

The path to parity: Exploring the lived experiences of first-at-institution female community
college presidents

by

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B.S., Western Governor's University, 2015
M.S., Western Governor's University, 2017

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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John E. Roueche Community College Leadership Program
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

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Abstract

This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of first-at-institution female community college presidents in the United States, focusing on the social influences they encountered. Despite community colleges serving a large number of female, underrepresented, and low-socioeconomic students, leadership roles are predominantly held by White males. Data from the American Council on Education and the American Association of Community Colleges reveal a slow increase in female representation in these roles, but progress has stagnated since 2010. This study echoes the importance of representation in leadership, and historical sentiments about power and identification.

Using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), it delves into the lived experiences of these female leaders to uncover the contextual factors that influenced their journeys as viewed through the lens of social capital theory. Findings reveal that attaining the presidency came at a high personal cost. Love emerged as both the motivation and intrinsic reward for these leaders. Broad experience and knowledge were identified as crucial factors for achieving such positions. Additionally, a supportive spouse had a significant positive impact on some journeys. Authenticity was deemed essential, and female friendships provided important emotional and social support. Moreover, males in power were critical advocates for these female presidents.

Based on these findings and by understanding the experiences of these female leaders and the contextual factors that impacted them, valuable insights can be provided for boards of trustees, aspiring presidents from underrepresented groups, and those interested in achieving parity in community college presidencies. This study may encourage prospective female leaders to seek the presidency and informs stakeholders about the critical support systems needed to foster diversity in leadership.

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Dedication

Note: the following dedication was written April 8, 2023, as I sat alone in vigil at the bedside of my mother who was in the active phases of dying. She had been quite ill for several weeks and had progressed to the point where we knew her life would soon come to an end. I remember that day almost as an observer who was viewing the whole thing from somewhere in the corner. The room was quiet. The only sounds were an oxygen concentrator humming rhythmically and her breathing, which from time to time would pause and then begin again. I sat in a chair next to her bedside listening carefully to that breathing pattern, waiting anxiously each time it stopped.

My maternal grandmother had been on my mind that day, she had a titanic impact on my early life and then memories focused on, of course, my mom. I wish that I could tell you that I had some sort of transcendent spiritual or psychic experience where I felt the spirit of my grandmother close that day. I have hoped and looked for such an experience as that my whole life, but it did not come.

As the hours passed by, I had a laptop and this dissertation to work on and it became clear who I should dedicate this work to and why. And I don't think there is any self-sacrificing virtue in saying I worked on this project on the last day of my mother's life. But it did provide a distraction from the wreckage that was occurring in my heart and for that I am grateful.

So that is the background of the little dedication that was written only an hour before I held the hand of the woman who loved me best as her breathing pattern changed-- and then finally stopped forever--. And because it was, I am not going to edit it or touch it in any way. It is slightly inarticulate and normally I would have cleaned it up, but I will not do that. For me it was written on sacred ground.

This work is dedicated to two female leaders who ... my maternal grandmother Virginia Johnson who was an educator and instilled a love of learning and the importance of completing a degree in higher education in me at a young age. She would be proud of this achievement. And to my mother Lillian Kay Cherry, who passed away in the final months of this project. Her tenacity, work ethic, and love of laughter are a part of me and the reason I was able to persevere through what turned out to be a difficult doctoral road that passed through a global pandemic, the sudden loss of a brother, a divorce, two job changes, and her passing. These two remarkable and strong women are the reason I am where I am. They mentored and loved me, and I am grateful.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Addressing gender equality and its importance, former United Nations Secretary Kofi Annan has stated, “Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development, and building good governance” (Annan, 1998, p. 4). As one of the primary drivers of economic prosperity and the vehicle for hundreds of thousands of underrepresented Americans to improve their lives each year, the community college is a bastion of hope and an example to the world of democratic principles in action. However, as in almost all other areas, women have faced discrimination and struggle to find parity in leadership roles in community colleges.

Statement of the Problem

In 2017, the American Council on Education (ACE) released data on a five-year survey of American college presidents. What they found was that in the United States, community college presidents are predominantly White, male, and over the age of 60. And although the percentage of females filling the role had slowly increased from the 1980s, they were still significantly underrepresented in relation to the percentage of female students community colleges serve (Espinosa et al., 2017). More recently in 2021, ACE found that 36% of community college presidents were female, while 57% of students at those institutions identified as such (American Association of Community Colleges, 2021).

Even more concerning is that since 2010 the number of female CEOs at community colleges has not materially increased. The American Association of Community Colleges reported in March of 2023 that the percent of female CEOs at community colleges has remained nearly the same over a 13-year period, from 36.5% in 2010 to 36.6% in 2023 (Phillippe, 2023). Gains made in the previous decades seem to have stagnated.

Background of the Problem

Higher education in the United States was initially conceptualized to be not only of benefit to individuals but “be vital to the development and maintenance of a healthy republic” (The Aspen Institute, 2017, p. 13). As part of that vision, community colleges have long been the vehicles of economic prosperity in the United States. Community colleges provide technical, vocational, and transfer education for large numbers of female, underrepresented, and low-socioeconomic students. Their creation arose out of the need to democratize education and generate a robust, diversified economy with skilled workers. Many improvements, such as those prescribed by landmark reports such as the Truman Commission (Zook, 1947) and the Spellings Commission (U.S. Department of Education, 2006), have only expanded the community college mission of an open-door invitation to all to improve their lives through education and job training (Fonte, 2009). However, as in all other parts of United States society, leadership demographics have historically skewed toward White males (Great, 2023).

Representation matters. Just as the democratization of education hearkens back to the early days of the U.S. experiment, the argument against taxation without representation (Henry, 1765) echo through the cultural past. The founders of the Republic understood those in positions of power must be able to materially identify with the experiences and circumstances of those they led. They believed leaders must come from among them.

In 2004, Sullivan identified four distinct generations of community college leaders in the history of the movement. The first two generations were identified as founders and managers. These two groups had nearly identical demographics. They were primarily White males who were married, approximately 50 years old, had doctorates, made their way up through the leadership ranks of higher education, and many had served in the military. They exhibited a

traditional leadership style that built community colleges into hierarchal structures much like their counterparts in the business world and military (Sullivan, 2001). In the 1990s, the third generation of leaders was somewhat more diverse, with more significant percentages of females and minorities. This may have been due to affirmative action legislation providing a “foot in the door” (Sullivan, 2001, p. 562). Now community colleges are engaged in identifying a fourth generation of leaders (AACC, 2006; Sullivan, 2006). In 2004, Sullivan predicted a new type of emergent leader would be necessary to meet complex 21st century challenges. These leaders would require a leadership style that could adapt to the global dynamics and demands of a new century (Sullivan, 2001).

In education and business, institutions understand the critical need for diversity among leadership ranks. Increasing diversity among students and faculty is not enough; leaders must reflect the demographics they serve. In a Forbes expert panel article, Carylynn Larson (2021) stated:

Our life experiences create a powerful filter through which we see and engage with everything and everyone around us. Each time you increase the diversity of filters on your leadership team, you increase your awareness of the landscape your organization must navigate to succeed: employee needs, customer (or student) experiences, social impacts, global (regional and national) opportunities, etc. (para.5).

Women face many societal and cultural expectations that have impacted their ability to reach the presidency. In 2017, the American Council on Education found that 32% of female University presidents had altered their career progression to care for a family member, while only 16% of their male counterparts had done so (Espinosa et al., 2017). Women also report grappling with challenges to work–life balance, being responsible for more of the caretaking

needs of family members than males, imposter syndrome, and other burdens males generally do not experience (Herwatic, 2016).

In January of 2022, The College and University Professional Association for Human Resources reported on research conducted, which found that U.S. colleges and universities with female presidents and provosts have higher rates of females in administrative and instructional leadership positions than institutions led by men. The same study found that colleges and universities with female presidents report higher pay for women in administrative positions than institutions led by men (College & University Professional Association for Human Resources, 2022).

In 2011, Zenger Folkman Inc., a leading Corporate Leadership Consulting Firm, surveyed 7,280 leaders in business across the country. The survey asked respondents to rank male and female leaders on 16 competencies that had been found to be most impactful to overall leadership effectiveness during their 30 years of research. They found that female's strengths were not confined to traditionally accepted "nurturing" traits such as developing others and building relationships. "In fact, at every level, more women were rated by their peers, their bosses, their direct reports, and their other associates as better overall leaders than their male counterparts" (Folkman, 2012, para. 6).

Some of the barriers that females experience are described in research and include the glass ceiling theory, imposter syndrome, and the superwoman complex, among others. Barriers are gender-specific mental, social, and societal obstacles many females aspiring to presidencies face. Research is plentiful surrounding the career factors of females who have made their way to presidencies (Bynum, 2000; Dominici et al., 2009; Great, 2023). However, research is scant about women who were the first females to become the president of a community college.

As the number of female CEOs continues to lag behind their male counterparts, it will be crucial to understand how female leaders arose to the presidency of community colleges. In particular, identifying and making meaning of the essence of the phenomenon of the lived experiences of first-at-institution female presidents on the path to the presidency may bring insight into the gains made by women in overcoming identified barriers. This knowledge may assist future female leaders and other underrepresented groups as they move down the pathway to parity. To overcome the current lack of progress and avoid losing ground gained in the last 30 years, an understanding of these gains must be studied, understood, and passed to the next generation of female leaders. These insights may also lead to innovative ideas that are needed to address this issue in the coming years.

While much research has been completed in the past three decades identifying the challenges that face women attempting to reach a CEO position in the United States (Dominici et al., 2009; Great, 2023; Stutz, 2014), much less has been dedicated to women seeking a community college presidency, and almost nothing is available concerning women who were the first-at-institution female community college presidents. This study was designed to address the identified gap in the literature pertaining to this area. Furthermore, because interviewing women who have themselves navigated the road to a community college presidency can provide deeper insight into the nuances of their lived experiences, phenomenological research may allow for understanding that will not be able to be gained in other manners.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of first-at-institution female community college presidents on their road to the presidency and in particular the social influences they experienced during that time. Understanding the

phenomenon of the lived experiences of females who have successfully become first-at-institution female community college presidents, and exploring the contextual factors that impacted these experiences, can provide information that may be valuable to boards of trustees, females and other underrepresented groups who aspire to a presidency, and others who are interested in achieving parity in presidencies of community colleges.

Research Questions

Peoples (2021) states that phenomenological research questions must be about the lived experiences of the phenomenon and avoid language that makes assumptions about the phenomenon. In the attempt to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of first-at-institution female community college presidents and align with the phenomenological research design of the study, the following question and sub-question guided this research.

RQ1. What are the lived experiences of first-at-institution female community college presidents on the road to the presidency?

- a. How do first-at-institution female community college presidents experience social influences on the road to the presidency?

Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Lens

Lochmiller and Lester (2017) described a study's theoretical framework as the foundation that conveys the study's perspective and the conceptual lens as a theory framing the variables. A hermeneutic phenomenological theoretical framework was identified as an appropriate qualitative method for this study because it provides a way for the researcher to examine the lived experiences of first-at-institution female community college presidents on their path to the presidency and allows for the use of another theory to further examine the social influences on

that path. Transcendental phenomenology was also considered but does not allow for the use of additional conceptual lenses.

Social capital theory has been selected as a conceptual lens to gain insight and understanding of the experiences of social influences experienced by the participants on their path to the presidency. Social capital theory postulates that social and familial connections and networks have value and far-reaching impacts on the lives of individuals (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1986; Demirtas & Tezer, 2012; Seibert, Kraimer, and Liden, 2001). For this reason, it was determined to be the best choice for this study.

This theoretical framework and conceptual lens served as the structure and support for the rationale for the study, the problem statement, the purpose, the significance, and the research questions.

Methodology

Qualitative research seeks an “in-depth understanding of social phenomena within their natural setting. It focuses on the ‘why’ rather than the ‘what’ of social phenomena and relies on the direct experiences of human beings as meaning-making agents in their everyday lives” (Bayhi, n.d., para. 1). Phenomenology offers a tool for discovering the meaning of a phenomenon related to gender inequality (Jarmon, 2020). A qualitative phenomenological research design was selected for this study because it would provide means to best approach the research questions. Within the category of qualitative research phenomenology, the researcher considered both transcendental and hermeneutic philosophies.

Prior to the selection of this methodology, several data collection techniques were investigated, including descriptive methods, case studies, in-depth interviews, survey research,

and other approaches. It was determined that qualitative phenomenological methodology provided the best possible avenue for collecting the data desired.

The data collection instrumentation were semi-structured interviews that were conducted in a digital format over the Zoom platform. They were recorded and transcribed. This qualitative tool best lends itself to gathering in-depth data on the participants' perspectives, experiences, feelings, and the social influences that guided their decision-making (McMahon et al., 2015, p. 149). The population was a selection of 20 female presidents at community colleges who were the first of their gender to hold that role. The data collection instrument and the number of participants directly point towards a qualitative phenomenological methodology. Interpretive phenomenological analysis was used as the specific data analysis method in the study as it specifically supports a hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

Assumptions

The researcher acknowledges that in hermetical phenomenological research it is important to identify assumptions and biases that are held by the researcher in relation to the research topic that are assumed but cannot be established as fact (Peoples, 2021). Assumptions and biases in this type of research cannot be set aside and need to be recognized as new information and insight is gained (Peoples, 2021).

The researcher puts forth the following assumptions (a) inadvertently manifested implicit bias may be present on the part of both the researcher and the participants, (b) responses received from the participants in this study were voluntary and accurately reflected participants' honest opinions and experiences, and (c) the experiences of each president may have differed based on the location, size, student demography, type of institution/system served, and that

institution/system's cultural impact on the nature and role of the presidency (d) known or unknown structural barriers may limit the progression of women to the presidency.

The researcher attempted to identify and notate personal bias and assumptions by journaling during interviews. As part of hermeneutic phenomenology, identified assumptions were used as a lens to provide understanding in the data analysis process (Peoples, 2021).

The researcher was an observer and interviewer but did not attempt to influence the participants' responses. Questions were carefully formulated and aligned to the theoretical frameworks and conceptual lens selected, and peer reviewed to reduce bias and the possibility of impeding responses or the outcome of the research process. Peer reviewers were selected from among doctoral students in the Kansas State University CCLP who were currently serving in executive or upper administrative leadership positions in public community colleges.

Delimitations

The researcher acknowledges the following delimitations: (a) the study included 20 current first-at-institution female community college presidents from institutions in the United States, and (b) community colleges and community college leaders referred to in the study were limited to public and private, not-for-profit, two-year institutions.

Significance of the Study

This research provided insights into the experiences of the first-at-institution female community college presidents in the United States. The information gathered from this study may be valuable to boards of trustees when reviewing hiring practices and current female presidents as they endeavor to support and empower other women in their professional aspirations. It may also prove useful to community college presidents and leaders who are interested in increasing parity. Additionally, this research may be valuable to women who aspire

to secure a first-time presidency and contributes to the existing body of knowledge. Furthermore, this study seeks to serve as an exemplar of transferable information that may be applied to other underrepresented groups, including minorities and the LGBTQ+ community.

Definition of Terms

The following terms and definitions are used throughout the study.

Barrier

An obstacle that prevents or impedes access to a desired goal (*Definition of Barrier*, 2023).

Glass Ceiling

An invisible barrier that prevents women or minorities from rising in an organizational hierarchy (Bynum, 2000).

Hermeneutic Circle

Developed by Heidegger, a process of interpretation as revision by moving back and forth between the whole and parts of a text or observed phenomenon to gain understanding (Peoples, 2021).

Leadership

The process of motivating others to collaborate and achieve a common goal (Vroom and Jago, 2007).

Mentor

A trusted counselor or guide. Generally, someone who has attained a level of leadership that one would aspire to (Brown, 2005).

Social Capital

“The value of the relationships between people who work or live together and the knowledge and skills that they have and share” (*social capital*, 2023).

Alignment Table

An alignment table is provided. It details the alignment of the research question and sub-question, theoretical framework, conceptual lens, methodology, and data (see Appendix A.1, Alignment of Research Questions, Theoretical Framework, Methodology, and Data).

Chapter Summary

Women face unique challenges on the road to the presidency. Although gains have been made since the 1990s, females are still significantly underrepresented in presidency/CEO positions at community colleges (Phillippe, 2023). And concerningly, progress has come to a complete stop in the last decade. Those interested in reaching parity need to more fully understand the experiences of first-at-institution female community college presidents on the road to the presidency.

This chapter provided an overview of the study, including the problem statement and background of the problem being addressed, the study's purpose, and research question and sub-question were presented. Hermeneutical phenomenology was presented as the theoretical framework that directed the investigation with a conceptual lens of social capital theory utilized to further explore the lived experiences of first-at-institution female community college presidents. A short explanation of the alignment table was provided. An overview of the methodology was shared, and interpretive phenomenological analysis was introduced as the specific data analysis technique. Also discussed were the definitions of key terminology found in this study, as well as research assumptions, delimitations, and the significance of the study.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 presented an overview of the study. Chapter 2 will provide an analysis of the literature informing the study. Chapter 3 will discuss the research methodology of this study.

Chapter 4 will describe the analysis of the data collected and critical findings. Chapter 5 will reflect on conclusions, implications, and further research recommendations.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of first-at-institution female community college presidents on their road to the presidency and in particular the social influences they experienced during that time. Hermeneutic phenomenology is the theoretical framework the study is viewed through with a conceptual lens of social capital theory because it allows the researcher to gain insight into what is happening in the complex relationships that occur socially and culturally, which influence women seeking leadership (Machalek & Martin, 2015).

In hermeneutic phenomenological research the context of the experience is considered (Peoples, 2021). This literature review and analysis reflect the theoretical framework and conceptual lens of the study by first reviewing the social context of the perceived traits of female leaders and presidents. It then examines the literature on pertinent social influences on the leadership trajectories of females who seek the presidency. The review also discusses the gap in current literature that this study is designed to address.

Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory, as defined by Coleman in 1986, is grounded in an idea expressed by the political philosopher Rousseau. That idea was that individuals are “purposeful and goal-directed, guided by interests (or values) and by the rewards and constraints imposed by the social environment” (Coleman, 1986, p. 1311). It theorizes that individual action is influenced and connected to larger macrosocial systems and large-scale change. In short, the actions of individuals impact societal functioning and change, and the movement of society and

communities influence individual activity. Individuals and communities are locked in an influential symbiotic relationship.

The central theoretical problems that social capital theory brings together are: how the purposive actions of the actors combine to bring about system-level behavior, and how those purposive actions are in turn shaped by constraints that result from the behavior of the system. The two problems when taken together provide the elusive result that functional analysis seeks: to characterize the ongoing and sometime self-equilibrating functioning of a social system (Coleman, 1986, p. 1312).

Coleman developed the idea that social capital, much like physical and human capital, facilitates production (1986). Networks of social connections can affect change and production. It has value (Coleman, 1986). Plagens and Stapleton (2011) also discuss that social capital theory encourages thinking of interpersonal relationships and networks as resources much like economic, human, or physical capital. The idea has an intuitive appeal. Everyone knows someone who is talented at developing relationships and leveraging those relationships to get their goals accomplished. For those who are seeking leadership positions, the development of social relationships and networks with others who might have influence on achieving that goal would logically assist that path.

Bourdieu, who is recognized with Coleman as one whose work most social capital research is based upon defined it in this manner:

The aggregate of the actual and potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of

its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word (Bourdieu, 1986).

In a nutshell, social capital theory suggests that individuals with well-connected social networks have valuable resources they can leverage in assisting them in reaching their goals. In addition, others will invest in a relationship if they are perceived as having access to social resources (Lancee, 2012). Within the context of this theory, social capital is valuable.

This social sciences theory has been used in education research to describe and understand relationships and how those relationships influence outcomes. “Social capital theory contends that social relationships are resources that can lead to the development and accumulation of human capital” (Machalek & Martin, 2015, p. 892). James Coleman conceived the theory to understand social patterns and influences contributing to differences in educational achievement between ethnic groups. The idea says that “educational expectation, norms, and obligations that exist within a family or a community are important social capital that can influence the level of. . . involvement and investment, which in turn affect academic success” (Ho, 2022, p.1).

In 2001 research paper titled *A Social Capital Theory of Success*, Seibert, Kraimer, and Liden observed that while career success had been studied from the viewpoint of several different models that included demographic factors, motivational considerations, industry variables, and others, not much research had been completed surrounding the role of interpersonal relationships and behaviors. In that work they cited research by Luthans, Hodgetts, and Rosenkrantz (1988), which found that the “most successful managers spent 70 percent more time engaged in networking activities and 10 percent more time engaged in routine

communication activities than their less successful counterparts” (Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001, p. 219).

Underneath the umbrella of social capital theory three sub-theories, which provide different ways to conceptualize the idea were discussed by Seibert, Kraimer and Liden (2001). Weak tie theory investigates the nature of relationships or ties, structural holes theory investigates the pattern of the ties, and social resource theory focuses on the characteristics of the individuals (Seibert, Kraimer, and Liden, 2001). All of these theories demonstrate that social networks may provide valuable resources for career progression. Contact with those in positions of power or influence may lead to access to information, resources, and sponsorship that result in increased salary, promotions, and career satisfaction (Seibert, Kraimer, and Liden, 2001). Their research also demonstrated that the strength of the network influenced the career outcome.

Seibert, Kraimer, and Liden (2001) caution that relying only on this theory without considering the many other possible influences on career progression may result in a biased outcome. Care was taken by the researcher to journal such information as it occurred to attempt to reduce bias in the results of this study.

The conceptual lens of social capital theory makes sense as the tool to be used to explore social influences and social contexts of first-at-institution female presidents.

Perceived Traits of Female Leaders and Presidents

History

In a dissertation investigating female leadership characteristics, Bynum (2000) completed a review of historical female leaders from the ancient world through modern history. It was found that there was some consistency in the traits that were used to describe successful female leaders. “The terms visionary, courageous, intelligent, charismatic, confident, authoritative,

genius, dedicated, energetic, astute, ambitious, aggressive, ethical, independent, shrewd, sensible, and persistent appeared consistently in the literature describing historical women leaders” (Bynum, 2000, p. 23).

From the earliest neolithic civilizations to the depictions of Morrigan, the goddess of war and fertility in Celtic cultures to Athena in Greek mythology-- in ancient cultures across the world, there was an emphasis placed on the ability of women to give birth and their connection to fertility (Bynum, 2000). This connection played a significant part in the characteristics that were attributed to female leaders. Interestingly, modern female leaders are described using many of the same terms (Bynum, 2000).

Higher Education

More particularly to higher education, in April of 1979, Martha McGee presented a paper at the Annual Convention of the National Association for Women Deans, Administrators, and Counselors that outlined research surrounding the life situations and characteristics of female presidents at the time. The study found that female presidents typically: (1) spent their entire career in education; (2) had worked in three or fewer institutions; (3) had attained a doctorate; (4) had a mother who was at least a high school graduate not working outside the home, and a father who attended college and worked in a professional, technical, or managerial field; (5) had not initiated their own application, but was approached by a search committee; (6) expressed great satisfaction with their position; and (7) considered gender a distinct asset (McGee, 1979). While this list of life experience and characteristics may be partially outdated, it demonstrates individual, social, and environmental/societal forces upon achieving the office of president.

Boards of Trustees

Boards of Trustees have the ultimate authority for hiring community college presidents and the demographic makeup of a Board can influence hiring decisions. In 2010, Plinsk and Packer conducted a study aimed at revealing what Boards of Trustees believed were the most important characteristics of a community college president of either gender. What was found in order from most important to least was that leaders were: (1) passionate about education - is a champion of community colleges; (2) dependable - follows through on commitments and arrives on time or early for appointments and meetings; (3) energetic - has a high energy level and is in good health; (4) calm under pressure - ability to juggle multiple challenges; (5) charismatic - is well-liked and respected; (6) community involvement - membership in Rotary Club or Kiwanis; (7) organized - ability to manage time and resources effectively; (8) presence - looks the part of a president, is the image of the institution; (9) renaissance person - well rounded and well versed in multiple areas; (10) self-aware - has a sense of who they are as a person; (11) self-motivated - willing to take on challenges; (12) tactful - can provide constructive criticism diplomatically; (13) well balanced - has a balanced personal and professional life; pursues hobbies and diversions; (14) friendly - good sense of humor; (15) family person - is married (Plinske & Packard, 2010). Board members also noted that “looking like a president” was vital to them (Plinske & Packard, 2010, p. 294). Lorenzo (2020) noted that with men being the predominant leaders in higher education, looking like a president might be difficult for a woman. Some scholars have noted that what is considered a leadership characteristic has been significantly influenced by the patriarchal societies where Western culture developed and may be perceived to score lower in characteristics because they do not look the part (Lorenzo, 2020).

In a 2016 article for the American Association of Community Colleges, Kim Bobby, director of the American Council of Education's Inclusive Excellence Group, said:

We have to change the notion of what a good leader looks like...There is still a lot of unconscious bias that goes into the search process, women tend to be scrutinized more about certain aspects of leadership, skill sets and abilities, budgeting and finance, and the ability to be decisive. We need to take gender out and look at good leadership qualities. (Rogan, 2016, para. 2-3)

As the Bynum (2000) study revealed, many perceived personal traits of leaders, particularly female leaders, have held steady throughout human history. In modern times as women have entered the workforce in more significant numbers, the cultural impact of a focus on fertility and motherhood has created barriers to leadership (Moody, 2018).

Cultural opinions and expectations of women lead to social barriers women experience in modern leadership (Moody, 2018). With the context of the perceived supposed traits a female community college leader should possess in mind, there will now be a discussion of some of the prevalent social influences experienced by many females aspiring to the presidency.

Social Influences on Leadership Trajectories

As stated by Margaret Wheatley in an article about the capacity for groups to self-organize, she said,

It is a travesty to think we can understand ourselves or another human being independent of being in a relationship with them. . . we live in a world that has emergent properties, which means that when a group is together it is capable of behaviors that simply are not knowable when you study the individuals. It doesn't matter how well, how deeply, or how long you study the individuals, you would never see the potential for the . . .

individual. This is true of human behavior as well. So why do we spend so much time trying to understand our self (little s), since that self changes -- whole new capacities come forward in us -- when we are together in our communities? (Wheatley, 2007, para. 35)

Everyone, including females aspiring to the presidency of a community college are influenced by social forces and relationships (Hawkins, 2022). These forces can help or hinder the attainment of that goal. This section discusses prevalent forces identified in the literature that have had both a positive and negative impact on females seeking leadership roles.

Gender Discrimination

During her first oral argument before the Supreme Court in 1973, lawyer Ruth Bader Ginsberg paraphrased the 19th century abolitionist and women's rights activist Sarah Moore Grimké by stating, "I ask no favor for my sex. All I ask of our brethren is that they take their feet off our necks" (Grimké, 1837, as cited by Ginsburg, 1973, p. 21).

On the pathway to the community college presidency, Buddemeier (1998) found that 18% of the female presidents were discouraged from applying because they were female, 41% experienced prejudice in the hiring process, and 81% experienced discrimination based on their gender.

Surprisingly, in a 2014 study of minority female community college presidents in the State of Illinois, findings included that the subjects experienced more discrimination based on their gender rather than racial status (Stutz, 2014). The subjects of that study identified that their career decision-making processes were more centered on "doing a good job in every position they held" (Stutz, 2014, p. 103). These women also felt they had to work harder than men to attain the same positions, as well as reporting feelings of isolation and the pressure of being

judged at higher standards than their male counterparts. In the same 2014 study Stutz reported that they also felt pressure to “pave the way” for others like them (p. 28).

Researchers at John Hopkins found four general areas lead to understanding why there are so few women in leadership positions: (a) paths to leadership are slower or more often blocked for women; (b) leadership positions are less appealing to women; (c) women already in leadership roles are not as appreciated as much as males or appropriately rewarded; and (d) women are more often excluded because of their gender from the informal network of intellectual leadership than males are (Dominici et al., 2009).

While some claim that women face gender discrimination in attaining leadership roles, others point to a possible difference in ambition between genders towards leadership roles. It may be that many women don’t want to lead. With this hypothesis in mind, in 2019 Fisk and Overton examined whether “anticipated gender discrimination”— more specifically, the belief that females are punished more harshly than males for leadership failure decrease women’s leadership ambitions. Their research found that female leaders “face greater penalties and reputational losses for failure” (Fisk & Overton, 2019, p. 320). They also found evidence that women are aware of these gendered sanctions for failing in a leadership role and that this knowledge “depresses their leadership ambitions” (Fisk & Overton, 2019, p. 319).

In 2020, Keohane discussed how many more women now inhabit visible leadership positions. She stated that this is due to four factors:

- Opportunities created by access to higher education, which has occurred since the 1920s,
- voting and legal protections that have come as a result of the suffrage movement,

- the invention of time-saving devices such as washing machines, which freed up time from household chores,
- and legal and easy access to birth control.

Despite these historic advancements women still face many barriers, including generally being the primary caregiver for household and children (Eagly and Carli, 2007). The parity gap that is closing at a “glacial” (Keohane, 2020) pace is impacted by systematic obstacles that if not addressed, may never be reached.

Keohane also argued that the primary obstacle to women achieving top leadership positions in any field is that they still bear the primary responsibility for childcare and taking care of the home in most societies. Few organizations or countries have workplace policies that support families, such as childcare that is affordable, high-quality, and reliable; flexible work schedules; and support for those caring for sick children or aging parents (Keohane, 2020). This creates considerable challenges for working parents, particularly mothers. The rigid expectation that one must demonstrate job commitment by working long hours each day and being on call at all times presents a considerable barrier to women’s advancement. While hours worked may correlate with productivity in some professions, the reality is more complex than that metric may suggest. Nevertheless, that measure often influences promotion and job opportunities. This expectation disproportionately affects working mothers (Keohane, N., 2020).

Related to this topic, in higher education, women express significant dissatisfaction in the workplace, citing an imbalance between home and work lives (Ryan & Peters, 2015). Compared to their male counterparts, women in academia reported working 48 hours or more per week, struggling with work-family balance, and feeling overwhelmed by the pressure and stress of their roles (Ryan & Peters, 2015).

Eagly and Carli (2007) observed that, “all and all, despite the weakening of the household division of labor, family responsibilities still take a much greater toll on the workplace careers of women than those of men” (p. 59).

Clearly, gender discrimination can take many forms and is deeply ingrained in systems and culture. Social influences can have the effect of either being a barrier to progress, neutral, or aiding progress.

The Glass Ceiling Theory

In 1978, a thirty-one-year-old mid-level manager at New York Telephone Co. named Marilyn Loden unknowingly made history when the only female Vice President at her company asked her to participate in a panel discussion at that year’s Women’s Exposition in New York. The panel’s topic was titled *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall*, and centered on how women’s self-image was to blame for their lack of advancement into management positions. As part of her work at New York Telephone, Loden was responsible for determining why more women weren’t entering leadership positions. Her research in this area led her to believe that the problem was not just what her female counterparts believed about themselves or what they were wearing or saying (Vargas, 2018). “It seemed to me there was an invisible barrier to advancement that people didn’t recognize,” (Vargas, 2018, p. 1) Loden later stated in a Washington Post interview. In her remarks to the panel, she called this barrier a glass ceiling (Vargas, 2018).

Several years later, the term was brought into mainstream consciousness by a March 24, 1986 *Wall Street Journal* article by Carol Hymowitz and Timothy Schellhardt titled *The Glass Ceiling* on women’s challenges in attaining top leadership roles. The article outlined many ideas that continue to be discussed today, such as concerns about females’ caregiving roles taking

distracting them from business concerns, the lack of mentors, exclusion from personal relationships that advance careers, and questions about temperament.

In 1991, the US Department of Labor defined glass ceilings as bias that prevents females from progressing into leadership roles (Wade, 2021). In 1997, the term was added to the Oxford English Dictionary as “an unofficial or unacknowledged barrier to personal advancement,” especially as it related to “a woman or a member of an ethnic minority in employment” (Proffitt, 1997, p. 97)

In 1995 the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission released a report stating that after two decades in the workforce, women held only 5% of senior management positions, classified as a Vice President or higher, in Fortune 1000 companies (Kaufman-Rosen, 1995). As part of the report, the commission reported that the glass ceiling was denying many unidentified numbers of qualified women the opportunity to compete for and hold executive-level positions (Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). The commission also found that women had 45.7% of America’s jobs and more than half of master’s degrees being awarded. Even with that, 95% of senior managers were men, and female managers’ earnings were, on average, only 68% of their male equivalents (“The conundrum of the glass ceiling - women in business”, 2005, para. 1).

By 2005, things had not improved much. Women had made slight gains by serving in top management roles at just under 8%, and earnings were 72% of their male counterparts (“The conundrum of the glass ceiling - women in business”, 2005, para. 3).

In more recent history, politician Hilary Clinton frequently spoke about the glass ceiling as she ran for office in the 2016 presidential election. In her televised concession speech that year, she said,

I know we have still not shattered that highest and hardest glass ceiling, but someday someone will. . . And to all of the little girls who are watching this, never doubt that you are valuable and powerful and deserving of every chance and opportunity in the world to pursue and achieve your own dreams (Clinton, 2016, para. 26).

The glass ceiling metaphor had become widely accepted in broader culture, but there were some who saw problems with the description of the challenge that women faced. The same year Hilary Clinton famously invoked the term in her concession speech, journalist Zoe Williams criticized the metaphor. She argued that the way the glass ceiling “behaves is that women can smash their way through it and it will heal over immediately, leaving no trace” (Williams, 2016, para. 6). She reasoned that since Jeanette Rankin became the first woman to serve in the United States House of Representatives at the end of World War I, there had only been 299 other female representatives. She wrote:

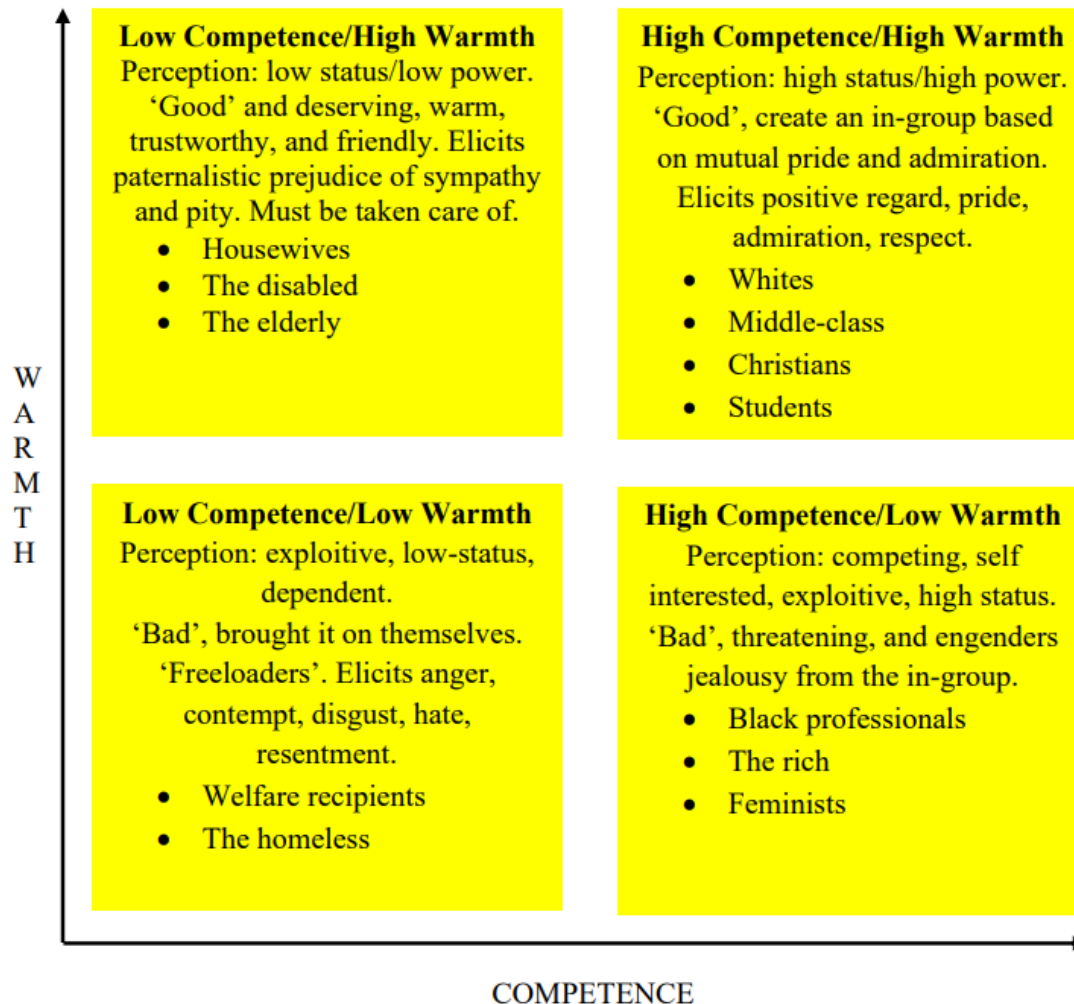
Each new generation of women has had to smash the same ceiling all over again, which makes it more like a membrane, self-healing through some immune system of the body politic that we might call “deep-seated misogyny”. It is actually impossible to imagine a ceiling that is less like glass. (Williams, 2016, para. 6)

Likeability and the Double Bind

Williams et al. (2018) argued that it is possible to make sense of stereotypes by looking at them on an axis of warmth or likeability, and competence. Those researchers probed to find general emotional responses to groups in four quadrants. (Please see the following figure).

Figure 1

Model of Stereotype and Prejudice, adapted from Williams et al., (2018)



Humans have a biological and psychological need to be accepted, validated, and part of an in-group. Williams et al. (2018) identified this as being a member of a high competence/high warmth group. To be relegated to any other quadrant, such as low competence/high warmth by the in-group is uncomfortable (Williams et al., 2018). The difficulty arises for women when the qualifications of belonging to one quadrant directly oppose being in another. According to Williams et al. (2018) women are either perceived as low competence/high warmth, or when

they seek competence and power, they are perceived as high competence/low warmth. This occurs in part because competence is seen as a male-dominated characteristic. This makes it very difficult for women to be perceived as both warm and competent. One excludes the other. This situation is termed the double bind (Williams et al., 2018).

The idea that there is a ‘right’ way to be a woman, to perform one’s gender, is ongoing and pervasive. Good women are modest, charming, polite, and unobtrusive, content to earn. . . less than their male counterparts, and to pick up the double load of career and house/child/elderly parent care. ‘Good’ women are liked. ‘Bad’ women are those who don’t adhere to these standards, and by performing their gender ‘wrong’ initiate a set of punishments both obvious and indirect. ‘Bad’ women are disliked. (Williams et al., 2018, p. 79)

A direct one-liner, often attributed to Bette Davis, gets right to the crux of the double bind for women. “When a man gives his opinion, he’s a man. When a woman gives her opinion, she’s a bitch” (Davis, n.d., as cited by Figes, 2007). Women are expected to be warm (Williams et al., 2018). Women in leadership roles face expectations of how they should manage conflict based on their gender (Hawkins, 2022). When women act outside of expected behavior patterns, social costs are associated.

Code-Switching

Code-switching was developed initially in linguistics to describe the behavior of bi-lingual persons switching back and forth between languages (Gardner-Chloros, 2009). The meaning has broadened to include the many ways that people change their behaviors to align with the dominant culture more closely. A viral video popularized code-switching in 2012. It showed President Obama entering the United States Men’s Olympic Basketball Team locker

room. As he approached the White assistant coach, he extended his hand for a traditional handshake. He then moved to shake hands with Black player Kevin Durant, and instead of shaking hands in the same way, he locked hands with Mr. Durant and pulled him in for a chest bump. This shifting of behavior is code-switching (Mostafa Mohamed, 2013).

Stitham (2020) argued that the dominant culture in workplaces and academia “is the culture that has been able, through economic, social, or political power, to impose its values, language, and ways of behaving on other cultures” (p. 1). This power structure has been heavily influenced by White, male, cis-gendered, heteronormative, Western values. Culture is much like the water fish swim in; it is pervasive and almost invisible to those who swim in it. Unspoken social norms influence the acceptance of members of the group. It sends a message that there are ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways of behaving (Stitham, 2020).

Persons whose identities and backgrounds do not align with the prevailing culture often alter their behaviors and mannerisms to fit in. This behavior modification is sometimes a conscious choice and other times unconscious. Either way, there is enormous social pressure to conform.

Research on code-switching has primarily focused on the ways that Black people navigate the cultural complexities surrounding the phenomena. Still, findings may inform how other minority groups and women are affected by this phenomenon (McCluney et al., 2019).

In 2019, *Harvard Business Review* completed research that identified three primary reasons people code-switch: (a) downplaying membership in stigmatized groups increases the perception of professionalism and the likelihood of being hired, (b) it avoids negative stereotypes and assists with the perception of leadership ability, (c) expressing shared interest and similarity with leaders increases the likelihood of promotion (McCluney et al., 2019, para. 8).

There are some negative consequences of code-switching. Downplaying one's authentic self can be tiring and lead to burnout. Not feeling free to be one's 'authentic' self also reduces self-expression (McCluney et al., 2019). In an online Harvard Business review article, Black professionals reported feeling as though they were in constant battle of censoring or watering down their thoughts, views, and personalities for the possibility of being looked at differently than someone of a different race that exhibited the same behavior. They described feeling exhausted while navigating an all-White workplace (McCluney et al., 2019). Similar sentiments can be attributed to women trying to gain entry into the 'boys club' of leadership.

In a 2021 Forbes article, Kramer argued that in many cases code-switching is simply image management and that all successful professionals must engage in this practice to some degree to gain acceptance in their companies and move forward in their careers (Kramer, 2021). For example, a person working as a stockbroker in New York City may dress and speak very differently than someone working in Silicon Valley or rural West Texas. In fact, research done by O'Neill and O'Reilly (2011) found that women with masculine traits such as dominance, aggressiveness, and competitiveness are prone to "backlash" because they are not conforming to socially accepted female behavior. However, women with those traits who also have high levels of self-monitoring and modulate their behavior based on the situation had higher rates of success in gaining promotion to leadership positions than even men did (O'Neill & O'Reilly, 2011).

Balancing authenticity with image management is a topic that seems to have no real agreement; however, research has shown that building an organizational culture where employees from diverse backgrounds are valued and understood leads to higher employee engagement and higher-performing institutions. Some argue that providing a place for employees to be their authentic selves is just the right thing to do (Allen et al., 2021; Wong, 2019).

Imposter Syndrome

In the early 1970s, Pauline Clance was an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Oberlin College. On the road to completing her Ph.D., she frequently described feeling like she was tricking her professors and others into believing she was more intelligent and capable than she truly was (Jamison, 2023). She also noticed that many of her high-achieving female students described the same phenomena. This observation led to a study conducted by Clance and a female colleague over the course of 5 years, which interviewed 150 “successful” females. They found that women “in their sample were particularly prone to ‘an internal experience of intellectual phoniness,’ living in perpetual fear that ‘some significant person will discover that they are indeed intellectual impostors” (Jamison, 2023, para. 4). Over the next 50 years, the concept of Imposter Syndrome gained traction and became widely accepted.

Interestingly, Clance and Imes’s original paper attributed certain family patterns as giving rise to impostor feelings. It went one of two ways, either the woman had a sibling who had been identified as “the smart one,” (Jamison, 2023) or else they had been identified as “superior in every way—intellect, personality, appearance, talent” (Jamison, 2023).

The paper theorized that women who were compared to a supposed superior sibling were driven to find validation but ended up doubting it once received. Those who were deemed to be superior found “a disconnect between their parents’ unrealistic faith in their capacities and the experience of fallibility that life inevitably brings” (Jamison, 2023). For women who experience either of these types of family messaging, the dissonance between the identity communicated to them from their family and that received from the world creates doubt (Jamison, 2023).

Despite academic and professional accomplishments, women who experience imposter syndrome believe they are not as intelligent or worthy as others in the same role or level and

have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise (Tulshyan & Burey, 2021). Many high-profile women, including First Lady Michelle Obama and Sheryl Sandberg of Facebook, have spoken about experiencing the feelings of discomfort, anxiety, and self-doubt associated with imposter syndrome, and it has become commonplace for professional development target to women to include information on how to overcome the phenomenon (Tulshyan & Burey, 2021).

However, in the last few years, criticism of the concept has pointed out that at the time it was developed, no consideration was given to the effect systematic racism, classism, xenophobia, and other biases had on women. Critics suggest that imposter syndrome places blame on women, not their workplace (Tulshyan & Burey, 2021). They argue that women who experience unsupportive cultures, criticism, and bias may have normal feelings of anxiety, doubt, marginalization, and disillusionment.

Still, other critics point out that imposter syndrome was based on a study of White women in higher socioeconomic classes. Women of color frequently did not describe the same feelings (Jamison, 2023). Men have also been reported as experiencing Imposter Syndrome. The limited research that is available on the topic has shown that “men experience imposter syndrome, but their expression of it may appear differently. Due to gender norms and fear of backlash, men are possibly less likely to externalize their feelings” (Owens, 2021, para. 20).

While it is clear that high-achieving women often experience the effects described by Imposter Syndrome, the data does not completely support that it is limited to women. As Jamison succinctly described it in a 2023 *New Yorker* article:

Impostor phenomenon, as a concept, effectively functions as an emotional filing cabinet organizing a variety of fraught feelings that we can experience as we try to reconcile three aspects of our personhood: how we experience ourselves, how we present ourselves

to the world, and how the world reflects that self back to us. The phenomenon names an unspoken, ongoing crisis arising from the gaps between these various versions of the self, and designates not a syndrome but an inescapable part of being alive. (Jamison, 2023, para. 49)

Superwoman Complex

Marjorie Hansen Shaevitz first coined the psychological term Superwoman Complex (SWC) (Mapenzi, 2019). She identified the ideal Superwoman as a “loving wife and mother, devoted friend, caring daughter, good housekeeper, and competent worker” (Mapenzi, 2019, p. 8). Many women experience the SWC, particularly those in high-achieving academic roles.

The propagated notion of the superwoman is a woman who takes on multiple roles at once. In particular, these women are a wife-mother-employee combination (Sumra & Schillaci, 2015). It would seem intuitive that women trying to be high achievers while juggling these multiple roles and expectations would experience increased stress levels and lower life satisfaction. However, results from studies are mixed. In a 2015 study, Sumra and Schillaci found no statistical correlation between increased stress response in the body and women taking on multiple roles. They also found that the women studied did not report lower life satisfaction than women who did not take on various roles (Sumra & Schillaci, 2015).

Familial Influence

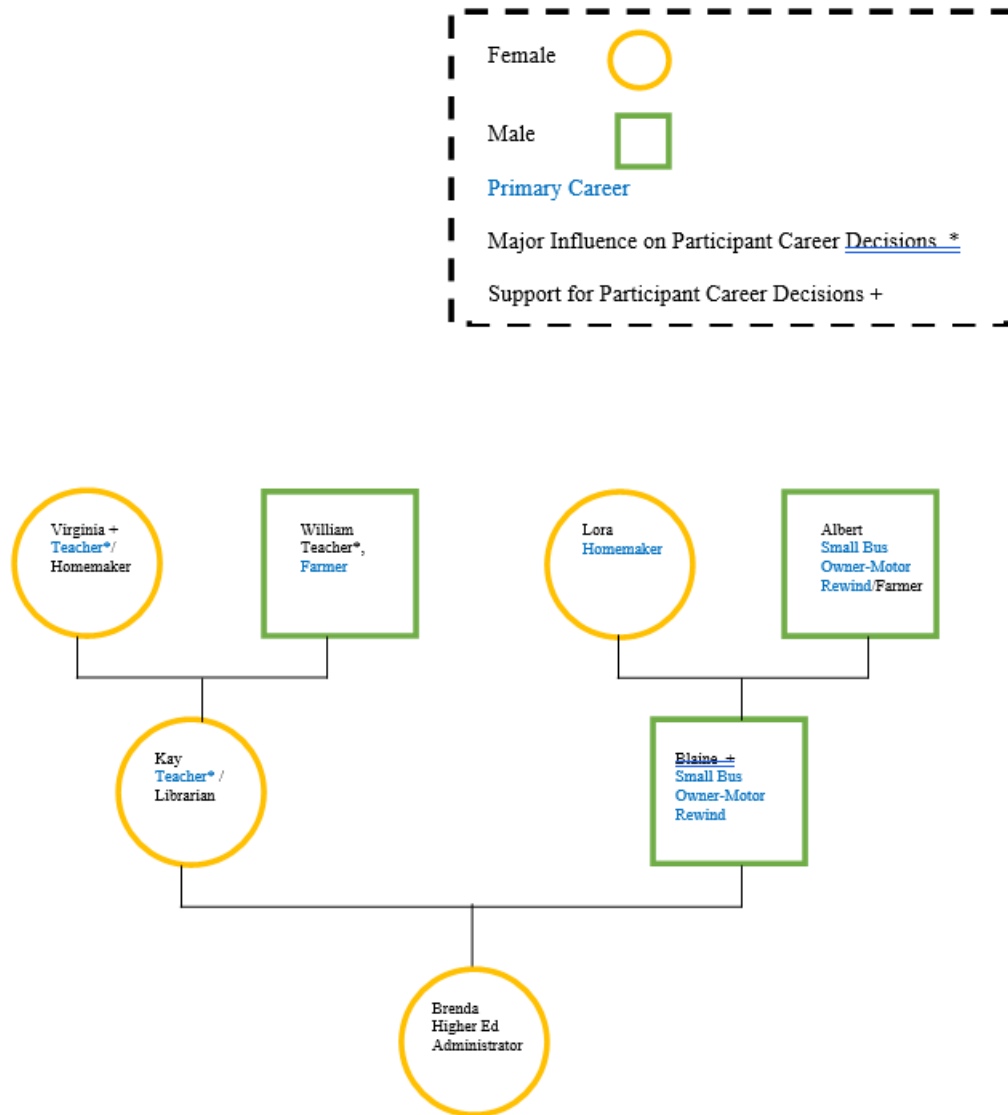
Minor et al. (1998) argued that career choices are shaped through “the constant interaction of social, cultural, geographic, and hereditary contexts over time” (p. 139) and that family roles and expectations play a large part in the career choices made by individuals (Minor et al., 1998). Chope (2002) argued that family values and attitudes can adversely affect the career decision process (p. 176). He also found that career choice indecision often springs from

experiences in early life where individuals are neglected or sharply criticized for their decisions. Values that are passed down about money, prestige, and success can also influence the choices and individual makes.

There are modeling influences that occur within families. The careers that are chosen by close relatives are known and familiar to individuals. A career genogram is a diagram that maps at least three familial generations of influences (McMahon & Watson, 2015). It is a genealogy of careers in a family unit and is used by social scientists to examine the influence of the social network of family members and their career choices on an individual. A family diagram is created, and the careers of each of those listed are noted. The participant then reflects on possible social influences this social network had on their own career (McMahon & Watson, 2015). As an example, the researcher has completed a basic career genogram to show the influence that the maternal side of her family had on her choice to become an educator.

Figure 2

Example of Basic Career Genogram, adapted from McMahon (2011)



Mentorship

Another social influence that may be found formally within an institution or informally is mentorship. In 2018, a study by Moscariello found that mid-level female administrators at community colleges benefited from informal mentoring. The administrators helped not only in

their careers but personally as well. “Self-confidence, career success, professional development, and leadership opportunities resulted from these experiences” (Moscariello, 2018, p. 3).

Brown found that mentorship relationships are an “invaluable resource for the recruitment and preparation of women for the college presidency” (Brown, 2005, p. 659).

Mentor relationships can be a vital influence on a woman’s career. Even women who hold all of the experience and credentials necessary for leadership may not be able to achieve their goals without being vouched for by influential colleagues (Brown, 2005).

Both formal and informal mentorship was found to be the most common practice used by women attempting to navigate their way to the college presidency in a study by Oikelome in 2017. “Mentors were essential in providing encouragement, advice, insight, guidance, and, in some instances, sponsorship” (Oikelome, 2017, p. 34). In research surrounding characteristics of successful entrepreneurial female leaders, Lorenzo (2020) determined that it is vital for women seeking leadership to find mentors to help develop leadership characteristics.

Because mentorship is so powerful the lack of access to it is a concern. Allen et al. (2021) concluded that systematic changes in academic institutional policy, legislation, cultural norms, and other areas are required to address women’s lack of equity in leadership positions. They posit that lower levels of women in leadership positions adversely affect the women aspiring to those roles because of a lack of mentorship and other critical opportunities (Allen et al., 2021).

Work Life Balance

American author, businessman, educator, and speaker, Stephen Covey noted that, “The challenge of work-life balance is without question one of the most significant struggles faced by modern man. I’ve surveyed thousands of audiences about their greatest personal and professional challenges. Life balance is always at or near the top” (2007).

Sundaresan found that when a woman pursues a leadership role within an organization, she must consider the impact on various aspects of her life, such as hobbies, personal relationships, and family. Executive positions often demand significant time and effort, which can be challenging for a working woman to manage alongside family responsibilities. It can be nearly impossible for a working mother in a top management role to also be the primary caregiver for her child. Women frequently face greater challenges in maintaining balance due to the competing pressures of work and home demands. Consequently, working women must adeptly manage their personal balance and skillfully integrate their roles to maximize their potential in all areas of life (Sundaresan, 2014).

Gaps in the Literature

In 1999, Tedrow & Rhoads found that “little existing research explores what may be at work in shaping women’s career paths at community colleges” (p. 1). Buddemeier (1998) also indicated that further research should be done to explore the possible social pressure of women discouraging other women. Amey et al. (2002) stressed that there is a great need to improve the understanding of boards of trustees on the modern look of leaders and the very definition of leadership. Amey et al. also discussed that an improved understanding of non-traditional career pathways might produce more diverse candidate pools for senior positions. Amey (2006) posited that a main criticism of leadership literature is the lack of focus on females. Amey suggested this was due to the high percentage of male presidents. Studies may have been skewed in that direction because the presidential position was primarily held by White males. Gaps in the literature indicate that a clearer understanding of women’s experiences as they consider and approach seeking the presidency is needed. Paternoster (2006) stated that many of the previous studies on this subject have been quantitative and that the addition of qualitative studies would

provide greater understanding by offering insights and perspectives of women's experiences that quantitative studies do not.

In the review of the literature, it was found that a significant amount of research has been completed in the last 20 years surrounding women seeking a college presidency in the United States (Dominici et al., 2009; Espinosa et al., 2017; Faniko et al., 2022; Great, 2023; Ligeikis, 2010; McGee, 1979; Moody, 2018; Phillippe, 2023; Porter, 2017; Rogan, 2016; Wade, 2021). There has also been some research completed specific to women seeking and attaining the role of president of a community college. However, research is scant to non-existent for first-at-institution female community college presidents and those females seeking a similar role. There is also a lack of qualitative studies that address this area. This study is designed to begin to address that gap.

Chapter Summary

The chapter began with a review and discussion of literature surrounding the study's conceptual lens of social capital theory, which laid the framework for the rest of the discussion in the chapter. It was followed by a review and discussion of perceived traits of female leaders throughout history, more specifically in higher education, and by boards of trustees who are ultimately responsible for the hiring decisions of presidency roles. Social influences on female leadership trajectories were then explored. It was found that many social influences and pressures have remained stable throughout history. Research also indicates that it is not clear that there is a comprehensive understanding of the pressures and barriers women seeking leadership face. The chapter was rounded out with a discussion of gaps that exist in the literature.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Chapter 3 will discuss the proposed methodology of this study. It is organized in the following manner. It begins with an introduction, which discusses the purpose of the study and the research questions designed to explore that purpose. A rationale for the methodology employed then follows, including information on the type of research to be conducted, the theoretical framework and conceptual lens to be utilized, and the alignment of these elements. There is then a discussion of the research design, including the selection of participants, instrumentation, and data collection and analysis. Study quality, ethical considerations, and a summary round out the chapter.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of first-at-institution female community college presidents on their road to the presidency and in particular the social influences they experienced during that time. Gains were made through 2010 as more women ascended to presidencies, but parity has not yet been reached and progress has stalled since that time. It is well noted that women struggle to achieve these leadership levels.

Research Questions

A research question and one sub-question were formulated so that the study's findings would best address the problem statement as viewed through the selected methodology, theoretical framework, and associated conceptual lens. These questions are:

RQ1. What are the lived experiences of first-at-institution female community college presidents on the road to the presidency?

- a. How do first-at-institution female community college presidents experience social influences on the road to the presidency?

Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Lens

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a theoretical orientation developed by Martin Heidegger (1971). Heidegger was expanding upon the work of the German philosopher Hesserl who had developed transcendental phenomenology, which uses eidetic reduction to identify the essential components that make up a phenomenon. The practice requires bracketing or withholding preconceptions so that the “phenomenon can speak for itself” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p. 362). This makes it impossible to use a conceptual lens in transcendental phenomenological research. Heidegger did not believe it was possible for a researcher to separate themselves completely because they are “Daesin” (p. 34), meaning literally present and conscious in their own existence (Peoples, 2021). Thus, Heidegger allows for a conceptual lens such as social capital theory and takes into account the complexity of lived experiences while providing a process for interacting with personal beliefs and the research data without placing all beliefs or biases to the side (Peoples, 2021). In fact, personal beliefs and biases are identified and used in the data analysis. Hermeneutic phenomenology may also reveal how context affects an individual’s experience of a phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Hermeneutic Circle

The hermeneutic circle was the revisionary process designed by Heidegger to achieve the goal of phenomenological research, which is to understand and interpret the essence of a phenomenon (Peoples, 2021). The process begins by looking at the whole, analyzing it, breaking it down into parts, synthesizing, and then looking at the whole again. As the researcher moves

through the process new understanding is garnered in each step and the researcher uses their own foreknowledge and the conceptual theory to continue to gain new understanding as the process continues. It is a non-linear process (Peoples, 2021).

Rationale

Because this study examines the lived experiences of first-at-institution female community college presidents and the social influences along that path, approaching the research from a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective is a logical choice. Unlike transcendental phenomenology, hermeneutics allows the researcher to make their own bias and foreknowledge explicit and utilize that as a lens for understanding. It also allows for the use of other lenses such as social capital theory to enhance the understanding of social influences on the lived experiences of the participants (Peoples, 2021). In addition, hermeneutic phenomenology may reveal how context affects an individual's experience of a phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019), which also fits the purpose of this study.

Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory was introduced in Chapter 1 and discussed more fully in Chapter 2 as the chosen conceptual lens through which the research was viewed. The theory provides a tool for the examination of the influence that social relationships and networks have on career selection and attainment (Ho, 2022). This theory was selected as a conceptual lens to be utilized in harmony with the theoretical framework during the literature review, research design, and was employed in the hermeneutic circle of understanding during data analysis. This theory provides a lens to deeper understanding social influences on career development (Ho, 2022).

Research Design

Qualitative research “encompasses multiple methodologies and methods that typically seek to understand social life as it unfolds in its natural environment” (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, p. 93). Its focus is to make sense of lived experiences and identify social forces that lead to those experiences. Phenomenology provides a tool to uncover the meaning of a phenomenon related to gender inequality (Jarmon, 2020) and allows the researcher to discover personal meanings and rich descriptions (Peoples, 2021) of first-at-institution female community college presidents. Since this study required the analysis of lived experiences of female community college presidents to answer the research questions, a qualitative phenomenological approach was appropriate. Qualitative research methods allowed the researcher to gather stories and insights from the participants and gain a rich understanding of their experiences.

Several other qualitative research methods were investigated prior to the selection of a phenomenological approach. Case study, ethnography, and biography were all considered but did not focus only on experiences as lived by the participants and thus did not meet the requirements of this study (Peoples, 2021).

Twenty participants at different sites were studied as part of this research. The research questions and subject matter encompass complex social influences and structures and point to a relatively small number of participants. According to Creswell (2005), a minimum of three to 15 participants is determined to be the number required to meet saturation in basic qualitative research. Phenomenological research may include more (Peoples, 2021). The research techniques sought an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of the participants. The small number of participants and research techniques lent themselves to a qualitative study (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017).

As such, this study employed qualitative research techniques and methods of hermeneutic phenomenology. Semi-structured interviews were the instrument utilized. This instrument and its rationale for use are discussed later in this chapter.

The theoretical and conceptual frameworks chosen for this study were the platforms upon which the research was designed. Each component was aligned under the umbrella of Hermeneutic Phenomenology and specific elements were aligned with social capital theory. Please see Appendix A.1, Alignment of Research Questions, Theoretical Frameworks, Methodology, and Interview Questions for more detail.

Study Setting

Sites for this study were selected based on the location of identified participants. The site criteria was that they were nonprofit community colleges in the United States.

Study Participants

Qualitative research is supported by purposeful sampling, which was used in this study. Purposeful sampling is the practice of selecting participants based on specific criteria (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). This sampling strategy can provide rich insight into the research questions and understanding of the perceptions of a small group (Creswell, 2005).

The researcher identified a sample group based upon information located on the American Association of Community College (AACC) 2023 Institution Member list. From the AACC Institution list the researcher then narrowed and identified potential participants by searching publicly available information on each institution's president and identifying those CEO's who met the participant criteria. The researcher then contacted prospective participants by email.

The criteria for selecting participants outweigh the importance of the number of participants when utilizing a purposive non-random sample (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The criteria for selecting study participants was:

1. Self-identify as female
2. Gainfully employed full-time as president/CEO at a community college, public junior college, or two-year institution in the United States
3. First female president/CEO of their community college, public junior college, or two-year institution

Twenty participants were identified by the researcher with efforts to vary the time in office, age, rural or urban community, and cultural region of the United States they serve in. The number of participants reached saturation. Saturation occurs when information redundancy occurs, and themes emerge from the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Protection of Human Rights

Formal permission from the Kansas State University Internal Review Board was obtained before the researcher proceeded to collect data for the study. The researcher provided all participants with informed consent forms (see Appendix D, Informed Consent Form) and maintained confidentiality and privacy of any sensitive information that was shared. Participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time. All participants were given a participant designation, such as P1, and all identifying information was deleted from research data. The researcher obtained permission to digitally record audio and video of the Zoom sessions and make transcriptions of the sessions (see Appendix D, Informed Consent Form). To further protect the identity of the participants, they were given the option to have their camera on or off during the Zoom interview per their preference. All information gathered is stored on an

encrypted USB drive and kept in a locked cabinet, accessible only to the researcher. In five years the data will be destroyed.

Instrumentation

The researcher served as the primary instrument in collecting the data. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were also employed. The phenomenological interview is the recommended method of data collection when examining lived experience (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017) (Peoples, 2021).

Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to explore more fully subjects of interest that present themselves during the interview while remaining non-directive. This method also allows for follow-up when needed and provides flexibility to the researcher to conduct the interview in a conversational way (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017) (Peoples, 2021).

Interview questions were based upon the research question and sub-question and limited to elicit responses about experiences (See Appendix B, Interview Questions). They were designed to align with the theoretical framework and conceptual lens of the study. Peoples (2021) posited that when constructing interview questions in a phenomenological study that researchers restrict questions to only ask about experiences and not about “thoughts, feelings, or perceptions” (p. 53). During interviews if participants responded to questions by describing their views (thoughts, feelings) rather than describing the experience the researcher tried to redirect them by using the follow up questions such as “Can you give me an example of when you have experienced this?” (Peoples, 2021, p. 55).

Interview questions were peer reviewed and revised with the feedback provided in a pilot process prior to being utilized in the research. Peers were selected from a pool of community college leader colleagues who had a minimum of the following qualifications: hold a Master’s

degree or higher from an accredited University in the United States and were currently employed in a leadership role at a public non-profit community college in the United States. These peers received a copy of the interview questions via email (see Appendix B, Interview Questions), and were asked to provide feedback to the researcher on relevance, appropriate number of questions, and any other insights they may have had. The researcher then edited the interview questions based upon relevant feedback before utilizing them in the research.

Data Collection and Data Sources

Once potential participants were identified through purposive sampling, the researcher made initial contact by email (see Appendix C, Invitation to Participate Email), followed by a follow up short email inquiry if the request was not returned within several weeks. Following this, those participants who indicated they would participate were emailed informed consent forms (see Appendix D, Informed Consent). Following receipt of the signed form, the researcher then scheduled Zoom interviews with each participant at a time that was convenient for them. The researcher also provided participants with a copy of the interview questions (see Appendix B, Interview Questions) via email upon request. This gave participants time to review the questions and prepare for the interview.

The researcher collected data through semi-structured interviews. Due to time and travel restrictions, the interviews were conducted via the online platform Zoom. Zoom interviews were audio and video recorded and transcribed. To further protect the identity of the participants, they were given the option to have their camera on or off during the Zoom interview per their preference.

The researcher scheduled and facilitated the Zoom appointments and provided information such as the purpose of the research, the interview protocols, and the details on how

the interviews would be scheduled before the interviews occurred. The researcher had an active role by interviewing each participant (Richards, 2015). Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Interviews began with an explanation of the intent of the study and the rationale for the selection of the participant. Participants were reminded that they could decline to answer any question and that the interview would be semi-structured in form. The participant was asked if they had any questions or concerns before beginning. Then the interview began. The researcher was involved in asking open-ended questions and probing follow-up questions.

In an attempt to create as much consistency as possible, all participants were asked the same initial questions. However, follow-up questions followed an open-ended conversation. The researcher journaled during the interviews as is recommended in phenomenological research (Peoples, 2021) and utilized journaling in the data analysis process.

Sample size was part of the planning process and was reevaluated as interviews were completed and the research process progressed. Malterud et al. argue (2016) “the preconception that an approximation of sample size is necessary for planning, while the adequacy of the final sample size must be continuously evaluated during the research process” (p. 1738). The researcher completed twenty interviews and saturation was achieved.

Data Management

Zoom produced audio and video recording, and a verbatim transcription of each interview. MAXQDA software was then utilized to facilitate the sorting, coding of information, and to assist in identifying patterns and themes.

MAXQDA is a qualitative data analysis software that allows users to organize and analyze data. It was selected for the intuitive way it allows researchers to assign codes and manipulate information. The software is also capable of identifying patterns the researcher may

not have noticed and of suggesting codes. MAXQDA is commonly used among qualitative researchers.

Data Analysis

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a method of data analysis that aligns with hermeneutic phenomenology and utilizes the hermeneutic circle. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) recommend that in IPA the researcher immerse themselves in the data and attempt to see things from the perspective of the participant as much as possible. IPA is doing two things at the same time. It is looking at how the participants are making sense of the experience to distill the essence of the phenomenon while also looking at the data through the conceptual lens and interpreting it to illuminate the understanding of the research problems. The researcher is thus moving between these two perspectives (Alase, 2017). In addition, it allows the researcher to identify their own foreknowledge and provides a framework to interpret the data.

Smith and Osborn (2014) discuss IPA in the following manner, “IPA produces an account of lived experience in its own terms. . . and it recognizes that this is an interpretative endeavor as humans are sense-making organisms” (p. 41). They went on to say that the analysis method is particularly useful for examining topics that are “complex, ambiguous and emotionally laden” (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 41).

The topic of this study has many human variables that are grounded in social constructs that are not easily identifiable. An interpretive analysis allowed the researcher to gain detailed descriptions from participants and then identify and interpret variables from that data. Not only is IPA solidly in alignment with hermeneutic phenomenology and utilizes the hermeneutic circle as the data analytic, but it was also derived from that theoretic framework. IPA relies upon

ideography and results in rich descriptive analysis, which lets the phenomenon speak for itself while also making room for researcher interpretation (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). “Since the goal of phenomenological research is to illuminate the lived experience of a phenomenon, the method of analyzing data is emergent” (Peoples, 2021). For these reasons, it was chosen to reach the goals of this research study.

Supported by MAXQDA software, data analysis follows an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis format that has been blended between those suggested by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) and Peoples (2021).

Step 1: Multiple Readings and Making Notes

After collecting the data, each individual interview transcript was read all the way through in its entirety several times. The researcher also listened to and watched the recorded interviews again. The researcher made notes on the transcript about reflections and observations of potential significance. This step was completed as a way to gain understanding of the whole story the participant was telling and immerse the researcher in the data.

Step 2: Creating Preliminary Meaning Units

The transcripts and researcher notes were processed through MAXQDA software to identify and assign initial codes. Coding “is the process of attaching a short word or phrase to specific portions of . . . data” (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, p. 174). Coding was formatted as an inductive process. Inductive analysis is an emergent strategy that allows the researcher to create codes from the participants’ words and thoughts (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). Codes were attached to units of data as the researcher completed an analysis of the transcripts and notes. Inductive analysis aligns with the purpose and theoretical framework of this study.

Step 3: Identifying Emergent Themes

The hermeneutic circle was continued in this step and further reduction and refinement was employed. Codes were then categorized and organized into themes. The researcher looked at codes through both the perspective of the participant and then the conceptual lens to identify emergent themes. This required patience and deep reflection. A concise phrase was formulated and assigned to emergent themes.

Step 4: Seeking Relationships and Clustering Themes

Next, emerging themes were compared and contrasted across all of the transcripts and grouped together based on conceptual similarities and labeled. A list was compiled of themes and possible subthemes along with identified associated passages in the transcript (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

Throughout this process the researcher journaled and kept the bigger picture of the study in mind. Journaling throughout the process attempted to identify potential biases, establish credibility during the research process, and make transparent the researcher's decision-making process. This added to the validity and credibility of the study.

Findings that fell outside of the theoretical framework and conceptual lens were noted and informed needed areas of additional research.

Trustworthiness

Various methods such as triangulation and journaling were employed to ensure the study's credibility and quality. Triangulation occurs when a pattern or theme is identified and corroborated across multiple participants (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). As part of IPA, the researcher identified patterns and themes among the data across participant interviews. As discussed in the data analysis section of this chapter, journaling was also used to establish

credibility. Journaling is a prevalent practice to achieve this goal in phenomenological research (Peoples, 2021).

Tracy's (2010) Eight Big Tent was also employed in the design and completion of the study to address credibility and quality. Tracy's (2010) criteria provides a framework that ensures the researcher develops more comprehensive findings from diverse voices and perspectives. It guides the researcher to look at the nuances of complex issues and provides rich perspectives from multiple points of view (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). A narrative of how this framework was applied will now be discussed. Please also see Appendix E, Tracy's Eight Big Tent criteria for a succinct table of the information.

As the name of the framework suggests there are eight areas of consideration in the framework: worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence.

Worthy topic: The topic of first-at-institution female community college presidents is relevant, timely, and significant. Despite gains in the past 30 years, females are still significantly underrepresented in top leadership roles and concerningly, the rate of increase has stalled since 2010.

Rich Rigor: This study uses a sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex set of theoretical constructs. The theoretical framework of Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Conceptual lens of social capital theory align with the purpose of the study and research questions. Data was collected from multiple participants across the country providing multiple viewpoints. Participants were from diverse institutions to attempt to further increase the diversity of voices represented. First-at-institution female presidents at large and small institutions, both

rural and urban, and from various cultural regions of the United States participated. Data collection and analysis utilized triangulation.

Sincerity: Self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher were specified in the study and are a part of the phenomenological research process. Transparency about the methods are delineated in the study. Impressions and decision-making during analysis were captured in the journaling process.

Credibility: The research is marked by the following, “Thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit (non-textual) knowledge, and showing rather than telling” (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017, p. 3). The researcher brought forward details from interviews and other data sets to provide these items. In addition, the researcher coded with triangulation in mind. The researcher employed method, theory, and data source triangulation (Carter et al., 2014). This study has also been designed to address multivocality by giving voice to diverse voices and to rely on the reflection of participants.

Resonance: The research is designed to influence, impact, or move readers through aesthetic, evocative representation and naturalistic generalizations (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017).

Significant Contribution: The research is designed to provide a significant contribution both conceptually and theoretically, practically, morally, methodologically, and heuristically.

Ethics: The research considers procedural ethics (such as human subjects), situational and culturally specific ethics, relational ethics, exiting ethics (leaving the scene and sharing the research), IRB approval, protection of human subjects, confidentiality, and secure storage of data for five years.

Meaningful Coherence: It is the aim of the researcher that the study achieves what it intends and uses methods and procedures that fit its stated goals. It is also the researcher’s intent

to meaningfully interconnect the literature, research questions, findings, and interpretations with one another (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017, p. 3).

Ethical Considerations

To ensure alignment with standard ethical considerations in qualitative research, the researcher took steps to ensure that human participants and their data were protected. Internal Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained before beginning any research, and all requirements of IRB were followed. Participants received pertinent information prior to interviews in both verbal and written form and signed informed consent forms, examples of which are located in Appendix D, Informed Consent. Participants were allowed to withdraw at any time. All video, audio, and transcription are kept in a password-protected secure digital location accessible only by the researcher. To further protect the identity of the participants, they were given the option to have their camera on or off during the Zoom interview per their preference. Data is stored on an encrypted USB drive and stored in a locked cabinet, accessible only to the researcher. It will be safeguarded by the researcher for five years, and then irreversibly destroyed with no chance of recovery by deleting and overwriting the files and then degaussing the external drive it is kept on. Individual presidents and their institutions have anonymized to protect their identities.

From an ethical standpoint, the selection of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) takes into account thought and respect for the participants. “IPA is seen by many researchers and admirers of the approach as the most ‘participant-oriented’ qualitative research approach; a research approach that shows respect and sensitivity to the ‘lived experiences’ of the research participants” (Alase, 2017, p. 9).

Debriefing

At the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked if they had any concerns or questions. The researcher then clarified any potential misconceptions or concerns that may have arisen during the interview and expressed gratitude for their time and contribution.

Participants will be provided a copy of the findings once data has been analyzed and the study is completed. See Appendix F – Debriefing Statement.

Reflexivity Statement

The researcher is female and aspires to become a community college president. This may present an opportunity for bias. In hermeneutic phenomenology, researcher bias is made explicit and utilized as a lens during the analysis process (Peoples, 2021). The researcher kept this bias in mind and used journaling to make explicit when it was applied.

Limitations

The researcher acknowledges the following limitations: (a) the possible difficulty of establishing rapport over a digital platform, (b) possible small sample response, and (c) possible bias in the participant sample.

Chapter Summary

This phenomenological qualitative study aims to understand the lived experience of first-at-institution female community college presidents. This chapter reviewed the purpose of the study, it's theoretical framework and conceptual lens, the research design, study setting, the participants, protection of human subjects, instrumentation, data collection and data sources, data management, data analysis, trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and limitations. Chapter 4 will discuss the research findings and analysis, and Chapter 5 will provide conclusions and make recommendations.

Chapter 4 - Research Results and Analysis

Chapter 4 will discuss the results of what was found during the data collection process and the results of the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) conducted on that data. A review of the research questions and the data collection techniques begin this chapter, followed by a summary of participant demographics. It will then present an overall summary of the interview data including alignment with hermeneutic phenomenology and how the data attempts to answer the research questions. A description of how the data was validated followed by interview data organized by codes and then themes arising from IPA concludes the chapter.

Research Questions

As has been discussed in previous chapters, the purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of first-at-institution female community college presidents on their road to the presidency and in particular the social influences they experienced during that time.

A research question and one sub-question were formulated so that the study's findings would best address the problem statement as viewed through the selected methodology, theoretical framework, and associated conceptual lens. These questions are:

RQ1. What are the lived experiences of first-at-institution female community college presidents on the road to the presidency?

- a. How do first-at-institution female community college presidents experience social influences on the road to the presidency?

Interview Data Collection

In alignment with best practices for the qualitative phenomenological methodology applied in the study (Peoples, 2021), semi-structured interviews were conducted over Zoom

video conferencing software, to collect data that could inform answers to the research questions. Interview questions were devised in alignment with the theoretical framework and conceptual lens of the study. Video and audio recordings from each interview were automatically electronically transcribed as set up by the researcher in Zoom software prior to each interview. During the interviews, the researcher endeavored to build a rapport with the participants and encouraged them to speak openly of their lived experience. The semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to include follow-up questions that provided additional insight during the data gathering process. The researcher journaled during the interviews to record initial insights, impressions, and to assist in identifying biases that the researcher may be holding.

Participants

Demographics

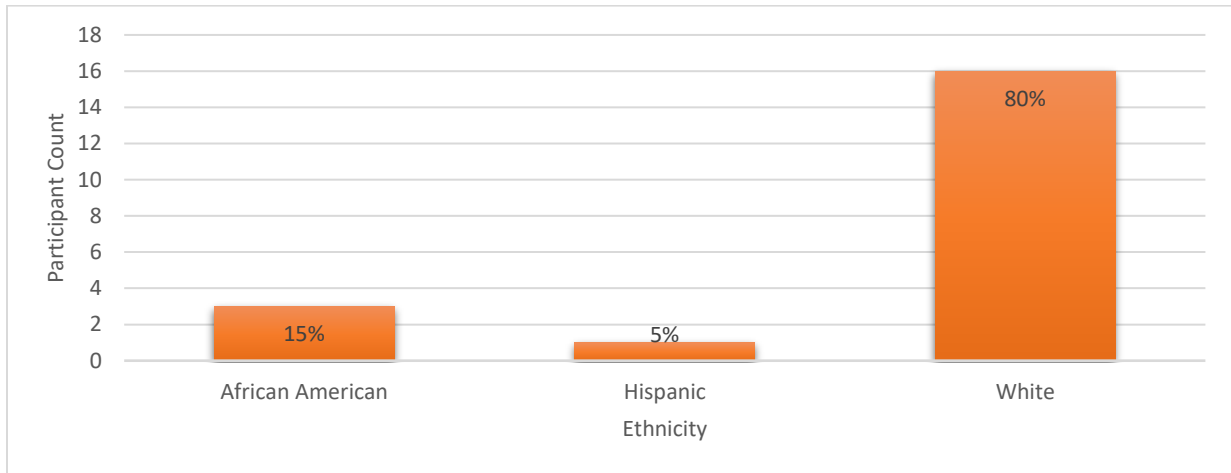
Participants in the study all self-identified as female, were gainfully employed full-time as president/CEO at a community college, public junior college, or two-year institution in the United States, and were the first female president/CEO of their community college, public junior college, or two-year institution. Notably, all of the participants held a terminal degree of either a Ph.D. or Ed.D.

Participants ranged in age from 43 to 77 years of age, with the average age being 61 years old. The participants had served in the role of president from just a few months to multiple decades, with the average participant serving 7.85 years.

Participants were asked to self-identify their ethnicity. Of the 20 participants, 16 identified as White, three identified as African American, and one identified as Hispanic. See Figure 3 for a visual representation.

Figure 3

Participant Count of Ethnicity



Participant institution location was identified based on a widely accepted regional cultural areas map of the United States as identified by Zelinsky in 1973. These are New England, the Midland, the South, the Middle West, and the West and were identified by Zelinsky (1973) based on a wide range of cultural factors.

Figure 4

Participant Institution Region Location



Institution size was identified using the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (2001). Those categories are delineated as follows:

Very Small = Fall enrollment data indicate FTE enrollment < 500 students.

Small = Fall enrollment data indicate FTE enrollment of 500–1,999.

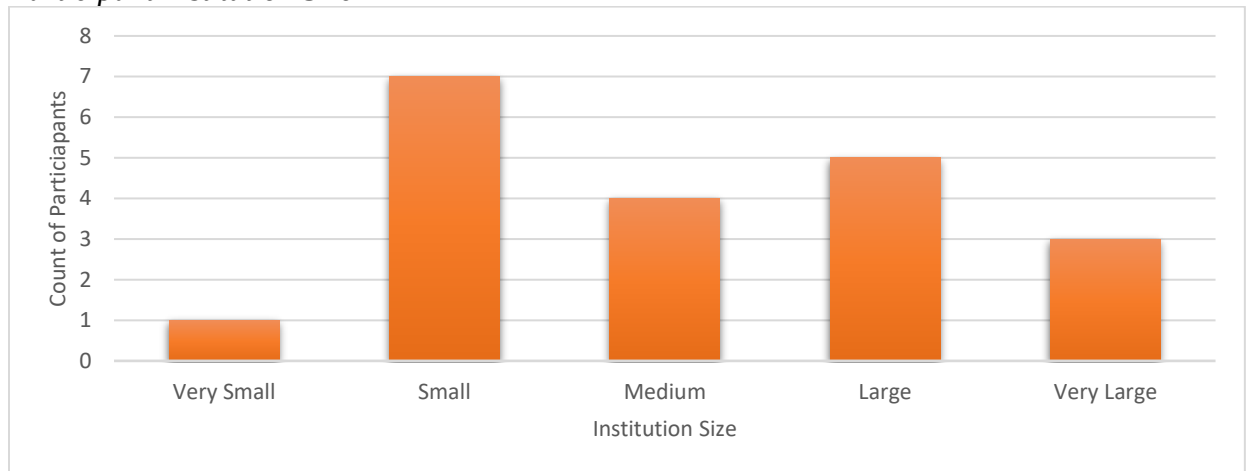
Medium = Fall enrollment data indicate FTE enrollment of 2,000–4,999 students.

Large = Fall enrollment data indicate enrollment of 5,000–9,999 students.

Very Large = Fall enrollment data indicate FTE enrollment > 9,999

Figure 5

Participant Institution Size



Participants were selected from various cultural regions, age groups, and ethnicities, to ensure that a wide variety of voices was being solicited and data validation was occurring.

Code Identification

Following an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis format merged between those suggested by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) and Peoples (2021) and assisted by MAXQDA software, the researcher completed the steps that were delineated in Chapter 3.

Step 1: Multiple Readings and Making Notes

Step 2: Creating Preliminary Meaning Units

Step 3: Identifying Emergent Themes. Themes were created based on the instances and weight of a particular code.

Step 4: Seeking Relationships and Clustering Themes. Throughout this process the researcher journaled.

Table 1. Codes, Instances, Weights exhibits the codes that were identified during analysis. Instances are the number of times a code is mentioned across all interviews. Weight is the number of individual interviews in which that code was discussed. Items appearing in fewer than half of the interviews (weight < 10) were not included.

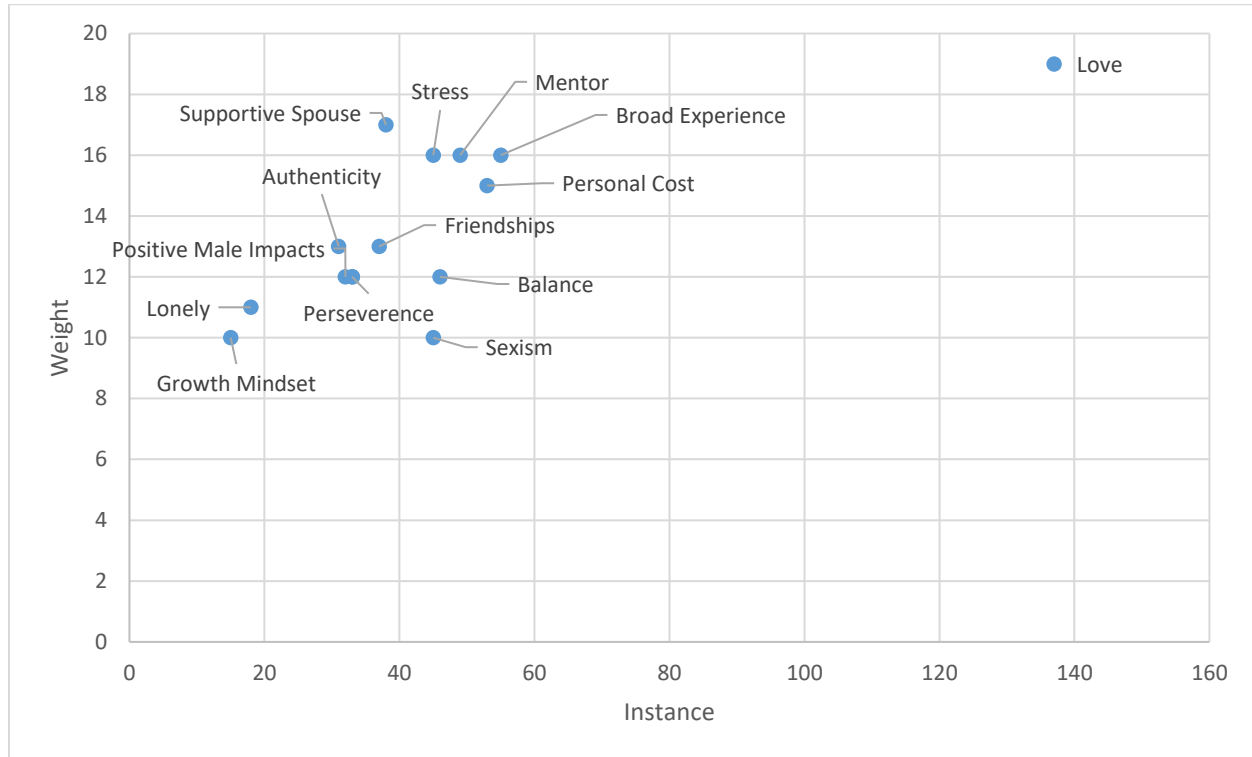
Table 1. Codes, Instances, Weights

Code	Instance	Weight
Love	137	19
Spouse	38	17
Broad Experience	55	16
Mentor	49	16
Stress	45	16
Personal Cost	53	15
Friendship	37	13
Authenticity	31	13
Balance	46	12
Perseverance	33	12
Mission	33	12
Positive Male Impact	32	12
Lonely	18	11
Sexism	45	10
Growth Mindset	15	10

Figure 6 is a visual representation of the information found in Table 1.

Figure 6

Frequency of Code Instances and Weight



Discussion of Results

Each code discussed below is supported by a selection of statements from participant interviews that provide context and detail.

Love

The analysis of transcripts revealed love as the term and topic with the greatest number of instances and weight, by a large margin. At 137 instances across 19 of the 20 interviews, it is by far the largest code group. Participants spoke of their love of people, institutions, education, colleagues, students, communities, spouses, family members, the mission of community colleges, and the work they had done. Most were passionate about these topics and brought a

great deal of emotion to the conversation when speaking about it. Love in this context was spoken about as the main overarching motivating factor for the pursuit of a career in community college leadership and provided the intrinsic reward that allowed participants to overcome the stress and hardship that had come with the path to the presidency.

Several of the participants expressed deep feelings for the institutions they served, with one summing it up simply as “I love this place.”

Speaking of a colleague one participant said, “he is so marvelous. I just love him to death.”

Echoing several participants’ regard for the field of education one participant related, “yeah, it’s tough to stay engaged, but that’s why I love education.”

Another spoke about her early days in education, “I fell in love with teaching. Fell in love with the community college student.”

Another participant shared this about her early experience with community college service. “I immediately fell in love with the mission.” Along the same lines, another participant discussed her desire to serve others and how her personal value system aligned with that of community colleges. “That’s part of my mission to help others.” Another code, *Mission*, specific to this alignment will be discussed later.

Love as Motivation

All of the participants related that the primary motivation for their career path had been the desire to serve students and communities or to make a difference in the lives of others. They frequently used the word love to describe this motivation.

“I am so fortunate to have found a career I love.”

“I love it because I want to make a difference.”

“I think when you love what you do, it comes through.”

One participant discussed a breakthrough moment when she discovered the community college model. She found powerful motivation behind the idea of providing economic mobility for others, which led her to the path to presidency.

It was the first time I’d ever heard of a community college, and I went, oh my god.

Having something like this where I grew up would have been . . . because, not only for everybody I grew up with, but particularly for my [family who lived] in very deep poverty, it would have given them a way out. And so, at that point I decided that’s where I want to be. Took me about 12 years to get there.

Love as a Reward

During the interviews, all of the participants discussed hardships and stressors that came along the path to the presidency as well as those that occurred once they were in the role. The researcher asked each of them as a follow up question--what made it all worth it?

Overwhelmingly, the participants spoke about the intrinsic reward of love.

“I love that feeling of making a difference.” Another spoke tongue in cheek about it being a selfish endeavor, “it’s just the best and I’m selfish. I love that feeling of making a difference and I can do it at a community college . . . So, I’m doing it.”

Another participant summed up what came across almost universally by explaining, that’s the power of the community college to transform the lives of our students. To me it’s worth all of the gray hair. It is hard, it is incredibly hard work. It’s hard at the dean level, it’s hard at the vice presidency level, but as a president the buck stops with you. So, no matter what happens on that campus you’re responsible for it. But you also have more ability at the presidential level to impact the institution and how it’s going and how it’s

going to serve students. So, to me, if somebody was wondering whether or not they should do it, to me it's an incredibly personal question. How much are you willing to put into the opportunity to have that impact on students?

When asked about what she would share with female faculty members considering the presidency one participant said, tell them to

follow their heart, follow their dream. Yes, they have a love for education. A love for students. You know, we're on the other side, but you can affect change. You can affect more change from this position than you can from any other. And so, if there are things you feel passionate about that you really want to see implemented, it's a great chair to do it from.

Another shared her deep feeling of teamwork and impact. "I know I've saved lives, literally. I know that I've made my community better and I'm using the 'I' here, but I know it's not me."

The participants seemed at their core to draw great strength from the belief that they were helping others and making a difference. "It's the most rewarding work I've ever done" said one.

Another spoke about the feeling of being in the right place. "Those are the moments, right? When you realize that you're in the right place for a reason. And your work does make a difference and it does have an impact on students and the community."

Supportive Spouse

Seventeen of the participants pointed to a supportive spouse as a factor in their successful ascension to the presidency. Supportive spouses were credited with emotional support, career advice and support, care of the home and children, and financial support.

Participants were not asked if they were married in the semi-structured interview questions; however, if the subject brought the topic up the researcher asked follow-up questions. The participants who discussed a supportive spouse were all currently married. Some voluntarily offered that they had been married to the same spouse and others had been previously married to another person and were now married to a subsequent spouse.

The following quotes from different participants show the strong feelings surrounding the impact a supportive spouse had.

“I have a wonderful husband that gave up his career so I could have one.”

“I couldn’t have done it without such a supportive husband.”

“I have a wonderful husband who is super supportive and listens to me.”

“I married my second husband and that’s when my career started to really blossom.”

“My husband said you need to go to grad school and he’s, you know, he’s amazing.”

“I love being with my husband.”

“I would definitely see my husband as one of my biggest cheerleaders.”

“I think that the biggest thing for me is the time I get to spend with my husband.”

“My husband was very supportive of me taking this on.”

“My husband was always extremely supportive of my career.”

“I always had a husband who pushed me harder than I pushed myself.”

“I’ve always had the benefit of having a supportive spouse.”

“To be completely transparent. I could not have the journey I had without him.”

My husband, he was 100,000% behind me and knew what my goal was and was right there with me-- helping me, you know, with whatever we needed to do . . . we knew what our goal was . . . and we were helping each other get those goals.

Spouse Takes on Household Responsibilities

In four of the interviews the participants specifically described their spouse taking on a majority of child rearing and household responsibilities. “I didn’t feel like I was letting anybody down at home and my husband has always been very supportive.” Another said, “at that point, I mean, it becomes a family affair.” And another, “we’ve been in a non-traditional marriage for years and you know, my husband has had fits and starts as the stay-at-home partner in the group.”

Broad Experience

Broad experience and knowledge came up 55 times in 16 interviews. Many of the participants had broad experience within community college, several had experience at the University level, and several in K-12. Others had private industry experience that they felt was critical to their success. In particular, consulting, medical fields, marketing and public relations, business, engineering, philanthropy or fundraising, and politics were areas that came up.

Several of the participants found value from the experience of serving at several different institutions or in different areas of the country. One said, “being able to have been at multiple institutions, I have lots of examples of things that worked and didn’t work.”

Several also found great benefit from private industry experience. One stated, “I can’t even imagine doing this job if I had spent my entire career in higher ed.”

When asked what the most valuable thing to their success was, broad experience was the most cited.

Not taking the straight path up a career ladder was most valuable What has helped me now is being very well rounded, I said I can only go about an inch deep on any topic,

but I know a little about almost everything, which in our roles as presidents, that's what we're being asked to do.

I mean we have teams, we have faculty that do the really hard stuff in there, but to be able to talk about quantum computing, to be able to talk about semiconductors, to be able to talk about early childhood or economic development, you know, go into meetings with our economic development agency to land new companies but also the social issues of mental health issues of the state, and addiction, and knowing enough about it to hear and to try to see how can we as an institution support [the community].

Mentor

Participants were specifically asked about mentors in their experience. One participant related that she had not had any mentors and discussed the challenge of navigating by herself; however, the rest discussed varying degrees of impact that mentors both formal and informal had on their career trajectories.

Mentors discussed were both male and female, formal and informal. In one instance a participant hired a career coach to serve in the role as she aspired to the presidency. Another participant discussed hiring an executive coach for herself and her board once she became a president.

Mentors filled an important role of career advisor, social support, and in some instances as an inspirational figure.

I just respected her so much . . . I saw in her the qualities of what I needed to be a successful first-generation college student. She cared about me, she saw me, she listened to me . . . I get emotional thinking about her . . . what I saw in her is an inspiration. To be

able to say ‘someday I could be her’ because she recognized who I was and saw that in me.

Sharing some wisdom from a mentor about not needing to know everything before taking on the role of president one participant related,

but especially for women, I believe strongly that we continue to second guess ourselves about that pipeline to the next level. We think we have to have all this skill set knowledge before we can actually do the job. And I just remember one of my great mentors saying to me, ‘I learned so much on the job, so many people don’t know what I didn’t know’. But I would get together with other presidents and we would laugh and say, ‘if people only knew what we didn’t know.

Stress

Not surprisingly, stress was noted in 45 instances across 16 interviews as participants discussed the path to presidency. They also talked about habits and coping skills that have allowed them to deal with stress.

Much of the stress was related to physical and mental symptoms such as stress eating. One said, “I’ve gained 25 pounds in these eight years. And I think it’s all stress.” Another said, “I carry my stress and my tension in my neck and shoulders.”

Minority participants pointed to stressors specific to the current political climate. “Now we’re facing, since DEI is out, they want to get rid of us. So, we have a real backlash going on with African-American female presidents.”

Said another,

and your goal is to get to the table so you can understand what’s happening behind the scenes so you can make a difference for others. And not everything is fair, not everything

is equitable. That's why we have to have you at the table. So, you've got to keep going. You're gonna get knocked down. You're going to get something that's unfair to happen to you. It's just a part of the business, but it doesn't stop you.

Strategies to Manage Stress

Participants discussed a variety of habits and coping strategies that assisted them in dealing with stress.

It took about 18 months, but then I paid very close attention to my diet and exercise. I prioritized that. Tried to be as healthy as I could be to reduce the stress and after a while that sense of heaviness that I felt seemed to lighten a little bit.

Many discussed regular physical exercise, eating a healthy diet, reading, watching television programs, travel, and spending time with friends and family. A few also talked about the importance of finding places where they were not the person in charge.

Personal Cost

Fifteen of the participants discussed the personal cost their path had levied on their lives and the lives of their loved ones. During these parts of the interview participants displayed what the researcher interpreted as sadness, resolve, or regret. It was clear to the researcher that this topic held emotional weight for the subjects.

In particular, the constraints on time that became increasingly more demanding as leadership roles gained more responsibility were brought up. "You never leave. You can never leave it at the door. I don't care if you go on vacation for two weeks or whatever. It's 24/7. And I don't know if I'd encourage that for anybody." Said another about the heavy responsibility, "it's 24/7. I go home, I sit on the couch, I have my laptop, I fall asleep with my laptop on my lap."

One participant spoke about the emotional hurt that occurred when unexpected difficulties arose with colleagues when she was promoted. “I knew in my life that if I was ever in a similar situation; don’t ever be the way that people were to me, cause that really hurt. People turned, just turned on me.” Others spoke about not being able to have friendships at work, “I always say I have no friends at work.” Said another, “I’m not saying you can’t get close to people, you can. But you always have to keep things to yourself. So, you have to be comfortable with that.”

A few participants also talked about the toll it took on romantic relationships. Reflecting that choosing another career path may be advisable one said, “it’s not gonna come home at night and interfere with your relationship.” Another spoke about the difficult decision to leave a partner behind and engage in a long-distance relationship to pursue her dream.

I aspired to be president and we, my partner and I, before I left, we spent a lot of time talking about that. You know what, this was my dream and he’s like, “I don’t want you to lose your opportunity if this is your dream and we’ll just figure it out, we’ll see what happens.” So, yeah.

Others talked about missing children’s ball games or events, or having to bring kids to work with them. One related,

it was a bummer the day they had a senior event, and they had a slide show and all the kids talked and she was like, ‘well, Mom, even though you’re always on your computer, I knew you were always there for me.

Speaking about the pressure and responsibility the path puts on individuals and families one related,

because at the end of the day, you're in this role. Even if it's a decade or two, it's still in the grand scheme of things a relatively short period of time. You need to take that responsibility really seriously and own it. And if at any point in time it gets to be too much, then it's time to go to something else.

Friendship

Friendships were discussed in 37 instances across 13 interviews. Female friendships came out as particularly important. Where male authority figures had more impact on career trajectory, participants reported that among friends and colleagues, females did so.

She was the one that I would test my thinking with. She was with me when I went through a divorce, it was a tough thing you know . . . Provided the kind of spiritual and social support that I needed at that time.

“I felt like a real, real sisterhood, so to speak.”

“She and I were side-by-side colleagues for years and she went out of her way to reach out and say, ‘I really think you’d be good for this.’”

“I have my six girlfriends from high school that we text a few times a week but, none of them do what I do.”

I have a little book club . . . of five literally random people, you would put us in a room and be like how are these women hanging out together, but we get together once a month and that’s pretty good.”

A few of the participants also spoke about the friendships they currently enjoy with other presidents, both male and female.

Authenticity

Authenticity in leadership was the second most offered answer to the question of what was found most valuable on the road to the presidency. Related to that topic, participants also spoke about having learned that institutional fit was critical.

“And I think that’s part of leadership. You need to be your authentic self. They need to know who you are.”

“I was always trying to make sure people knew who I was.”

“You really have to be an authentic leader. And if you’re not, the job is really, really hard. It’s really hard if you’re not.”

“I always really wanted to be my authentic self.”

While many of the participants related that they thought it was imperative to share their authentic selves in leadership roles, they also understood that what they shared was situation dependent. They held a self-awareness about the importance of image management in addition to the desire to be authentic. Said one of the participants, “It’s imperative that we’re authentic, but that doesn’t mean that some of our behaviors can’t be tweaked.”

Authenticity was also spoken about in relation to having integrity in difficult situations. Speaking about a situation of pressure to conform to actions that were not in alignment with her personal value system, one participant shared,

I just said to myself, that’s not who I am. And I can’t be that. I’ve got to be who I am.

And, and so I think that’s very important, you have to be who you are, or it doesn’t work.

One participant also shared her journey of learning to embrace her more feminine traits in her leadership role, something she felt required bravery. “So, what I’ve done, and I hate this

term, but I've leaned into my woman nature. I lean into being a kind person and a loving person . . . because we have denied that part of us too long."

Balance

Balance came up 46 times over 12 interviews. The great majority of those instances surrounded the effort to find life balance amid the stress and high personal cost on the path to the presidency. The participants talked about the possibility of burnout for themselves and their staff members in relation to the lack of balance. "I call it work life integration. It's not balanced by any means" said one participant. Another spoke about the level of frustration she felt from a lack of balance. "The most frustrating aspect of being the president in the beginning was the demands of the position. Trying to balance my personal life with the work life and the long hours that we have to put in."

Some of the respondents had integrated practices and habits into their personal and work lives to attempt to create a sense of balance. Several participants related practices they had implemented for themselves and subordinates to create balance in the workplace.

You know, we live in an age of technology. People email you morning, noon, and night. When I go to the office, I get there early, and I come back home at 6 o'clock. As soon as I put my car in the driveway, I do not answer emails. I also don't answer [email] on weekends, and I tell my staff, "if you want to write to me, that's fine, but you should be spending time with your family. I don't expect to hear from you" . . . So, I actually have a defined time when I work and when I don't work. And it took me a while to get to that point, but it really helps to energize me, and it works for me.

Another participant spoke about having healthy boundaries around practices such as email and work hours as a necessity for balance at her institution.

What happens as I create balance for the organization by setting my own boundary? . . .

Effective leaders, especially females, because men do it naturally . . . they have a more natural sense of boundaries . . . but women don't because we're so used to working all the time. And so, to me, an effective female president [sets boundaries].

A few of the participants also talked about the differences between generational ideas of work life balance.

That conflict between millennials who say, 'we have to have life balance' and Gen X and, you know, people a little bit older than that will say, you know, "work ethic, work ethic". What are you talking about? It is interesting to see there is tension. You know, we don't understand why the workers, the 20-year-olds and 30-year-olds and students and stuff, why they, you know [don't come to work]. And they're saying, "we can't understand, why are you people showing up when you should be in the hospital?"

Perseverance

The code perseverance is an amalgamate of the terms hard work, sacrifice, dedication, and persistence. These terms were used by participants when answering what they thought was important to their journey, but they also told stories of perseverance and overcoming difficult challenges as they explained their experience.

In particular, hard work and sacrifice surrounding the time spent in undergraduate and graduate programs as a student were talked about by several of the participants. In her undergraduate days one participant echoed the work ethic that many of the participants shared. "I worked every weekend at the hospital . . . at the time, in work study position . . . and then I worked at McDonald's as well. So, I was quite busy working while participating and going to school."

Several of the participants were working mothers and non-traditional students in their graduate programs. Said one, “I used to tell my kids don’t even think about complaining about your homework. You go to bed; I’ve got five more hours.” Another spoke about going to graduate school while being pregnant. “

So, I would [go to school] two to three days a week while I was still working full time. Drop my two-year-old off at my mom’s and go to class, and that was a several year period. Had my second child on spring break. It was an eight-to-nine-year process to earning my Ph.D.

Some of the participants referenced upbringings that placed a premium on hard work and sacrifice.

No slack was cut for you. Talk about not patronizing the little woman if there was something heavy to do . . . I mean, the only thing I didn’t do was drive the tractor . . . but anything else, she can do it. So yeah, it definitely made me tough.

Across the board the participants believed that hard work, sacrifice, dedication, and persistence were important traits to a successful leadership trajectory. One related,

it is a tremendous opportunity to be able to serve. And to have great opportunity to help influence and change people’s lives, families, communities. That it takes a lot of work. It takes a lot of sacrifice.

In the same vein another said, “you have to be willing to give a lot of self. And again, it’s being a servant leader.

Mission

Aligning closely and having some overlap with the sentiment found in the *love* code category, many of the participants specifically mentioned identification with the mission of

community colleges as a major motivating factor in their careers. “It really matched my values, my priorities, the social justice work I’ve been doing since I was a young person in college.”

“I like to make a difference. I like to have an impact. I like to leave the world a better place than when I entered it.”

“I knew I could make a difference. The changing demographic. The reality that we have significant poverty, that it’s a high performing institution.”

“That is why I do what I do because we have the power to change lives and it’s the best.”

“I certainly believe in the mission of what we are doing.”

“I care a lot about equity and the values and the work we do.”

“I’m the mascot of this institution and my job is to lift this institution to help meet its mission through every single person that we come in contact with.”

“There was an energy that’s palpable in the community college. It’s different than it is in a four-year institution.”

“If you’re 100% focused on student success and I’m not even talking mission, I’m talking student success, then you’re going to be able to weather a lot of storms.”

“The mission just keeps me totally engaged.”

Positive Male Impact

Many of the participants discussed both the positive and negative impacts that males had on their career trajectories.

Strikingly, two participants succinctly described their experience with males in authority. “Males in power can be very helpful or they can destroy you.” “I had many good male mentors, and I had many awful male tormentors.”

Interestingly, the participants spoke about female colleagues and friends having an important supportive emotional role in career progression but male authority figures as having more of an impact in opening doors, providing access, and offering advice that led to promotions. Male colleagues and friends were much less mentioned in an emotionally supportive role as conversely female authority figures talked about as facilitators of upward mobility. One participant provided a possible answer to that. “I will say that I’ve had more males help me in my career than females. Not because females are less helpful necessarily, but they aren’t in positions of power.”

Male Authority Figures Who Encouraged Career Progression

Eight of the participants specifically referenced a male authority figure who directly impacted their ascension to the presidency. In many cases this person provided the first idea that the role was a possibility for the subject. Many described an “aha” moment. Several of the participants discussed male presidents and board members who mentored them and provided learning and growth opportunities that led to career progression.

“I know that you have a question about mentors. Ironically, they’ve been men my whole life.”

A gentleman that was the provost at a college I was working at, wonderful man. He went out of his way to make comments and give me advice. And he sat at that table with me where I was the only woman.

Another participant spoke about a male president she worked for, “and he literally told me. You need to be in a community college, you need to be here, and you need to think about eventually becoming a vice president.”

I would say probably my most constant supporter was the first president I worked for, for any significant period of time. And he continued, I would say he was instrumental, one of my key references and supporters throughout my career. He stands out because he's always been in my corner, always encouraged me, always been encouragement to keep going and, you know, not to get disenchanted with the search but to put myself back out there.

"Because had I not had that male president, I wouldn't be where I am."

Other Positive Impacts

I honor the two men that came before me. They were both White men and, they did a beautiful job at building the facilities, the organization, the structure. And, and I think the human capital too. And so here I am as the first female . . .and I wouldn't want to be anyplace else.

Lonely

Feeling lonely in leadership was discussed specifically in 18 instances over 11 interviews. Participants described this feeling growing as authority and responsibility increased, with the presidency creating a situation where they could not have close friendships at work.

"I always say I have no friends at work."

"I don't have one friend among them, I think that's more about me than anything. I don't need a large group of people, I'm an introvert by nature."

"Because it's a lonely place. You know, when you're president, you can't talk to a lot of people at the institution."

"You have very hard days. It's lonely."

However, this was not the case with all of the participants. There were a few who pushed back at the notion that you cannot have friendships at high leadership levels. Said one participant who was the president of a very large institution,

you put yourself in a much more vulnerable position, but I think relationships are critical.

They have to be authentic. You have to have deep friendships in that team. I would fall on a sword for my current cabinet, which is the most talented group of people I've ever worked with. So, you do. Genuinely, I do genuinely love them. Because we have been in the trenches on a lot. We're doing big things there. They are going all out now, part of it when I retire, several of them would like this position, which is great.

Sexism

While participants described positive experiences with men, many also faced instances of perceived sexism on their path. Most did not feel that sexism was a major hinderance to their career progression but had been a challenge to be overcome, which had provided an opportunity for them to become "tough". Older participants were less likely to identify experiences as sexism even while describing discrimination based on their sex. Younger participants were more likely to call sexism by that name. There was a wide variety of opinions on how much sexism they had faced and the level of frustration that had created. One participant shared that she had never faced sexism, but then proceeded to describe a situation that may have indicated discrimination. Many of the participants wondered if men would have faced the same challenges and if the sexism label was applied too liberally by women. There was no clear consensus around this topic.

"And I don't think they would ever do it to a man."

“All the finalists were men and so I started to come to the realization that if I wanted to be a president I probably have to leave the state of . . .”

“My voice was silenced by my [male] supervisor at the time.”

He said “let’s see what happens” and so he kept putting in letters of recommendation for me and nothing happened, and he finally said to me, “you’ve clearly hit the glass ceiling here and you’re going to have to move on”, and I hated to. I loved the job. I absolutely loved the job. And I said, “okay”.

Said another,

I’m less prone to blame sexism. Right? There was a period of my life where I blamed a lot of stuff on sexism. Not being promoted, maybe. Not being recognized for my work, you know, the same blah blah. And, okay, at this point in my life, I’m less tolerant of that. I think men my age and younger men are a little different. They’ve learned from their own experiences and their wives’ and daughters’ experiences.

Growth Mindset

In ten of the interviews the participants specifically mentioned either a growth mindset or described that trait in themselves.

“I just like to learn and continue to grow, transform. I certainly would describe myself as a transformational leader.”

“I say that leadership is really a transformational journey because you must always be able to continue grow, transfer, adapt to changes, make tough decisions.”

“In order for me to grow and develop, I had to come out of that comfort zone and that’s where I am right now.”

“And the reason for that is I’ve made so many mistakes. I just have made so many mistakes that I don’t try and make them much anymore.”

“I’ve always wanted to grow, learn, advance.”

“And kind of that growth mindset of being, you know, making sure that you’re staying challenged.”

And then, as I was preparing for the presidency, I realized that philanthropy was also something that I really didn’t have any background or experience in . . . they said, hey, we’re going to start a doctorate of philanthropy program. You should sign up. So, I did. I still have areas to grow in.

Some participants also described how they wanted to have others share in that growth mindset. “I want people to overcome any obstacles that they’ve had and feel like they can grow and do better.”

Emerging Themes

Reflecting on the codes and employing the hermeneutic circle led to identifying themes that emerged from the data. These themes reveal the phenomenon of the experience of the pathway to the presidency across the participants and inform the research question and sub-question. All of the themes and related codes directly answered the main research question. However, while all were at least loosely related, not all of the themes and subsequent codes directly answered the sub-question surrounding social influences. The following discussion of each theme will identify which themes and codes directly contributed to answering the question and sub-question. Table 2 reveals the themes, related codes, weight, and the question/s it addressed of each theme.

Table 2. Themes, Codes, Weights exhibit the themes that were identified during analysis. Related codes are those codes as previously identified that were grouped together to form the themes. Weight is the combined number of interviews that at least one of the codes in each grouping were found.

Table 2. Themes, Codes, Weight

Theme	Code/s	Weight	Research Question/s
Attaining the presidency came at a high personal cost.	Stress, Balance, Personal Cost, Lonely, Perseverance	19	Question, Sub-question
Love was the motivation and intrinsic reward.	Love, Mission	19	Question
Broad experience and knowledge were key.	Growth Mindset, Broad Experience	18	Question
A supportive spouse yielded a significant positive impact.	Supportive Spouse	17	Question, Sub-question
Authenticity was key.	Authenticity, Fit	13	Question
Female friendships were important to emotional and social support.	Friendships	13	Question, Sub-question
Males in power were critical advocates.	Positive Male Impacts	12	Question, Sub-question

Theme: Attaining the presidency came at a high personal cost.

The path to becoming the first female president of a community college was not easy for any of the participants. Nineteen out of 20 of the participants spoke at length about challenges, hardships, and sacrifices that were required of them to reach their goal. Many of them expressed sadness and regret over missed time and opportunities with children and loved ones. Most noted the long work hours and loss of personal freedom and the weight of responsibility they felt. Some even questioned whether the cost was worth it or not.

All of these experiences revealed the phenomena of the lived experience of these leaders and answered the research question. Included in the code “stress” was the pressure and disappointment that several of the participants experienced through specific episodes of gender

discrimination and a perception of hitting a glass ceiling. This portion of the theme answered in part the sub-question.

Theme: Love was the motivation and intrinsic reward.

Overwhelmingly, love came out as the central theme of this research. Participants cited it as the motivating factor for their pursuit of leadership and the presidency, as well as the primary reason they were willing to overcome the high personal cost to achieve that goal.

This theme and related codes were certainly connected to a social context, the participants were driven by the desire to lift and help others, but it did not specifically address the social influences that they experienced themselves. Thus, it answered the research question but did not particularly address the sub-question.

Theme: Broad experience and knowledge were key to success.

Having broad knowledge and work experience were believed to be a key to success by most of the participants. Those that spent their entire careers inside of community colleges had broad experience across the institution, several who had spent their entire career in higher education had university experience as well as community college experience, and several had private industry experience. Those with private industry experience felt that was particularly beneficial to the work they were doing as a president.

In addition to having broad experience, many of the participants either explicitly described having a growth mindset or demonstrated that trait in the interviews.

This theme and related codes addressed the research question but did not answer the sub-question.

Theme: A supportive spouse yielded a significant positive impact.

Subjects gave a supportive spouse on their career trajectories heavy weight. It came out as more important than mentors, authority figures, and other institutional and career factors. Seventeen of the participants put varying degrees of emphasis on this topic but all used language that indicated deep feeling. Intuitively, having emotional support and someone to provide primary assistance with child rearing and household duties and responsibilities would provide great benefit to a person involved in a demanding career path.

This theme was directly related to answering both the research question and sub-question, as it surrounded the influence that a key familial relationship had on the participants' experience.

Theme: Authenticity was key.

Authenticity in leadership was discussed by many of the participants as a key factor in finding the "right fit" at an institution and in success in a position. Most participants did feel that they needed to modulate their behavior and image based upon circumstances to some degree, but most felt strongly that they act with integrity and present themselves as their true selves.

Again, the theme revealed an important element of the lived experience of the participants. It was also loosely indicative of social influences due to the reports of the need to code-switch so as to manage the participants' image in certain instances, but it did not directly address the sub-question.

Theme: Female friendships were important to emotional and social support.

Same level and below female colleagues and female personal friends were noted by many of the participants as important social and emotional supports as well as encouraging career growth. Female authority figures and mentors were significantly less identified as having impact on career trajectories.

This theme was directly related to both the research question and sub-question. Female friendships were an important social influence and support.

Theme: Males in power were critical advocates

Male presidents, supervisors, and board members served as critical mentors and advocates to several of the participants. Of those, many indicated that they could not have reached their position without the assistance of a male authority figure. Men in positions of power were important as advocates to the attainment of these positions. One participant reflected that it may be that there weren't many women in positions of power who could do that work. It is unclear why there was a difference in the roles males and females played in the career trajectories of the participants.

Of all of the themes, the influence of spouses and males in power had the most direct social influence on the career trajectories of the participants. This theme directly addresses both the research question and sub-question.

Theme Summary

The seven themes that resulted from the interpretive phenomenological analysis of the interviews and data collected answer, in part, the research question and sub-question: What are the lived experiences of first-at-institution female community college presidents on the road to the presidency? And how do first-at-institution female community college presidents experience social influences on the road to the presidency? The analysis revealed some results that were expected and a few that were not.

Whereas all of the themes and subsequent codes addressed the main research question, only some of the themes and related codes addressed the sub-question related to social influences.

The themes that addressed the sub-question related to social influences are the following:

Attaining the presidency came at a high personal cost.

Within this theme loneliness and social isolation from co-workers and subordinates was acutely experienced by many of the participants and was a social result of continuing to move up in the power structures.

A supportive spouse yielded a significant positive impact.

Conversely, emotional and social support as well as support in household and child-rearing duties was offset by a supportive spouse in 17 of the participants. This social connection was very important to the career paths of those participants.

Female friendships were important to social and emotional support.

Female friendships emerged as an important way to offset the loneliness and stress felt as participants rose in to higher and higher levels of authority. They were confidants and provided levity, support, and release.

Males in power were critical advocates.

This theme was most closely tied to social capital theory. Males in positions of power who wielded their expertise, influence, and access on the part of several of the participants had a large impact on their ability to learn, grow, and attain higher levels of authority.

Chapter Summary

Chapter four provided a brief review of the study's research questions and a discussion of how the study's data were analyzed utilizing IPA, and how the hermeneutic circle led to the identification of themes from that data. The use of MAXQDA to facilitate the identification of patterns and codes within the interview data was reviewed. Participant demographics were

discussed as well as code identification. The results of the analysis of the twenty interviews comprised much of the chapter, with codes that occurred in 50% or more of interviews receiving attention. Themes were then extrapolated. These results provide insight into the lived experience of the participants.

Chapter 5 will summarize the study's findings, present the implications of the study for practice and further research, and provide a brief summary of the entire study.

Chapter 5 - Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter will begin with a review of the research, including a summary of the study's purpose, research questions, theoretical framework, and conceptual lens. A summation of the study's findings are then presented within the context of the conceptual framework and data analysis technique utilized, followed by implications and concluding remarks.

Research Overview

There has been, and continues to be, a lack of equal representation of females in community college presidencies. In 2021, ACE reported that 36% of community college presidents were female, while 57% of students were (American Association of Community Colleges, 2021). Even more concerning, is that since 2010 the number of female presidents at community colleges has not increased. In 2023, the AACC reported that the progress in the percentage of female CEOs at community colleges had ground to a halt. From 36.5% in 2010 to 36.6% in 2023 (Phillippe, 2023). Research has been done on barriers facing females in attainment of college presidencies, but the literature is lacking in the area of females seeking community college presidencies and is nearly non-existent for first-at-institution female community college presidents. This research was designed with this problem in mind.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of first-at-institution female community college presidents on their road to the presidency and in particular the social influences they experienced during that time. The researcher explored the lived experiences of first-at-institution female community college presidents in an attempt to answer one research question and one sub-question.

RQ1. What are the lived experiences of first-at-institution female community college presidents on the road to the presidency?

- a. How do first-at-institution female community college presidents experience social influences on the road to the presidency?

This question and sub-question are in alignment with the hermeneutic phenomenological theoretic framework and the conceptual lens of social capital theory of the study.

Data were collected for this qualitative study by conducting semi-structured interviews of 20 current first-at-institution female community college presidents. The researcher analyzed the collected data by employing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA allowed the data and participants to speak for themselves and required the researcher to bring forth themes inductively. IPA provided a structure to analyze the data that was in alignment with the purpose and theoretical framework of the study and best allowed for the research question and sub-question to be answered.

Interpretation of Findings

Findings were formulated withing the theoretical framework of hermeneutic phenomenology and utilized the conceptual lens of social capital theory. Findings in this section are compared and contrasted with the literature, which was reviewed in chapter 2. Results are noted as expected or not expected and reasoning for those determinations are discussed. Insights are also discussed in relation to the research question and sub-question and the problem stated in this study.

Findings Within the Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Lens

The theoretical framework of hermeneutic phenomenology aims to reveal the lived experience of the study participants. It also allows for the use of a conceptual lens (Peoples, 2021). The conceptual lens of social capital theory selected for this study allowed the researcher to gain insight into what was happening in the complex relationships that occur socially and

culturally, which influence the participants on their path to the presidency (Machalek & Martin, 2015). Social capital theory postulates that social and familial connections and networks have value and far-reaching impacts on the lives of individuals (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1986; Demirtas & Tezer, 2012; Seibert, Kraimer, and Liden, 2001). The findings of this study are directly related to the theoretical framework and conceptual lens that were selected. Findings did not diverge in any notable way from the framework and conceptual lens.

This study identified seven themes that revealed, in part, the lived experience of the subjects on their path to becoming the first female president of a community college. The findings revolve around social connections and experiences of the participants. Those findings are discussed below.

Attaining the presidency came at a high personal cost.

Achieving a presidency comes with significant personal costs and stress was a pervasive issue. The subjects had balanced demanding jobs with academic pursuits and family responsibilities and were often driven by a strong work ethic instilled from a young age. Despite the personal toll, they view their roles as opportunities to serve and positively impact others, requiring significant personal sacrifice and dedication. This echoes Sundaresan in 2014, who found that women in top leadership positions must manage a wide variety of personal and professional demands.

Balancing work and personal life were a constant challenge, with many participants struggling to integrate practices that prevent burnout. Personal costs are significant, including strained relationships, missed family events, and a pervasive sense of loneliness due to the inability to form close friendships at work. The participants demonstrated what was found by

Keohane (2020), that the that lack of family friendly policies and practices in higher education has a disproportionate negative impact on females.

Many of the participants specifically expressed dissatisfaction with the imbalance between their home and work lives. This supports the findings of Ryan & Peters in 2015. They also reported working very long hours which was also found by Ryan & Peters (2015) when they surveyed women in academia.

In an effort to manage stress, the participants engage in a variety of coping strategies including exercise, healthy eating, and setting boundaries around work, such as not answering emails on weekends, to maintain a sense of balance.

Issues surrounding gender discrimination presented additional hurdles, with experiences varying widely among the participants. Older leaders were less likely to label discriminatory experiences as sexism, while younger leaders more readily identify and call it out. Despite mixed views on its impact, explicit individual and systematic gender discrimination was something that subjects had to overcome.

It was found that the participants experienced what was found by Stutz (2014). They spoke about their career decision-making was focused on doing a good job. Many also felt they had to work harder than men to attain the same positions, as well as reporting feelings of isolation and that they were judged at higher standards than their male counterparts (Stutz, 2014).

This result was not unexpected. It is intuitively understood that reaching a community college presidency would require high levels of hard work, dedication, and sacrifice. However, the long hours and feelings of being on call 24 hours a day and the struggle to balance work and life reflect the research and writing of Keohane (2020) and Ryan and Peters (2015), who deduced that females are disproportionately impacted by a lack of workplace policies that support

families and are negatively impacted by the imbalance between work and home life. It is easy to see why this difficult path would cause some females to choose another way of life that was less demanding on themselves and their families. It may also be that these types of demands simply made it impossible for women without significant support structures in their personal lives to be able to make the attempt at all.

Love was the motivation and intrinsic reward.

Love. It all came down to love. The researcher was taken by surprise at the almost universal deep belief, commitment, and passion that arose for community colleges and their students by the subjects out of love.

Their stories were different, but at their core, each of them has a drive to love others in their own way. They see this work as a way to change lives. They all spoke of the hardship and sacrifices necessary to reach a presidency, and there are many. The price is very high. But that price is overcome by love. That is not where the researcher thought this study would lead. Love. Mentioned specifically 143 times over 19 interviews and in myriad ways that did not explicitly use that word, it was the motivating force behind their work and aspirations, and the intrinsic reward that allowed them to continue and move through difficulty.

Looking at the literature review, the 2010 Plinsk and Packer research study aimed at revealing what Boards of Trustees believed were the most important characteristics of a community college president of either gender. They identified passion for education and being a champion of community colleges as the most important trait that a president could possess. The participants in this study embody this trait. This directly supports the theme that arose from this study.

In addition, love in most cases, translated as a high level of warmth along with competence. These leaders seem to have been able to walk the thin line of competence and warmth described by Williams et al., (2018) in navigating likability and the double-bind.

This finding also tied directly back to the conceptual lens of social capital theory chosen for this study. As discussed by Coleman (1986) and Bourdieu (1986), networks were particularly valuable to most of the participants in moving their careers ahead. They were able to create these relationships and leverage them due to their care, concern, and love for others as well as their competence in their positions. Also supported by the theory, each of these leaders believed strongly that their value in their position was to be able to influence others for the good of those in their networks.

Broad experience and knowledge were key to success.

It was clear that broad experience inside and outside of community colleges as well as working at multiple institutions was highly valued by the subjects. Private industry work experience was particularly appreciated. A broad knowledge base was similarly regarded, with experiential knowledge and formal education sought after to increase this knowledge base. As one participant put it, her knowledge was “an inch deep and a mile wide”. This is directly contrary to the 1979 Martha McGee paper presented at the Annual Convention of the National Association for Women Deans, Administrators, and Counselors that outlined research surrounding the life situations and characteristics of female presidents at that time. That study found that female presidents at that time typically: (1) spent their entire career in education; (2) had worked in three or fewer institutions.

Times have changed and presidents need to have the ability to operate in a wide variety of areas. Business management, fundraising, facilities management, financial knowledge,

political acumen, human resource management, partnership development and many others are all critical for successful modern leadership.

The benefit of having a wide circle of connections and experiencing interactions with many leaders, both in positive and negative ways, was found to be a valuable learning experience by many of the participants. Those networks were also instrumental in career progress. Again, this ties back to the conceptual lens of social capital theory the study was designed with.

Connected to the idea of attaining broad experience, many of the participants demonstrated a growth mindset. Dr. Carol Dweck of Stanford University coined the term. Her research revealed that “individuals who believe their talents can be developed through hard work, good strategies, and input from others have a growth mindset. They tend to achieve more than those with a more fixed mindset, those who believe their talents are innate gifts” (Dweck, 2016).

A supportive spouse yielded a significant positive impact.

Much like the result surrounding love, this theme arose strongly. As the researcher engaged in the hermeneutic cycle it became apparent that the researcher had a preconceived idea that personal relationships would not be as impactful as professional relationships on career paths. This was revised through the reflective process.

Seventeen of the participants, all of whom were married, cited a supportive spouse as a primary reason for their success. This exceeded the influence of people who directly impacted their career progression such as supervisors and board members.

However, when reviewing the literature surrounding systematic barriers that are in place when it comes to work-life policies in higher education--and the demands of increasing leadership roles--having a spouse at home who is taking on homemaking responsibilities and

caring for children is a tremendous benefit, not to mention the emotional support such a relationship can provide (Sundaresan, 2014). Keohane (2020) delineates the disproportionate impact that lack of family friendly policies and practices in higher education has on females. It seems that having a supportive spouse may have lessened that barrier for those participants allowing them to reach the presidency.

Authenticity was key.

Throughout the interviews, participants pointed towards being true to themselves and portraying themselves to others in a way that represented themselves honestly. However, the participants also discussed the ways they modulated their behavior based on the audience. This seems to support research discussed in the literature review, which indicated that females that share their authentic selves but also have high levels of self-monitoring and modulate their behavior based on the situation have high rates of success in gaining promotion (O'Neill & O'Reilly, 2011).

Kramer (2021) postulated that in many cases code-switching is simply image management and that all successful professionals must engage in this practice to some degree to gain acceptance in their companies and move forward in their careers. O'Neill & O'Reilly (2021) found that women who have high levels of self-monitoring and modulate their behavior based on the situation had higher rates of success in gaining promotion to leadership positions than even men did. The way that the participants engaged with the theme of authenticity supports these findings.

Acting with integrity was also discussed by some of the participants as connected to authentic leadership. Being “authentic” was held up as a way to avoid burnout and to allow

critical social connection with others. The result of authenticity was expected and aligns with research around successful women in leadership and code switching.

Female friendships were important to emotional and social support.

Interestingly, in more than 50% of the interviews, female friendships were discussed as important social and emotional supports. Same level and below female colleagues and female friends outside of the institution were those who encouraged career growth in the participants as opposed to male supervisors and males in authority. One possible reason for this was offered by a participant when she observed that it was men who had primarily assisted in her career but that was because there weren't women in authority positions who could do so. There may be other reasons that women in authority positions were not as helpful to those seeking leadership positions. As stated earlier, the "tend and befriend" response to stress may support this behavior of females seeking and building relationships with other females (Taylor et al., 2000).

This finding aligned with social capital theory, in that the strength of influence of those in the network has a weaker or stronger effect on the career trajectory of the participant (Seibert et al., 2001). Since women are not in as many leadership positions they may have less influence in the network. Considering the high levels of stress and sacrifice that many of the participants experienced on their paths the importance of female friendships may be explained by research completed by Taylor et al. In research completed in 2000, researchers offered that the oft cited fight-or-flight biobehavioral response to stress had been primarily created from research completed on males. They observed that females tended to act in another way, which they coined "tend-and-befriend" (Taylor et al., 2000). "Tending involves nurturant activities designed to protect the self and offspring that promote safety and reduce distress; befriending is the creation and maintenance of social networks that may aid in this process" (Taylor et al., 2000). Taylor et

al. (2000) noted that this tend-and-befriend response is primarily done with other females, however, females exhibit this response with both males and females.

While it was not unexpected to find that females would find social and emotional support from other females, it was notable that females in authority positions did not have as much effect on career paths.

Males in power were critical advocates.

In contrast with female friends, many of the participants gave credit to males in positions of authority for significant milestone promotions in their careers. Male presidents and board members in particular were identified as taking interest in, providing informal mentorship to, and providing access to valuable social contacts for several of the participants.

According to social capital theory, females who are connected with those in positions of power are associated with networks that can aid their progress (Coleman, 1986; Seibert et al., 2001). With males occupying a majority of leadership positions, particularly presidencies, they may hold greater strength in their networks of influence than female leaders. Social capital theory is supported by this finding.

In addition, and connected to this topic, Moscariello (2018) found that mid-level female administrators at community colleges benefited from informal mentoring. The administrators helped not only in their careers but personally as well. “Self-confidence, career success, professional development, and leadership opportunities resulted from these experiences” (Moscariello, 2018, p. 3). Additionally, both formal and informal mentorship was found to be the most common practice used by women attempting to navigate their way to the college presidency in a study by Oikelome in 2017. Participants in this study reported almost universally

that males in positions of power had either mentored or opened doors for them or both. Both of these studies align with the reported experiences in this study.

Implications for Practice

This study finds that those who successfully obtain a presidency as the first female at a community college had a passion for education, loved their institutions and students, and led and lived with authenticity. It also finds that there are significant challenges and barriers that exist for females on the path to becoming the first female president of a community college, many of which surround work-life balance, stress, and access to mentors and those in positions of authority.

Social capital theory was also supported in the findings. It was clear that the participants relied heavily on the social connections in their lives, such as spouses, mentors, friends, and family members for emotional and career support. In particular, relationships with authority figures who provided access, advice, encouragement, and assistance were valuable to their paths in this context. Many of the participants also seemed to understand that they now had a responsibility to use their social capital to advance the careers of others.

For Females Seeking a Presidency

Based upon the findings, females who are seeking a presidency should consider several actions and practices that may be beneficial in reaching that goal.

Seeking out informal mentors who are in positions of power and influence is important. The data revealed that male presidents, board members, and supervisors had the greatest influence on upward career trajectory. However, females in positions of power and influence were also important to a few of the participants. The old adage that it “matters who you know” turns out to be true.

Create healthy personal habits and engender positive personal relationships as a way to manage stress. Nearly all of the participants had some personal habits surrounding diet and exercise and explicitly made time in their schedules for activities that allowed them to unplug from their work. Some of the participants had also implemented email and work time restrictions for their subordinates as a way to protect their own well-being and that of their staff and faculty. As another part of stress management, engaging in positive female friendships, particularly with those who were not connected to higher education, emerged as an important.

Gaining a wide variety of experience and knowledge is another practice that may yield results. Formal training and education, and informal study were valuable to the participants. Staying at one institution or in one career field may have been the standard historically for presidents but many of the participants had worked at more than one institution and in broad areas across those institutions. Several had also come to higher education from outside career fields, those participants found that outside career experience to be exceptionally helpful to them. In connection with this, many of the participants were engaging in continuous learning about new topics.

Without a doubt, having a supportive spouse or partner was helpful. If a female does not have that type of support in their personal life, it may be important to specifically seek out employment at institutions that have family friendly and work-life balance policies, practices, and cultures in place.

Finding institutions that fit personal values and culture is also important. Being able to be authentically themselves was something that many of the participants pointed to. However, they also noted that the ability to modulate behavior within that authentic self was critical for success depending on the situation.

For All Those Concerned with Improving Parity

Family friendly policies needed – work life balance policies and culture.

As found in the literature review and voiced by the participants, women in higher education work very long hours and suffer from a lack of balance between work and their personal lives (Ryan & Peters, 2015; Keohane, 2020). The subjects were required to sacrifice important time with family, friends, and time for themselves to attain this goal. Many of the subjects had a supportive spouse who provided emotional support and took on household and child rearing duties that would typically be handled by females. This was a tremendous benefit to the subjects.

Community colleges must improve their policies and practices surrounding work-life balance and family friendly policies if females who do not have such a relationship in their life are to be afforded more access to leadership roles. Current systems make it very difficult for caregivers, who are predominantly women.

Email practices and boundaries on when work is to be completed were noted as being impactful by some of the participants. Presidents have a lot of authority to encourage healthy behaviors not only for themselves, but their entire campus community.

HR policies and practices can do more to support parents and caregivers as they navigate difficult waters (Keohane, 2020). Building a culture that is accepting and supportive as well as creating efficiencies instead of venerating long hours and setting expectations for work to take priority during off hours may help address this issue.

Boards of Trustees can do more to provide a safe and reasonable working condition for female presidents.

The emotional, social, and physical toll and the heightened risks of leadership at the CEO level has a dampening effect on female ambition (Fisk & Overton, 2019). The belief that females are punished more harshly than males for leadership failure decrease women's leadership ambitions. Fisk and Overton (2019) found that female leaders "face greater penalties and reputational losses for failure" (p. 320). They also found evidence that women are aware of these gendered sanctions for failing in a leadership role and that this knowledge "depresses their leadership ambitions" (Fisk & Overton, 2019, p. 319).

The risks associated with failure and the sacrifices required are such that potential leaders may not seek the role. Particularly, African American females, who are also facing the stresses that come with current political turmoil revolving around Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion along with other systematic issues are under pressure that few would rationally seek out.

Boards can do much more to inform themselves of the struggles and pressures that face presidents and then implement policies and support that ease some of these issues. If parity is to be reached, the job must be a place where a wide variety of genders and ethnicities can thrive.

Find those who embody love and passion for community colleges and students and develop them.

It is fitting that love was a central theme to this study, as it aligns with what community colleges are at their core. Employees who embody this trait may be fertile ground for the upcoming generation of leadership. Current leaders should find those who embody love and passion for community colleges and students and develop them. As one participant said, "I think to attract people who want to be here because they are student centered. Those individuals may need a little nudging. And we need to be sure whether they male or female, that we're nudging [them]."

Men must continue to advocate and mentor.

Males in authority were a major factor in the subjects meeting their goals. Men who are interested in parity must continue this work and expand it. Men who have not taken an active role are needed to engage. Their connections to networks and information are still a critical piece in moving the needle in this area.

The iconic request from Justice Ginsburg, “I ask no favor for my sex. All I ask of our brethren is that they take their feet off our necks” (Grimké, 1837, as cited by Ginsburg, 1973, p. 21) does not go far enough. It is clear that many men are already doing more than just taking their feet off the necks of females, but this study makes it evident that if we are to ever reach parity, they must do more than that.

With males still holding the majority percentage in presidencies, it is critical according to social capital theory (Plagens and Stapleton, 2011) that they connect upcoming female leaders with their networks if parity is ever to be reached.

Female presidents must use their influence and social capital to open doors for the next generation.

Females who are now in positions of leadership and authority now have access to the very social capital that assisted them in their journeys. They need to be active in encouraging the next generation of women leaders even more than they have been doing as well as leading the work to tear down identified barriers. Said one participant, “I think we also have a responsibility. To be sure that we’re paid in a fair way, for whoever is coming behind us. I don’t really feel like I broke through any glass ceilings. But I can very easily and quickly look at people who did (that) for me. And so, there were a lot of things that I think I just knew I could do. I’m able to climb the ladder, because of somebody who built it before me. You look at look at what this

opportunity has afforded me and my family, I have an obligation, I have a responsibility-- to help anybody who's coming behind me."

Recommendations for Further Research

This study used data gleaned from interviews of current first-at-institution female community college presidents. Based on the findings, the following areas may be served by further research.

The code of Faith did not meet the reporting threshold of being discussed or mentioned in 50% or more of the interviews that were conducted. However, six of the 20 participants spoke about having faith in God and that being a primary reason for their pursuit of leadership. Interestingly, those six included all of the underrepresented ethnic groups in the study. All the African American and Hispanic participants spoke openly about a faith in God, while only 12.5% of White participants did so. The researcher asked no specific questions about religion or faith but did ask follow up questions when participants voluntarily brought the subject into the interview. Focusing research specifically on subjects from these groups may yield additional meaningful results.

In addition, the impact of a supportive spouse on the path to presidency reflected only traditional marriages. Spouses in same-sex households were not a part of the subject group. This may be another area of possible research that may yield useful information.

The study also noted that female leaders were not as impactful as male leaders on the subject's career trajectories. Further research into that area may be important.

Chapter Summary

As this study has shown, the path to becoming the first female president of a community college traverses many different landscapes. Each female must make her own way. However,

there are strong themes among those that have been successful in reaching this position that directly grapple with significant cultural and structural challenges that women face today.

Analysis revealed some results that were expected and a few that were not. Females who have reached this level of leadership in their careers, and particularly those who have overcome barriers to become the first female president at an institution have wisdom that may benefit women who are on the path behind them. As a group they were humble, kind, confident, intelligent, and passionate about their calling. And a calling is what they overwhelmingly believed their careers were: to be in service of their students, communities, families, and colleagues. They were an inspiration.

Parity is about more than simply fair play. As stated at the beginning of this work, “Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development, and building good governance” (Annan, 1998, p. 4). As one of the primary drivers of economic prosperity and the vehicle for hundreds of thousands of underrepresented Americans to improve their lives each year, the community college should be a place this goal is reached, and soon.

There is much work still to do to reduce the systematic barriers that exist within community colleges that may be depressing ambition or holding prospective females back. Work-life balance is an issue that is growing increasingly more urgent.

With gains stalled, it is critical that this current generation of leaders, both male and female, utilize the social capital that they have gathered and assist those women coming up behind them. One would have hoped that by the year 2024 the need for this type of focused attention on the barriers that women face would no longer be necessary, that we had progressed as a society, but the data do not bear that out. Thankfully, as shown by this study, there are many

in positions of authority, both male and female, who embrace authenticity and love along with a feeling of responsibility to the next generation. That gives much hope for the future.

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Appendix A - Alignment Table

Table 3. Alignment of Research Questions, Theoretical Framework, Conceptual Lens, Methodology, and Interview Questions

Research Questions	Conceptual Framework	Methodology	Interview Questions
RQ1: What are the lived experiences of first-at-institution female community college presidents on the road to the presidency?	Social Capital Theory	Qualitative - Phenomenological	Interview Questions 1, 2, 3
RQ1a: How do first-at-institution female community college presidents experience social influences on the road to the presidency?	Social Capital Theory	Qualitative - Phenomenological	Interview Questions 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9

Appendix B - Interview Questions

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What are the lived experiences of first-at-institution female community college presidents on the road to the presidency?

1. Describe your journey to becoming a community college president, highlighting key experiences and milestones? Tell me in as much detail as possible. What was the most frustrating? What brought you joy in this journey?
2. Were there any specific challenges or barriers you faced as a female leader on your path to the presidency? How did that make you feel?
3. How did you decide to pursue a leadership role in higher education? Why did you decide to pursue a leadership role in higher education?

Research Sub-question 1a (RQ1a): How do first-at-institution female community college presidents experience social influences on the road to the presidency?

4. Who were significant individuals who influenced your leadership journey?
5. Walk me through the mentors you have found along your journey. How did they impact your journey?
6. What did you find most valuable in your journey to the presidency?
7. What societal expectations and cultural norms impacted your experience? What did that feel like?
8. Describe any social and professional networks that influenced your career progression.
9. What was it like for you to overcome social and gender-related challenges in your leadership role? What did that look like on your journey?

Possible follow up/probing questions:

You mentioned xxxx tell me more about that,

What was it like walking in your first day?

What does it feel like to be in board meetings?

Have you noticed any changes in the attitudes or expectations towards female leadership in community colleges over the years?

Appendix C – Invitation to Participate Email

Dear (Potential Study Participant),

I am a doctoral candidate at Kansas State University's John E. Roueche Community College Leadership Program. I'm excited to invite you to participate in the research for my dissertation.

Close to 60% of the students we serve in community colleges today are female. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), in 2010 36.5% of community college presidents in the United States were female. Measured again in 2023 the rate was 36.6%. Statistically, the needle has not moved in 13 years. Women remain underrepresented in the presidency role of community colleges and progress has stagnated.

My research focuses on first-at-institution female community college presidents. Through qualitative research, I aim to explore the lived experiences and social influences on the path to the presidency of pioneering women like you. While I am interested in the challenges women face, I am more focused on what worked so that information can be shared with others who care about improving parity.

Your participation is crucial to the success of this study. It will involve sharing basic demographic and institutional information, insights into your social network, and thoughts on your path to the presidency during a Zoom interview that will be recorded and transcribed. The Zoom interview will last approximately an hour or less and be scheduled at your convenience. Your participation will be entirely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time. All information will be kept confidential, and your demographic information will be anonymized and kept secure.

If you decide to participate, I'll provide an informed consent form and more study details. Please feel free to reach out to me at madore.brenda@gmail.com or (254) 433-0959 with any questions.

Thank you so much for your consideration. I hope to hear from you soon.

Respectfully,

Brenda Madore

Appendix D – Informed Consent

KANSAS STATE
UNIVERSITY

University Research
Compliance Office

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Informed Consent Form

comply@k-state.edu | 785-532-3224

PROJECT TITLE:

The path to parity: exploring the lived experience of first-at-institution female community college presidents

**PROJECT
APPROVAL
DATE:**

**PROJECT
EXPIRATION
DATE:**

**LENGTH OF
STUDY:**

TBD

**PRINCIPAL
INVESTIGATOR:**

Brenda Madore

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):

Dr. Kathie Sigler

**CONTACT DETAILS FOR
PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:**

Contact Dr. Kathie Sigler at Kathie.sigler@gmail.com.

**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; Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

This phenomenological study intends to explore the lived experiences of first-at-institution female community college presidents on their road to the presidency. It will also explore the social influences they experienced during that time.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:

The proposed methodology for this study is a qualitative phenomenological design. Participants will be first-at-institution female non-profit community college presidents in the United States. The data source for this study will be collected from semi-structured participant interviews consisting of open-ended questions followed by follow-up clarifying questions to gather relevant data from each participant.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:

There are no known risks or discomforts to the participants.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:

The focus of this study is designed to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on internal and external social influences on the pathway to the community college presidency for females. The study is designed with the intention of adding to the body of knowledge that may encourage more females to seek community college presidencies.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

Participant and institution identities will be kept confidential. They will be identified using letters and numbers. All interviews and recordings will be kept on an external drive that will be encrypted and password protected and kept in a secure location for five years. The information or biospecimens collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

PARTICIPANT NAME:

--

**PARTICIPANT
SIGNATURE:**

--

DATE:

--

**WITNESS TO
SIGNATURE: (PROJECT
STAFF)**

--

DATE:

--

Appendix E – Tracy’s Eight Big Tent Criteria

Table 4. Tracy’s Eight Big Tent Criteria

Tracy’s Eight Big Tent criteria (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017)

Worthy Topic	The topic of the research is: The topic of first-at-institution female community college presidents is relevant, timely, and significant. Despite gains in the past 30 years, females are still significantly underrepresented in top leadership roles and concerning, the rate of increase has stalled since 2010.
Rich Rigor	The study uses a sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex: • Set of theoretical constructs. The theoretical framework that will be used is Hermeneutic Phenomenology. A conceptual lens of social capital theory will also be employed. • Data and time in the field. Data will be collected from multiple participants across the country. • Sample(s). Participants will attempt to be selected from diverse institutions across the country. Large and small enrollment and rural and urban settings will all be recruited. • Data collection and analysis processes. Semi-structured interviews will be utilized to provide triangulation. Coding of the interviews will produce themes across the participant pool.
Sincerity	The study is characterized by the following: • Self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher. These will be specified in the study. • Transparency about the methods and challenges. These will be specified in the study.
Credibility	The research is marked by the following: • “Thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit (non-textual) knowledge, and showing rather than telling” (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017, p. 3). The researcher will bring forward details from interviews and other data sets to provide these items. • Triangulation. The researcher will code with triangulation in mind. The researcher will employ method, theory, and data source triangulation (Carter et al., 2014). • Multivocality. This study has been designed to give voice to diverse voices. • Member reflections. This study has been designed to rely on the reflection of participants.

Resonance	The research is designed to influence, impact, or move readers through aesthetic, evocative representation and naturalistic generalizations (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017).
Significant Contribution	The research is designed to provide a significant contribution: • Conceptually/theoretically • Practically • Morally • Methodologically • Heuristically
Ethics	The research considers the following: • Procedural ethics (such as human subjects) • Situational and culturally specific ethics • Relational ethics • Exiting ethics (leaving the scene and sharing the research) • IRB approval • Protection of human subjects • Confidentiality • Secure storage of data for five years
Meaningful Coherence	It is the aim of the researcher that the study: • Achieves what it purports to be about. • Uses methods and procedures that fit its stated goals. • “Meaningfully interconnects literature, research questions/foci, findings, and interpretations with each other” (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017, p. 3).

Appendix F – Debriefing Statement

Thank you for sharing your perspectives with me today. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of first-at-institution female community college presidents on their road to the presidency and in particular the social influences they experienced during that time. Your participation is invaluable in the attempt to meet this purpose.

Next steps will include the transcription of your interview. The information gathered from this research is confidential and will be summarized with other responses. You will not be mentioned by name nor will any personally identifying information be included in the dissertation. You will be provided with a copy of the findings once the data has been analyzed and the study is completed.

If you have any questions, please contact me at madore.brenda@gmail.com or Kathie Sigler at Kathie.sigler@gmail.com. You may also contact the Research Compliance Office at Kansas State University with questions about the study (comply@ksu.edu).