitimacy after every supervisory change. Advancement practices are similarly unreliable when comparable preparation produces different outcomes across units without a clear institutional rationale. Supervisory discretion may allow leaders to respond appropriately to individual circumstances, but it should not determine whether employees can access basic developmental opportunities or use established policies without professional consequence.

The treatment of time provides an important measure of this reliability. Leadership roles should not require employees to surrender agency over their nonwork hours as evidence of commitment. Institutions should distinguish between availability that is genuinely necessary to the work and expectations inherited from an ideal-worker model that equates visibility with dedication. This concern extends beyond caregiving. All employees should be able to exercise meaningful control over their lives outside the institution without having that boundary interpreted as diminished leadership ambition.

Reliability also requires institutions to align responsibility with meaningful authority. Expanded work should not be mistaken for advancement when employees remain excluded from the decisions governing that work. Higher-level responsibility should be accompanied by a corresponding change in organizational influence and recognition. Employees expected to implement institutional priorities should have appropriate access to the spaces in which those priorities are established.

Higher education institutions should design leadership systems that reliably connect preparation to opportunity. This requires accessible developmental experiences, transparent evaluation of readiness, and meaningful authority accompanying increased responsibility. Institutions should examine whether these connections remain dependable across supervisors and units and whether relational development is recognized within workload and evaluation practices. Relationships should deepen leadership development within these systems rather than determine whether employees can access them. Progress will be evident when women's advancement depends less on exceptional individual intervention and more on organizational practices that consistently support their development and leadership.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should extend this study in four directions. First, research should include millennial women who have left higher education. Because all participants in this study remained in the field, the findings explain how women preserved career viability but cannot fully identify when persistence becomes impossible or undesirable. Departure may represent not diminished ambition but a conclusion that available conditions no longer support a viable or values-aligned future.

Second, institutional ethnography could trace how leadership careers are organized through everyday practices. This study centered participants' interpretations of advancement, evaluation, governance, and supervisory discretion but did not independently follow the texts and processes coordinating those experiences. Future research could begin from women's accounts and trace position descriptions, evaluations, workload policies, promotion criteria, governance documents, meetings, and selection practices across institutional actors. Such work could distinguish localized supervisory experiences from conditions embedded in institution-wide systems and reveal how navigation labor and adaptive accommodation are organizationally produced.

Third, comparative research should examine career construction across faculty, staff, and third-space roles. Participants suggested meaningful differences in pathway visibility, credentialing, and the relationship between responsibility and advancement, but the study was not designed for systematic comparison. Research should also examine how race, caregiving, institutional type, professional field, and other dimensions of organizational position affect access to development, sponsorship, governance, and advancement (Acker, 2006; Cho et al., 2013).

Finally, longitudinal research should examine when interruption becomes reconstruction. Studies could investigate whether practices introduced by individual leaders remain after those leaders leave, become embedded in policy and routine, and produce comparable experiences across supervisors and units. Research could also examine whether leaders replicate, normalize, interrupt, or reconstruct conditions they encountered earlier in their careers. This work would test whether adaptive accommodations remain localized or change the mechanisms through which access, development, recognition, time, and authority are distributed.

Conclusion

This study examined how millennial women interpreted their pathways toward leadership and made decisions about persisting within higher education. Participants constructed deliberate careers within institutions that did not consistently connect preparation to opportunity. Their pathways were nonlinear in shape, but they were not aimless. Participants methodically developed their readiness even when no reliable route translated that preparation into advancement.

Relationships frequently bridged this gap by making readiness visible and connecting participants to opportunities that formal processes had not produced. They did not simply support leadership pathways. In many cases, they constituted the pathway itself. These relationships also made structurally deficient environments sustainable for a time. When the institutional cost of remaining exceeded what those relationships could support, leaving allowed participants to preserve their commitment to leadership rather than accept institutional limitations as permanent career boundaries.

The Kaleidoscope Career Model (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) illuminated how participants evaluated challenge, balance, and authenticity, while radical feminist theory (Osborne, 2001; Thompson, 2001) revealed the organizational conditions shaping which career configurations were available and sustainable. Together, the frameworks demonstrate that agency and structural constraint are not competing explanations. Participants made intentional decisions within institutions that controlled access to developmental opportunity and defined the conditions under which leadership could be sustained.

The central contribution of this study is not evidence that millennial women can adapt to higher education in pursuit of leadership. Participants repeatedly demonstrated that capacity. The

more consequential finding is that institutions relied on women's agency and relationships to compensate for pathways that remained unclear and unevenly accessible. Relationships made leadership possible, but they could not make an inequitable structure reliable. Structural progress will be evident when deliberate preparation can become leadership opportunity without requiring an exceptional relationship to bridge the distance between them.

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Appendix A - IRB Approval

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | Office of Research Integrity, Compliance and Security

TO: Christy Craft
Spec Ed, Counsel & Student Aff
Manhattan, KS 66506

Proposal Number IRB-13867

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 06/17/2026

RE: Approval of Proposal Entitled, "Shattered glass: How millennial women reconstruct leadership pathways through kaleidoscope careers."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects has reviewed your proposal and has granted full approval. This proposal is **approved for three years from the date of this correspondence.**

APPROVAL DATE: 06/17/2026

EXPIRATION DATE: 06/16/2029

In giving its approval, the Committee has determined that:

No more than minimal risk to subjects

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file as written. Any change or modification affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. All approved proposals are subject to continuing review, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced post-approval monitoring may be performed during the course of this approval period by URCO staff. Injuries, unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the IRB and / or the Office of Research Integrity, Compliance and Security (ORICS).

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 06/17/2026 6:13 PM ET

203 Fairchild Hall, 1601 Vattier St., Manhattan, KS 66506 | 785-532-3224 | fax: 785-532-3278 | comply@k-state.edu

Appendix B - Recruitment Letter

Subject: Participants Needed: Doctoral Study on Millennial Women in Higher Education Leadership

Hello,
My name is Caelee Lehman, and I am a doctoral candidate at Kansas State University. I am currently conducting a research study for my dissertation examining how millennial women aspiring to or currently holding senior-level positions in higher education make sense of their career advancement, the barriers they encounter, and the strategies they use to persist in leadership pathways.

I am seeking participants who:

- Identify as a woman,
- Identify as a millennial (born between 1981-1996),
- Currently hold or aspire to hold a senior-level leadership position in higher education,
- Have professional experience working in higher education, and
- Are willing to participate in one to two interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes each.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to:

- Complete a brief online demographic questionnaire for eligibility,
- Participate in one to two interviews (approximately 60 minutes each, conducted via Zoom or Microsoft Teams), and
- Optionally review your interview transcript for accuracy and additional comment (sent via email).

To protect your identity, you will be asked to choose a pseudonym (a fake name). Participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

If you have any questions, you may contact me at [clehma@ksu.edu] or [785-280-3604]. You may also contact my major professor and dissertation chair, Dr. Christy Craft at [ccraft@ksu.edu]. Please feel free to share this invitation with others who may meet the study criteria.

Thank you for considering participation. Your experiences can help inform policy and practice and contribute to creating more equitable and sustainable leadership pathways for women in higher education.

If you are interested in participating, please follow this link to complete the brief demographic questionnaire: [Qualtrics or survey link]

Sincerely,
Caelee Lehman

Appendix C - Eligibility Email

This research study is examining how millennial women aspiring to or currently holding senior-level positions in higher education make sense of their career advancement, the barriers they encounter, and the strategies they use to persist. If you are willing to participate in this study, please complete this screening questionnaire.

This survey will take approximately 5–7 minutes to complete. If you are eligible and choose to participate, you may be invited to take part in one to two interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes each.

Your participation is voluntary. You may stop at any time without penalty. Your responses will be kept confidential and used only for research purposes.

By selecting "I agree," you indicate that you are at least 18 years old and consent to participate in this screening questionnaire.

☐ I agree to participate
☐ I do not agree to participate -> *End survey with thank you message*

1. Do you identify as a woman?
    a. Yes
    b. No -> *End survey with thank you message*
    c. Prefer to self-describe: _____
    d. Prefer not to say -> *End survey with thank you message*
2. Do you identify as part of the millennial generation (born between 1981-1996)?
    a. Yes
    b. No -> *End survey with thank you message*
    c. Not sure
3. Do you currently work in higher education?
    a. Yes
    b. No -> *End survey with thank you message*
4. Which best describes your current career stage?
    a. Currently in a senior-level role
    b. In a mid-level or emerging leadership role
    c. Aspire to a senior-level leadership role
    d. Not interested in leadership roles -> *End survey with thank you message*
5. What is your current role or job title? (Short Answer)
6. If selected for an interview, how may I contact you?
    a. Name: (Short answer)
    b. Email: (Short answer)
    c. Phone (optional): (Short answer)

End of survey message:

Thank you for your interest in this study. If you are eligible and selected, you will be contacted by the researcher with additional information. Your time and willingness to share your experiences are greatly appreciated.

Appendix D - Informed Consent

Subject line: Research Participation Invitation: Doctoral Study on Millennial Women in Higher Education Leadership

You are being invited to take part in a research study. This form provides information about the study, what your participation would involve, and any possible risks and benefits. Your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to participate or may stop participating at any time without any penalty. Please read this form carefully. It is important that you understand this information so you can make an informed decision about whether to participate.

The purpose of this study is to better understand how millennial women in higher education make sense of their career advancement, the barriers they encounter, and the strategies they use to persist into leadership roles. This research aims to contribute to scholarship and practice by identifying ways institutions can create more equitable and sustainable pathways into senior leadership for women.

Your participation in this study will take place over approximately one academic semester, although your active participation will total about one to two hours. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire and take part in one or two interviews, each lasting about 60 minutes. The interviews will be conducted by Zoom (or another secure online platform) and will focus on your professional experiences in higher education, leadership, and career progression. All interviews will be audio recorded for transcription and analysis. Audio recordings, transcripts, and questionnaire responses will be stored on password-protected devices or secure, encrypted storage and will be accessible only to the researcher (and, if required, the dissertation advisor or research team).

Your name and any identifying information will not be used in any reports or publications. Instead, participants' experiences will be transformed into interrelated arts-based narratives that represent the lived experiences of millennial women in higher education, which helps protect

individual identities. Any identifying details will be removed or changed when the results are written or shared. Three years after the completion of this study, all data will be destroyed unless you give permission for the researcher to keep the data for future research or publication purposes.

There are no known major risks beyond those encountered in everyday life. However, some questions may ask you to reflect on challenging or stressful professional experiences, which could cause discomfort. You may skip any question you do not wish to answer or stop participating at any time. If you feel distressed and would like support, you may contact your institution's counseling or employee assistance services or another support resource of your choosing.

You may not receive a direct personal benefit from participating in this study. However, your participation may help increase understanding of women's leadership experiences in higher education and inform future policy and practice.

If you would like, the researcher will be happy to share the study's findings with you after the research is completed, and you may view the final dissertation and ask questions.

By signing below, you indicate that you understand the purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits of this study, and that you agree to participate. After your consent is received, the researcher will contact you to schedule your interview(s). Thank you for considering participation in this study.

Sincerely,
Caelee Lehman
College of Education, Kansas State University
clehma@ksu.edu, 785-280-3604

Thank you for taking the time to complete this online questionnaire. Based on the needs and criteria for this study, you have been selected to participate in the research study. Attached you will find an informed consent form. Once you read through the form and decide you wish to participate, sign the form and return it to the researcher. You can contact me with questions at clehma@ksu.edu or 785-280-3604.

Project Title: Shattered Glass: How millennial women reconstruct leadership pathways through kaleidoscope careers
Project approval date: June 17, 2026
Project expiration date: June 16, 2029
Length of study: 6 months
Principal Investigator: Dr. Christy Craft
Co-investigator(s): Caelee Lehman
IRB chair contact information: Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224, rubin@ksu.edu; Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224, comply@ksu.edu.
Project Sponsor: N/A

Purpose of the Research: This study looks at how millennial women who work in higher education think about their careers, leadership, and advancement. The goal of this research is to better understand the challenges women face, how colleges and universities shape their experiences, and what helps women continue toward leadership roles. What we learn from this study may help improve policies and practices in higher education and create more fair and supportive pathways into leadership.

Procedures or methods to be used: If you choose to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete a short online questionnaire with basic background information and participate in one or two interviews, each lasting about 60 minutes. The interviews will be conducted by Zoom (or another secure online platform) and will be audio recorded so the researcher can accurately remember what you said. You may also be asked to review your interview transcript to make sure it is accurate and to add any comments if you wish. Your participation will take about 1–2 hours total. You may skip any question you do not want to answer, and participation is completely voluntary. You may stop participating at any time without any penalty.

Alternative Procedures or Treatments: N/A

Risks or Discomforts Anticipated: There are no known major risks from taking part in this study. Some questions may make you think about difficult or stressful experiences related to your career or workplace. You may feel uncomfortable talking about these topics. You do not have to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable, and you may stop the interview at any time.

Benefits Anticipated: You may not receive a direct personal benefit from taking part in this study. However, you may find it meaningful to reflect on your experiences and share your story. The information from this study may help educators and leaders better understand women's

experiences in higher education and work toward creating more fair and supportive leadership pathways in the future.

Extent of Confidentiality: Reasonable measures will be taken to protect the confidentiality of your information. Your name and any identifying information will not be used in any reports or publications. Rather than presenting individual narratives, participants' experiences will be represented through composite, arts-based narratives that synthesize themes across multiple participants, further protecting individual identities. Audio recordings and transcripts will be stored on password-protected devices and/or secure, encrypted storage. Access to data will be limited to the primary researcher and, if applicable, the dissertation advisor. Identifying details will be removed or altered in all transcripts, reports, and publications. While these steps will be taken to protect confidentiality, complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

Terms of Participation: I understand that this project is research and that my participation is voluntary. I understand that I may withdraw my consent and discontinue participation at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled. My signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form and agree to participate under the terms described. I also acknowledge that I will receive a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

Future Use of Data (Optional)

The researcher may wish to use de-identified data collected during this study for future research studies, scholarly presentations, publications, or educational purposes related to women's leadership, higher education, or related topics. Any future use will involve only de-identified data, and no names or identifying information will be included.

Please indicate your preference below:

☐ YES, I give permission for my de-identified data to be retained and used for future research, presentations, publications, or educational purposes without additional consent.

☐ NO, I do not give permission for my de-identified data to be retained for future use. My data will be destroyed three years after completion of this study.

Participant Name: _____

_____ _____

Participant Signature: Date:

_____ _____

Project Staff Signature: Date:

Appendix E - Interview Questions

While the study is grounded in a critical feminist framework, the interview protocol was intentionally designed to capture dimensions consistent with the Kaleidoscope Career Model—authenticity, challenge, and balance—particularly as they relate to how participants make decisions about pursuing and sustaining leadership within organizational contexts.

Interviews will begin with an open-ended narrative prompt inviting participants to describe their career and leadership trajectories. Consistent with a semi-structured, participant-centered approach, the interview protocol will function as a flexible guide rather than a fixed sequence of questions. Follow-up questions and probes will be employed selectively to elicit additional depth or clarification when key dimensions are not sufficiently addressed within participants' narratives.

Interview 1: Career Pathways, Context, and Institutional Experience

To get started, I'd love for you to walk me through your career journey, particularly as it relates to leadership. You can begin wherever feels most meaningful to you, and take it in whatever direction makes sense. I'm interested in how you've experienced your path over time, including key moments, decisions, and influences along the way.

I. Career Story and Context (R1/Challenge)

- Can you tell me about your career path into your current role (or toward leadership)?
    - Probing question: What felt most pivotal along the way?
    - Probing question: What drew you to leadership in higher education?
    - Probing question: How has your understanding of leadership changed over time?

II. Barriers and Challenges (R1+R2/Challenge)

- What challenges have you faced in achieving or maintaining leadership roles in higher education?

- Probing question: Which of these challenges, if any, feel tied to organizational structures or expectations?
- Probing question: How, if at all, have gendered expectations or biases shaped your experiences?
- Probing question: What aspects of your work, if any, feel undervalued or invisible?

III. Institutional Culture (R2/Challenge + Balance)

- How would you describe your institution's culture around leadership and advancement?
  - Probing question: What aspects of that culture feel supportive?
  - Probing question: What feels limiting or exclusionary?
  - Probing question: How are expectations around availability, productivity, or leadership style communicated and enforced?
  - Probing question: How are caregiving, flexibility, or work-life boundaries treated?

IV. Policies, Practices, and Evaluation (R2/Challenge)

- How would you describe your institution's culture around leadership and advancement?
  - Probing question: How do promotion or evaluation processes influence advancement?
  - Probing question: What expectations exist around workload, visibility, or presence?
  - Probing question: How are decisions around advancement communicated or enacted?

Interview 2: Navigation, Strategy, and Meaning-Making

V. Navigating Organizational Structures (R3/Challenge)

- Can you describe how your organization's structure has shaped your opportunities for leadership or influence?
    - Probing question: How do you access decision-making spaces or leadership opportunities?
    - Probing question: How transparent are pathways for advancement?
    - Probing question: How have these structures changed over time, if at all?

VI: Networks, Sponsorship, and Visibility (R3/Challenge)

- How do relationships, networks, or sponsorship shape leadership opportunities in your institution?
    - Probing question: Who tends to receive mentorship or sponsorship?
    - Probing question: How do you experience visibility in your role?
    - Probing question: How is the work of those you lead recognized or overlooked?

VII. Navigating Power and Expectations (R3/Authenticity + Challenge)

- Can you share an experience where you had to navigate organizational expectations or norms in order to lead effectively?
    - Probing question: How did you respond in that situation?
    - Probing question: How have you navigated moments where you felt the need to adapt, self-edit, or shift your approach?
    - Probing question: What was shaping your decision to adapt or shift your approach in that moment?
    - Probing question: How did that experience influence how you saw yourself in your role or as a leader?

VIII. Structure and Opportunity (R3/Balance + Challenge)

- How does your organization's structure affect your ability to advance or have influence?
    - Probing question: Access to leadership opportunities or decision-making spaces?
    - Probing question: Transparency of promotion or advancement pathways?
    - Probing question: How has that changed over time? Influence on that shift (if exists)?

IX: Persistence, Strategy, and Decision Making (R3/Authenticity)

- How have you made decisions about persisting in, stepping back from, or pursuing leadership roles?
    - Probing question: What, if anything, has supported your persistence?
    - Probing question: What sacrifices or trade-offs have you experienced?
    - Probing question: What factors, if any, have shaped decisions to stay, leave, or redirect your path?

X: Authenticity and Fit (R1, R3)

- In what ways do you feel able—or unable—to be yourself in your professional role?
    - Probing question: What expectations shape how you present yourself as a leader?
    - Probing question: Can you describe moments of alignment or misalignment with your values?
    - Probing question: How does this influence your leadership decisions?

XI: Reflection (R1, R3)

- Looking back on your experiences, how do you make sense of your leadership journey?
    - Probing question: What changes would you most want to see in higher education to make leadership more equitable and sustainable for women?

- How do you define leadership for yourself now?
- Is there anything about your experience with leadership, advancement, or persistence that you think is important that we haven't talked about?