

The experiences of award-winning women community college presidents achieving equitable
education outcomes

by

Elizabeth A. Ross

B.A., University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 2011
M.B.A, King University, 2018

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2025

Abstract

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Approved by:

Major Professor
Dr. Susan Yelich Biniecki

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Acknowledgments

I want to start by thanking my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for bestowing on me the gifts of writing, curiosity, creativity, innovation, and the love for learning. While I know that it's been your grace and mercy that's brought me this far, I thank you for carrying me through this finish line - without you, none of this would be possible.

To my chair and major professor, Dr. Susan Yelich Biniecki, thank you. There were times along this journey when you pushed me, and I was hesitant to take on discomfort, but you assured me each step of the way that I'd be fine and I could do it, and I have. I appreciate your openness and relatability, but most of all, your professionalism and demonstration of a dedicated and supportive major professor.

To my committee, I am sincerely grateful for your professionalism and scholarship. Your critiques and feedback helped stretch and guide me, and I appreciate you for it.

To Dr. Richard "Dick" Hannah, thank you for being a godsend of an editor. Just know you can expect direct referrals from me. I appreciate your help.

To Mama, Seria, David, and Shaina - while I've been blessed with community and friends who have become family, you all are my backbone and best friends. I appreciate you allowing me to vent, allowing me to be absent to focus on rest or work, and allowing me to evolve. There is so much more I could say, but not merely enough words to express my sincere and enduring gratitude for your love. I love you, times infinity.

To my family and friends, and colleagues, thank you for your love, support, words of encouragement, and understanding. Your love and kinship mean more to me than you'll ever know. I am a witness of the importance of community, and I pray we have many more years to celebrate life and love together.

Dedication

For Larry Darnell Johnson. For Sontidra LaVett Thomas. I love you. Rest in peace.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Achieving equity in higher education remains a critical challenge, particularly for community colleges serving diverse student populations. These institutions, despite their mission of access and inclusivity, often face difficulties in closing equity gaps, which are disparities in educational outcomes among different demographic groups (Brown McNair, 2021). Equitable education outcomes refer to ensuring all students, irrespective of their background, have equal access to educational resources and opportunities, enabling them to meet their full academic and personal potential (Bloomberg, 2024). The leadership within community colleges, especially women community college presidents, plays a pivotal role in addressing these challenges. Women community college presidents are uniquely positioned to influence and enact policies that foster equity and inclusion, which involves creating learning environments where all students feel valued, supported, and fully engaged in their educational journey (Bloomberg, 2024).

Historically, community colleges have been more inclusive environments for women compared to other higher education institutions, resulting in a higher representation of women in leadership roles within these settings (Eddy, 2008). As more women assume presidential roles, they bring diverse perspectives and approaches to leadership that can drive institutional change and promote equity (Gillet-Karam, 2017). This study explores the experiences of award-winning women community college presidents achieving equitable education outcomes. By examining the strategies, challenges, and successes of these leaders through their personal narratives, this research aims to provide insights into effective leadership practices that promote equity in education.

Background

Community colleges are essential in providing accessible education to a diverse student population, including students from various racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and demographic backgrounds. Underrepresented students, who have historically faced systemic barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education, include racial and ethnic minorities, first-generation college students, low-income students, students from rural backgrounds, students with disabilities, non-traditional students, students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or other non-heteronormative identities (LGBTQ+), and veterans (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; HE Professional, 2023; Tanner, 2019). Despite the inclusive mission of these institutions, achieving equitable education outcomes for these students remains a significant challenge (Astin & Astin, 2015).

The National Equity Project defines educational equity as ensuring each student receives the necessary resources to develop to their full academic and social potential (National Equity Project, n.d.). Equity gaps, which refer to disparities in education outcomes across various demographic traits, indicate that current practices and procedures do not effectively support all student groups (Brown McNair, 2021; Education Advisory Board [EAB], n.d.). Addressing these gaps requires intentional efforts to transform institutional practices to better serve underrepresented students and close the equity gaps that persist in higher education.

While community college students represent 41% of all undergraduates, many leave without degrees, particularly those from ethnic minority and low-income backgrounds (American Association of Community Colleges, 2021). Higher education institutions need to implement practices that improve completion rates among underrepresented students (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2018; Harper & Harris, 2012; Weatherton

& Schussler, 2021). Although community colleges cannot address all inequities, their mission of open access and community service positions them at the forefront of efforts to tackle challenges related to poverty, K-12 education, and workforce development (Davis et al., 2022). Community college presidents play a crucial role in this effort by making data-driven decisions, empowering their colleges and communities, and ensuring equitable student participation and outcomes.

Information from a report by Achieving the Dream, Inc. (ATD, 2013), *Crisis and Opportunity: Aligning the Community College Presidency with Student Success*, highlights the importance of strong leadership in community colleges. The report emphasizes that while effective leadership can come from various individuals within an institution, high-performing community colleges consistently have outstanding presidents (ATD, 2013). Additionally, Davis and Greenlee (2023) support this perspective by stating, "Effective community college presidents champion change and engage in important and sometimes difficult conversations" (p. 22). Effective community college presidents also intentionally promote and advance diversity, equity, and inclusion within their institutions (Davis & Greenlee, 2023).

Community college's longstanding reputation for being equitable and open access contributed to the increasing number of women as presidents over the last thirty years, where traditionally, in higher education, men outnumber women as presidents (Astin & Astin, 2015). In 1986, 9.5% of responding presidents were women, and today, women make up about 32.8% of higher education presidents (American Council on Education [ACE], 2023; Grant, 2022; Green, 2008). Historically, more women lead community colleges than other institutions, such as doctoral institutions (Eddy, 2008). It is also widely known and accepted that women play a major role in community colleges as students, staff, faculty, administrators, and presidents (Drake, 2008).

Women community college presidents have the potential to enact policies and practices that promote equity and inclusion. However, there is limited understanding of how the personal experiences of women presidents shape their efforts to foster equity and inclusion and improve student success.

Problem Statement

Community colleges face ongoing challenges in closing equity gaps and achieving equitable education outcomes (Brown McNair, 2021). Despite efforts, institutions continue to struggle with low persistence and completion rates among certain student groups (Brown McNair, 2021; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2023). The role of leadership, especially the president, is crucial in driving initiatives to address these disparities. Effective community college presidents are known to champion change and promote equity (ATD, 2013; Davis & Greenlee, 2022). However, there is a gap in understanding how women leaders, specifically those recognized for their achievements, use their personal experiences to navigate these challenges and implement effective strategies to promote equity (Eddy, 2008; Gillet-Karam, 2017). By exploring the experiences of award-winning women community college presidents, this study aimed to provide valuable insights into the strategies and practices that contribute to effective and equitable leadership in higher education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore the experiences of award-winning women community college presidents who have been recognized by the ATD organization, a national entity committed to increasing the success of community college students, for their efforts in achieving or improving equitable education outcomes. By conducting in-depth interviews and analyzing relevant institutional documents, this study aimed to illuminate the

leadership practices, strategies, and challenges faced by these presidents as they strive to foster equity within their institutions. Through the lens of transformational leadership theory, this research sought to provide insight into how women leaders navigate complex organizational dynamics, implement change initiatives, and define success in their roles. The study's significance lies in its contribution to the broader understanding of effective leadership in higher education, particularly in addressing systemic inequities and creating inclusive environments within community colleges. By highlighting the unique perspectives and approaches of women leaders, this research aimed to inform future leadership development and policymaking, offering actionable insights that can enhance equity-focused practices across the higher education landscape, particularly in community colleges.

Research Question

This qualitative inquiry was guided by the following question:

- What stories do award-winning women community college presidents tell about how their personal experiences informed their leadership approaches to equitable education outcomes?

Theoretical Framework

This study drew upon transformational leadership and Shields' (2018) transformative leadership in education to explore the experiences of women community college presidents to achieve equitable education outcomes. While transformational leadership continues to be a dominant construct for researchers making meaning of community college leadership frameworks (Tarker, 2019), Shields' (2018) transformative leadership emphasizes social justice, equity, and a commitment to challenging inequitable practices. Transformational leadership in the community college is defined as the ability of the community college CEO to influence the

attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of others by working with and through them to accomplish the college's mission and purpose (Roueche et al., 1989). In the context of community colleges, transformational leadership involves influencing attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors to achieve institutional missions collaboratively.

Key elements of transformational leadership include visionary goal setting, motivation of stakeholders toward equity goals, fostering innovation, personalized support for diverse needs, implementing organizational change for equity, collaborative decision-making, role modeling, ethical leadership, and measuring impact on outcomes (Roueche et al., 1989). According to Roueche et al. (1989), "Community college leaders who are most successful are those who are committed to actions necessary to bring about appropriate change" (p. 11). The eight tenets used to drive transformative leadership include a mandate for deep and equitable change, the need to deconstruct knowledge frameworks that perpetuate inequity and injustice and to reconstruct them in more equitable ways, the need to address the inequitable distribution of power, an emphasis on both private and public good, a focus on emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice, an emphasis on interconnected interconnectedness, interdependence, and global awareness, the necessity of balancing critique with promise, and the call to exhibit moral courage (Shields, 2018). This study used transformational leadership theory as a critical framework to understand how award-winning women community college presidents navigate and address the complexities of their roles.

Overview of the Research Design

This study employed a narrative inquiry design to provide a comprehensive exploration of the experiences of award-winning women community college presidents. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research method that focuses on the stories and lived experiences of individuals,

recognizing that humans make sense of their world and their experiences through storytelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). By incorporating narrative elements, this study captured the nuanced, personal accounts of the presidents' leadership journeys, challenges, and successes.

Narrative inquiry is particularly suitable for exploring the experiences of award-winning women community college presidents as they lead change and define success within their institutional contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This method allowed for an in-depth exploration of the stories of these leaders, providing a rich, contextual understanding of the complexities and dynamics involved in their roles. By focusing on personal narratives, narrative inquiry captured the full arc of participants' experiences, from their initial motivations and challenges to the strategies they employ and the outcomes they achieve in promoting equity and inclusion.

This research was framed through the transformational leadership theory as articulated by Roueche et al. (1989) and Shields' (2018) transformative leadership theory. Transformational leadership in the community college context is defined as the ability of the community college CEO to influence the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of others by working collaboratively to achieve the institution's mission and purpose. Transformative leadership in education critiques inequitable practices and aims to dismantle systems of oppression that affect individual achievement and collective social well-being (Shields, 2010). This theoretical framework guided the analysis of how these leaders described their experiences serving underrepresented students, leading change management initiatives to achieve equitable outcomes, and defining success in these endeavors.

In this study, narrative inquiry involved conducting in-depth interviews with award-winning women community college presidents. These interviews were designed to elicit detailed

stories about their leadership experiences, focusing on key themes such as navigating institutional dynamics, implementing equity-focused initiatives, and defining success. The narrative framework assisted in organizing and interpreting the data, as the participants' stories provided valuable insights into their leadership journeys.

Josselson and Hammack (2021) define narrative analysis as a "method that centers the individual as the unit of scrutiny, preserves the voice of the individual through close analysis and presentation of narrative data, and investigates how individuals make meaning of life's challenges and opportunities" (p. 4). According to Bhattacharya (2017), narrative inquiry is a framework allows researchers to examine, uncover, and comprehend participants' experiences by shaping stories from their retelling. In this study, narrative inquiry allowed the research to delve deeply into the personal and professional experiences of the participants, providing a comprehensive understanding of how they construct their leadership, what they consider success to be, and the impact of these factors on institutional and organizational change.

By employing narrative inquiry, this study aimed to uncover the most compelling interpretations of how change is enacted within community colleges. The findings in Chapter 4 - contribute to the current literature by providing rich, detailed insights into the experiences of award-winning women community college presidents, highlighting the strategies they use to lead effectively and promote equity within their institutions.

Participants

The participants for this study consisted of five current women community college presidents in the United States who have been recognized as award winners from the Achieving ATD network for their efforts to achieve equitable education outcomes (e.g., Bhattacharya, 2017). Specifically, the criteria for the participants were: individuals who identify as women,

must have held the position of president at a community college, may have varied lengths of tenure in their current role, but have been the president for a least one year to ensure sufficient time to implement equity initiatives; and, have won awards from ATD based on their demonstrated experiences achieving or improving education outcomes. The study included a national scope to provide a comprehensive perspective on the experiences of women community college presidents across diverse contexts.

To narrow the focus, the study particularly considered women who have been recognized by the ATD (2024) organization, a national entity committed to increasing the success of community college students. Specifically, the study focused on the presidents from colleges that have earned the ATD Leader College of Distinction Award. This award recognizes colleges that have pursued and met challenging student success goals, demonstrating improvement in at least three student outcome metrics and reducing equity gaps in at least two metrics for at least two student groups (ATD, 2024). Between 2021 and 2023, an average of 37% of the total winners of this distinction have been women, making these leaders a relevant and significant population for this study.

Data Collection

This narrative inquiry employed multiple data sources, including archival records, interviews, and interview transcripts (Creswell, 2007), to create a comprehensive account of the experiences of award-winning women community college presidents in achieving equitable outcomes for underrepresented students. The study's primary data collection method was in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This method aligned with the narrative inquiry approach by allowing the participants to share stories in their own words (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The interview process was iterative and consisted of two rounds (Creswell, 2007). The initial interview used open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about the president's leadership journey, their approaches to change management, and their strategies for promoting equity at their institutions (Creswell, 2007; Bhattacharya, 2017). The interviews took place on Zoom and were recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. Following the interview, a preliminary analysis was conducted where initial insights from the first interviews guided the development of follow-up questions for the second interview, allowing for a deeper dive into emerging topics and providing an opportunity for the participants to reflect on and expand their narratives (Bhattacharya, 2017; Saldaña, 2021).

Archival records and institutional documents were analyzed to provide context and corroboration for the presidents' narratives (Creswell, 2007; Bhattacharya, 2017). These included such documents as strategic plans, equity initiative reports, and public statements related to the president's efforts to close equity gaps at their institutions. This document analysis helped situate the presidents' personal narratives within the broader institutional context and provide additional information about the outcomes of their leadership.

All data was electronically organized and stored securely, with each source labeled by a unique identifier, date of collection, and brief description (Creswell, 2007; Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Interview transcripts were cleaned and formatted for consistency, with key quotes and observations manually highlighted to facilitate the narrative analysis process (Saldaña, 2021). A master inventory of all data sources was maintained to ensure a clear chain of evidence, and to enhance the study's trustworthiness (Creswell, 2007; Roller & Lavrakas, 2015).

This comprehensive data collection approach captured the nuanced and multifaceted narratives of the presidents' leadership experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Bhattacharya,

2017). By focusing on their personal stories alongside institutional context, the study offers a holistic view. This holistic view illustrates how these award-winning women community college presidents navigate the complexities of leadership, change, and equity promotion in higher education.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study employed a narrative inquiry approach, allowing for a rich exploration of the participants' experiences as award-winning women community college presidents. The analysis paid close attention to the chronology of events, plot development, key characters, institutional setting, and recurring themes throughout their narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This narrative approach helped illuminate the complex ways in which these presidents' leadership is shaped by and responded to their context, reflecting Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) assertion that individuals must be understood both as unique entities and as part of their broader environment.

The analysis integrated data from multiple sources, and interview transcripts served as the primary source of the president's narratives. Additional data was drawn from institutional documents related to equity initiatives. This integration of data sources enhanced the depth and credibility of the study, offering a comprehensive view of the president's leadership experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell, 2007). The narrative analysis focused on uncovering the nuances of the president's leadership journeys, their strategies for implementing change, and their perspectives on achieving equitable outcomes in the community college setting.

To enhance data visualization and presentation, narrative vignettes were crafted to present key stories or experiences in the presidents' own words (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). A detailed description was developed to provide a holistic view of the presidents' leadership within

the specific context of their institutions and the broader landscape of community college leadership (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Josselson & Hammack, 2021). This approach to data analysis ensured a comprehensive examination of the narrative inquiry, illuminating the complex dynamics of leadership, change management, and equity pursuit in community colleges (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Josselson & Hammack, 2021). By focusing on the rich, detailed narratives provided by these award-winning women community college presidents, this study provides valuable insights into effective leadership in the context of community college leaders.

Limitations of the Research

While this study provides valuable and nuanced insights into the experiences of award-winning women community college presidents in achieving equitable education outcomes, several limitations must be acknowledged. Although aligned with a narrative inquiry methodological approach, the small sample size, which included leaders with varying tenure lengths and experiences, may have limited the range of perspectives captured. While their experiences provided rich narratives, a larger sample could have offered broader insights into leadership practices across diverse institutions. Additionally, because the study focused on a highly specific subset of leaders, maintaining participant anonymity was a challenge. The need to protect confidentiality required careful consideration of which details could be included in the findings, sometimes necessitating the omission of certain contextual elements that may have added further depth to the analysis.

Another limitation of the study, which is common in qualitative research, was the reliance on self-reported data, which carried the risk of recall bias and self-censorship. However, the participants were generally candid in sharing both their successes and challenges, demonstrating a willingness to engage in open and honest dialogue. Sometimes, during the

interviews, the participants would hesitate or initially censor themselves, and that required reassurance of confidentiality that then allowed them to fully share their experiences. Additionally, differences in verbal communication styles influenced the richness of the data, as some participants were naturally more expressive, while others required further prompting to provide detailed narratives. While every effort was made to ensure the authenticity and depth of the data, the subjective nature of qualitative research remains a factor, as interpretations of the narratives are shaped by both the participants and the researcher's perspectives. Despite these challenges, this study offers meaningful contributions to understanding leadership and equity in higher education and reinforces the need for future research.

Researcher Background

As the researcher in this narrative inquiry, my background as an African American woman, a first-generation college graduate, and currently a senior leader at a community college deeply informs my approach to this work. My journey from the private sector to higher education in January 2020, progressing to a senior leadership role, has provided me with a unique perspective on organizational change and leadership in community colleges. This multifaceted experience, coupled with my background in training and development, has honed my understanding of how leaders navigate complex institutional dynamics and implement transformative initiatives. My engagement with the ATD network and my current leadership responsibilities have exposed me to successful equity initiatives, sparking my curiosity about the specific leadership practices that contribute to achieving equitable education outcomes. My professional experience aligns closely with the study's focus on transformational leadership theory and their application in community college settings.

As a researcher, I am acutely aware of the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research. My personal and professional experiences informed my approach to data collection and analysis, and I remained committed to maintaining a balance between my insider perspective and the need for objective, rigorous research. This self-awareness was crucial as I engaged in the narrative inquiry process. My dedication to social justice and equity in education drove this research, with the ultimate goal of contributing to meaningful changes in educational practices and policies. By focusing on the experiences of successful women community college presidents, I hope this research sheds light on effective strategies for promoting equity and supporting the persistence and graduation of underrepresented students by closing equity gaps. My current role as a senior leader provides me with a practical understanding of the challenges and opportunities in implementing such strategies, enriching the depth and applicability of this research. This aligns with the study's broader purpose of informing leadership development and policymaking in higher education, particularly in addressing systemic inequities in community college settings.

Significance of the Study

Research that aims to "contribute to our understanding of social life" and "bring clarity to confusion, make visible what is hidden or inappropriately ignored, and generate a sense of insight and deepened understanding" is considered significant (Tracy, 2010, p. 846). Research that examines "the potential of social inquiry as practical philosophy serves to enhance and cultivate critical intelligence that leads to the capacity to engage in moral critique and training human judgment (Tracy, 2010, p. 846). This study meets these criteria by examining the experiences of award-winning women community college presidents in leading change management initiatives that close equity gaps for underrepresented students. By focusing on transformational leadership theory and narrative inquiry, this research will enhance our

understanding of how these leaders navigate complex institutional dynamics, implement equity-focused initiatives, and define success in their roles.

Tracy (2010) asserts that "good qualitative research captures how practitioners cope with situated problems and provides implications that may help participants develop normative principles about how to act" (p. 846). This study intends to explore the experiences of women community college presidents achieving equitable education outcomes. The potential implications of this study could affect practices, policies, or theories visibly. This study not only seeks to fill gaps in the existing literature but also aspires to provide actionable insights that can inform and improve leadership practices and policies aimed at achieving equity for underrepresented students.

Operational Definitions

The following definitions provide clarification on the terminology used throughout the study. The definitions will ensure that the researcher and audience alike can understand each term in similar ways.

- *Award-Winning Women Community College Presidents*—In this study, award-winning women community college presidents recognized by ATD are defined as leaders acknowledged for their exemplary efforts in closing equity gaps and improving outcomes for underrepresented students. These presidents have demonstrated significant progress in student success, achieving measurable improvements in at least three student outcome metrics and reducing equity gaps in at least two metrics for at least two student groups (ATD, 2024). Within the framework of transformational leadership theory, as described by Roueche et al. (1989), these leaders exemplify the qualities of outstanding leadership by

influencing others, fostering collaboration, and driving meaningful institutional change. Their recognition by ATD highlights their effectiveness in setting visionary goals, motivating stakeholders, and creating an inclusive and equitable educational environment.

- *Change*—Change within higher education, particularly in community colleges, involves the process of implementing strategic initiatives and reforms aimed at improving institutional effectiveness and student outcomes. This includes adapting to evolving student needs, technological advancements, and external pressures such as financial constraints and policy shifts (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Hornak & Garza Mitchell, 2016). To lead effective change, leaders are required to navigate complex institutional dynamics and foster environments conducive to continuous improvement (Burmicky & Duran, 2022; Hornak & Garza Mitchell, 2016).
- *Community College(s)*—Institutions of higher education that offer accessible, affordable, and equitable educational opportunities to diverse, often underrepresented student populations. They primarily provide associate degrees, facilitate transfers to four-year universities, and offer vocational training and community services, thereby contributing to local economic and social mobility (Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017). With open-access policies and commitment to inclusivity, these colleges serve as gateways to higher education for first-generation, low-income, and minority students (Astin & Astin, 2015). Their focus on promoting educational equity through targeted support and inclusive practices aligns with the study's exploration of effective leadership in these settings.

- *Community College Leadership/Senior Leaders/Administrators*—In this study, leadership refers to the role and responsibilities of senior leaders and administrators, particularly community college presidents, who are tasked with setting the strategic direction of the institution, making critical decisions, and fostering an inclusive and equitable campus environment. These leaders play a pivotal role in driving change initiatives, promoting equity, and engaging with stakeholders to ensure the institution's mission aligns with the needs of its diverse student population. The terms leadership, leaders, senior leaders, or administrators may be used interchangeably in the study to refer to the community college president.
- *Community College President(s)*—The chief leader for an institution of higher education in the United States is referred to as a president or vice-chancellor. For this study, we will use the term "president" to describe this administrative role, which involves a broad range of responsibilities critical to institutional success. Higher education presidents are pivotal in establishing strategic direction, engaging with community stakeholders, and managing budgets to support faculty, staff, and students (Davis et al., 2022). Specific to this study, community college presidents are key decision-makers responsible for enacting policies that prioritize student well-being (Burmicky & Duran, 2022). Their duties include overseeing academic programs, managing resources, and fostering an inclusive campus environment. This role requires balancing a strategic vision with operational management to fulfill the college's mission while adapting to external challenges.

- *Equitable Education Outcomes*—The achievement of fair and impartial educational results that accommodate the diverse needs of students, particularly those from marginalized and socioeconomically underserved populations (Bloomberg, 2024). Equitable education outcomes are achieved when students, regardless of their racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds, have equal access to educational resources and opportunities that allow them to enroll, excel, and graduate at rates comparable to their peers. The ability for underrepresented students to persist and graduate involves the intentional structuring of educational environments that are designed to overcome historical inequities and systemic barriers that these students face, thereby enabling them to reach their full academic and personal potential (Bloomberg, 2024).
- *Equity*—In the context of this study, equity focuses on addressing and overcoming systemic disparities that hinder educational outcomes for diverse student groups, emphasizing tailored approaches that provide equitable opportunities, especially for those from historically marginalized backgrounds (Brown McNair, 2021; National Equity Project, n.d).
- *Equity Gaps*—Traditionally, educators have defined equity gaps based on "the disparities in educational outcomes among different groups of students" (Brown McNair, 2021). However, Brown McNair (2021) suggests institutions "continue to aggregate data based on student demographics to address equity in outcomes, but aspirational goals for closing equity gaps should be defined and measured by achievement goals established by the institution" (para. 4). For this study, equity gaps are disparities in student success metrics across student groups.

- *Higher Education*—Higher education is the sector of post-secondary education that encompasses a wide range of institutions, including universities, colleges, and community colleges, which provide academic, vocational, and professional education to students beyond the high school level. Higher education institutions are characterized by their mission to advance knowledge, foster critical thinking, and prepare students for various professional and academic pursuits (Astin & Astin, 2015).
- *Inclusion*—In this study, inclusion is defined as environments where all students feel valued, respected, and fully engaged in their learning experiences, where their differences are celebrated, and where there is a fostered sense of belonging and empowerment among all students (Bloomberg, 2024).
- *Institution/Organization*—In this study, "institution" and "organization" will be used interchangeably to refer to community colleges. These terms capture the structural and functional roles of community colleges as entities that provide educational services, support student success, and contribute to community development. By using "institution" and "organization" interchangeably, this study highlights the multifaceted roles of community colleges in higher education, emphasizing their significance as both educational providers and community partners in fostering equity and inclusion.
- *Student Success*—In higher education, student success can be seen in terms of outcomes like "persistence, increase in self-efficacy and publication rate" (Weatherton & Schussler, 2021, p. 2). This definition can differ depending upon the institutional stakeholder and can also include definitions like "academic

achievement, going to a 4-year university, surpassing the success of one's parents, or helping future students find success" (Weatherton & Schussler, 2021, p. 2). For this study, student success is defined by persistence or the ability of a student to continue to the next term or through to graduation (completion).

- *Underrepresented Students*—Underrepresented college students are identified as those who have historically been denied access to higher education. For the purpose of this study, a broad and inclusive definition of underrepresented students can be used to encompass the various groups that face systemic barriers in higher education. Underrepresented students are those who belong to demographic groups that have historically faced systemic barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education. This includes, but is not limited to, racial and ethnic minorities, first-generation college students, low-income students, students with disabilities, non-traditional students, students from rural backgrounds, LGBTQ+ students, and veterans. Here are some common definitions used:
 - *First-Generation College Students*—Students who are the first in their families to attend college. These students often face unique challenges due to a lack of familial experience with higher education systems (Tanner, 2019).
 - *LGBTQ+ Students*—Students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or other non-heteronormative identities. These students may face unique social or institutional challenges (Tanner, 2019).

- *Low-Income Students*—students from low-income backgrounds, often defined by eligibility for financial aid programs such as Pell Grants (Tanner, 2019).
- *Non-Traditional Students*—Students who do not follow the traditional path of enrolling in college immediately after high school. This group includes adult learners, part-time students, and those balancing education with work or family responsibilities (Tanner, 2019).
- *Racial and Ethnic Minorities*—Students who belong to racial or ethnic groups that are underrepresented in higher education, such as African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, and Pacific Islander students (Tanner, 2019).
- *Students from Rural Backgrounds*—Students from areas with low population density and limited access to educational resources (HE Professional, 2023).
- *Students with Disabilities*—Students who have physical, mental, or learning disabilities that require accommodations and support services to succeed in college (Tanner, 2019).
- *Veteran Students*—Students who have served in the military and are transitioning to civilian life and higher education (Tanner, 2019).

Chapter Summary

Achieving equity in higher education, particularly within community colleges serving diverse populations, remains a significant challenge due to persistent disparities in educational outcomes among different demographic groups. This study explored the experiences of award-

winning community college women presidents who lead initiatives aimed at promoting equitable outcomes for underrepresented students. By utilizing transformational leadership theory, the research examines how these leaders implement strategies, overcome challenges, and achieve success to foster equity in education. Community colleges play a crucial role in providing accessible education to a wide array of students. Despite their inclusive mission, these institutions often struggle to close equity gaps, making strong leadership essential. Women presidents, who have been increasingly represented in community college leadership, are particularly influential in driving change and advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion. This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry methodology, focusing on the lived experiences of these leaders to inform policies and practices that enhance equity and inclusion in higher education. Through in-depth interviews and narrative inquiry, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effective leadership practices necessary for closing equity gaps in community colleges.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This literature review is designed to provide a comprehensive summary and analysis of research pertinent to the experiences of award-winning women community college presidents achieving equitable education outcomes. This review will begin by contextualizing community colleges and examining their unique challenges and roles within the higher education landscape. It will then explore leadership in community colleges, highlighting the distinctive strategies and approaches leaders adopt in these institutions. Following this, the review will delve into the experiences of women community college presidents, focusing on their contribution and impact in driving institutional change and promoting equity. Transformational leadership theory will be discussed next, as these theories provide a critical framework for understanding how these leaders navigate and address the complexities of their roles. The discussion will extend to the broader themes of change in higher education and the ongoing efforts to foster equity and inclusion within community colleges. This section will also investigate the intersection of change, equity, and leadership, revealing how these elements converge to influence institutional outcomes.

Finally, the review will identify gaps in the existing literature and articulate the need for further research, specifically about the lived experiences of award-winning women community college presidents and their role in advancing equity. This approach will provide a foundation for understanding the unique challenges and strategies employed by these leaders in their pursuit of equitable outcomes for underrepresented students, contributing to the broader discourse on effective leadership in higher education. This synthesis will emphasize the relevance and originality of the current study, which employs narrative inquiry to explore these pivotal experiences.

Community Colleges in the United States

The Historical Background of Community Colleges

The origins of community colleges are deeply rooted in the political and economic reforms of the 19th century, emerging as *people's colleges* designed to provide accessible educational pathways for individuals aspiring to achieve the American dream (Birenbaum, 1986). These institutions were established in the early 20th century to offer local, affordable post-secondary education and vocational training, addressing the needs of communities and industries (Cohen et al., 2014). The founding of Joliet Junior College in Chicago in 1902 marked the beginning of community colleges as transformative entities within the United States higher education landscape, characterized by their open access policies that have made them gateways to postsecondary education for a diverse and non-traditional student body (Nevarez & Wood, 2010; Phelan, 2016; Philibert et al., 2008; Tarker, 2019).

Initially, community college institutions focused on preparing students for transfer to four-year colleges, but their roles have since expanded to include workforce development, adult education, and community service (Cohen et al., 2014). Community colleges offer associate degrees, facilitate transfers to four-year institutions, provide occupational education, and contribute to economic development (Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017). Over time, these institutions have become vital in promoting social mobility and economic development, particularly for underrepresented students. Community colleges play a crucial role in providing educational opportunities to diverse populations, including first-generation, low-income, and minority students, thereby supporting broader societal goals of equity and inclusion.

Governance Structure of Community Colleges in the United States

Community colleges in the United States serve diverse student populations and are governed under various structures depending on their funding, location, and specific educational missions. These institutions, often referred to as junior colleges, technical colleges, or city colleges, offer a range of programs, including associate degrees, certificates, vocational training, remedial education, continuing education, industry training, and eLearning (EducationUSA, n.d.). While most community colleges are publicly funded and operated by local or state governments, a smaller proportion are privately funded, often focusing on specialized fields of study or specific student populations (Campus Explorer, n.d.). Governance structures within these institutions can differ significantly, influenced by whether the college is publicly or privately funded and by the local community's educational and workforce development needs.

Governance models of community colleges vary widely, with some institutions under state control and others governed locally. In many states, community colleges operate under local boards of trustees or regents, who have authority over policy decisions, budgeting, and the general operation of the college (Rees, 2024). These boards may either be elected by the public or appointed by government officials (Rees, 2024). Some community colleges also have taxing authority, allowing them to levy taxes to support these operations (Rees, 2024). Shared governance is a common model in many community colleges, allowing faculty, staff, and sometimes students to be involved in the decision-making processes (Rees, 2024). The shared governance model ensures that a wide array of voices is considered in institutional decisions.

The California Community College System serves as an example of governance involving both local and state-level oversight, with 73 districts serving 116 colleges and governance divided between locally elected boards and a state-level Board of Governors (May,

2016). Similarly, institutions like Hagerstown Community College (2014) in Maryland and Sacramento City College (n.d.) use shared and collaborative governance models, ensuring that various stakeholder groups – such as faculty, staff, and students – are represented in decision-making processes (Mack, 2024; Myers, 2025). These models aim to reflect the needs of local communities while maintaining overall policy coherence across the state or system (Rees, 2024). Effective governance requires balancing local responsiveness with institutional and financial accountability, as seen in the diverse approaches employed across United States community colleges (Rees, 2024).

Key components of community college governance include the board of trustees or regents, which oversees high-level policy decisions; the president or chancellor, who implements these policies and manages day-to-day operations; and an administrative structure that ensures the college runs efficiently (Rees, 2024). Faculty and staff often play a significant role in governance, providing input on academic and operational matters through committees or faculty senates (May, 2016). Many colleges also involve student representatives, ensuring students' needs and perspectives are considered in institutional decisions. Recent trends, such as growing unionization efforts in states like Maryland and Oregon, highlight the increasing need for faculty involvement in policymaking, especially regarding compensation, job security, and working conditions (May, 2016; Myers, 2025). These trends reflect the broader movement toward collective bargaining and faculty empowerment in shaping the future of community colleges (Mack, 2024; Simon, 2021).

Current Challenges and Trends in Community Colleges

Community colleges face persistent challenges, including financial limitations, declining enrollment, and issues related to student retention and completion rates (Hornak & Mitchell,

2016). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges, posing heightened difficulties in meeting the holistic needs of students (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). Recent trends show declining enrollment in both two- and four-year colleges, with 2023 marking the sixth straight year of decline (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2023). Addressing these pressing issues necessitates a deeper understanding of leadership approaches that can effectively navigate and mitigate these challenges.

Challenges

Community colleges face a myriad of challenges that significantly impact their ability to provide equitable educational opportunities, particularly for underrepresented students. Financial limitations are among the most pressing issues, as these institutions often operate with constrained budgets, limiting their capacity to offer competitive salaries, maintain facilities, and provide essential student services (Hornak & Mitchell, 2016). State funding cuts exacerbate these financial constraints, making community colleges increasingly dependent on tuition revenue, which is itself vulnerable to enrollment fluctuation (Hornak & Mitchell, 2016). The decline in enrollment, a trend persisting over several years, further compounded these financial challenges. 2023 marked the sixth consecutive year of enrollment decline across both two- and four-year institutions, posing a serious threat to the financial stability and sustainability of community colleges (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2023).

Additionally, community colleges struggle with student retention and completion rates, which are crucial for fulfilling their educational mission. These institutions serve a diverse and often non-traditional student population that faces numerous barriers, including work commitments, family responsibilities, and financial challenges, contributing to lower retention and completion rates compared to four-year institutions (Hornak & Mitchell, 2016). The

COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these challenges, creating additional barriers to student success. The rapid shift to remote learning environments disrupted academic progress, leading to higher withdrawal rates and declining course completion rates, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). Although enrollment began to stabilize by fall 2022, with a slight increase attributed to dual enrollment programs, the pandemic highlighted significant disparities in access and outcomes, especially among students of color and those from low-income backgrounds (Brahm, 2022). These challenges highlight the need for targeted intervention to support underrepresented students and enhance the resilience of community colleges in the face of future disruptions.

Trends

Recent trends in community colleges highlight a growing emphasis on diversifying leadership and achieving equitable education outcomes. There is a concerted effort to address gender and racial disparities within the leadership of community colleges, particularly in the presidency. The American College President Study (ACPS) emphasizes the need for substantial increases in the hiring of women into presidential roles to achieve gender parity (American Council on Education [ACE], 2023). The push towards diversification reflects a broader recognition of the importance of inclusive leadership that mirrors the diversity of the student populations that these institutions serve. Diversifying leadership is seen as a critical step in fostering environments that are more responsive to the needs of underrepresented students, ultimately contributing to more equitable outcomes.

Simultaneously, there is an increasing focus on ensuring equitable student outcomes within community colleges. Institutions are prioritizing programs and initiatives aimed at closing achievement gaps and promoting economic mobility for all students, particularly those from

underrepresented groups (Lynch & Oakford, 2014). Programs like the Aspen Institute's Rising Presidents Fellowship are at the forefront of this movement, preparing future leaders to implement systemic changes that can advance student success and equity on a broad scale (St. Petersburg College, 2014). This shift towards equity is not just a trend but a critical reorientation of community colleges' mission, emphasizing the need for leadership that is committed to fostering inclusive excellence and addressing long-standing disparities in education.

Moreover, the unique career pathways for women leaders in community colleges are gaining scholarly attention. Research indicates that women in these roles often navigate complex institutional dynamics and face gender-based challenges that their male counterparts may not encounter (Eddy, 2009; Hagan and Olivier, 2022). These barriers include implicit biases, limited access to mentorship, and the pressure to balance professional and personal responsibilities (Venzant-Sampson, 2017). Understanding and addressing these challenges is essential for creating more supportive environments that enable women leaders to thrive and lead their institutions toward greater equity and success. The increasing awareness of these issues is driving initiatives aimed at supporting women in their journey to and through leadership positions, recognizing their crucial role in advancing the mission of community colleges in today's diverse educational landscape.

Community Colleges' Role in Serving Underrepresented Students

Community colleges play a pivotal role in the United States higher education landscape by providing access to diverse student populations, including those from historically underrepresented groups. These institutions serve as gateways to postsecondary education for first-generation, low-income, African American, Hispanic, Native American, and older students. For instance, community colleges educate 52% of Native American students, 48% of Hispanic

students, and 39% of African American students (Robinson et al., 2023). Additionally, 30% of community college students are first-generation students, 16% are single parents, and 21% are students with disabilities (American Association of Community Colleges, 2021). However, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected enrollment across various demographic groups, exacerbating existing challenges.

Recent high school graduates aged 18-24, who traditionally form a significant portion of community college students, saw the largest decline in enrollment during the pandemic (Fink, 2023). From fall 2019 to fall 2021, 586,000 fewer recent high school graduates enrolled in community colleges, compared to 277,000 fewer older adults (Fink, 2023). This decline was not offset by transfer to four-year institutions, as enrollment in these institutions also decreased for this age group (Fink, 2023). Racial and ethnic minorities, who are already disproportionately represented in community colleges, were also severely impacted (Cook, 2023). Native American (-15%), African American (-14%), Hispanic (-12%), and Asian (-11%) students all experienced significant enrollment declines, with Hispanic students reversing a previously strong upward trend in enrollment (New America, 2022). While other adults experienced a less severe drop, the overall demographic shifts highlight the deepening challenges faced by community colleges in serving underrepresented students during the pandemic.

Despite serving the most diverse student populations in higher education, community colleges face significant challenges in achieving high student success rates. These institutions must navigate a history of chronic underfunding and the complexities of fulfilling multiple missions, such as preparing students for transfer, providing career and technical education, and offering continuing education opportunities (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Ma & Baum, 2016). Moreover, underrepresented students at community colleges often encounter unique barriers,

including financial constraints and the need to balance work and family responsibilities, further complicating their path to success (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Ma & Baum, 2016).

The completion rates for underrepresented students at community colleges are notably low. Only about one-third of students who enter two-year institutions achieve completion within four years, and this rate drops to 24% for African American, Latino, and Native American students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021; National Student Clearinghouse, 2019). Moreover, while 80% of freshmen entering community college intend to earn a bachelor's degree, only 7% of low-income and minority students succeed in doing so (Achieving the Dream [ATD], 2018). To address these disparities, community colleges can implement targeted support mechanisms and inclusive practices. Effective leadership plays a critical role in advancing these initiatives and driving institutional change.

Leadership in Community Colleges

Leadership in community colleges plays a pivotal role in shaping institutional success and addressing equity challenges, particularly through the role of the president. Traditionally, the presidency in higher education has been a male-dominated role, but community colleges have seen a notable shift towards more female leadership over the past few decades. Historically, women have been underrepresented in presidential roles, with only 9.5% of college presidents being women in 1986 (ACE, 2023). However, recent data shows that women now make up about 32.8% of higher education presidents (ACE, 2023; American College President Study, 1986; Grant, 2022). This shift is more pronounced in community colleges, where women have increasingly assumed leadership roles, reflecting the sector's longstanding reputation for equity and open access (Astin & Astin, 2015; Eddy, 2008).

The decision-making processes of community college presidents have a profound impact on their institutions, influencing everything from strategic direction to student outcomes. The community college president's role in decision-making is multi-faceted, encompassing strategic planning, financial management, policy formulation, and engagement with various stakeholders (Hornak & Garza Mitchell, 2016; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Leslie & Fretwell, 1996). Research indicates that in times of crisis, decisions are made at the presidential level, with a focus on financial issues, fluctuations in enrollment, and programmatic offerings (Hornak & Garza Mitchell, 2016; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Leslie & Fretwell, 1996).

Effective presidents are those who can navigate complex organizational dynamics and lead change initiatives that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (Davis & Greenlee, 2023). Their decisions involve balancing resource allocation, academic programming, and community engagement, all while ensuring that the institution's mission aligns with the needs of its diverse student body. The ability to make data-driven decisions is crucial, as it empowers presidents to implement policies that close equity gaps and improve student success rates (ATD, Inc., 2013). By championing change and engaging in critical conversations, presidents can foster an institutional culture that prioritizes equitable outcomes for all students.

Importance of Diversity in Leadership Positions

College presidents have significant influence over the academic experience, and research shows that diversity in leadership can enhance institutional effectiveness, particularly in community colleges that serve diverse student populations (Davis & Greenlee, 2023). When college presidents come from varied cultural backgrounds, they bring unique perspectives and insight that can better support and relate to the diverse needs of students (Grant, 2022). A diverse leadership team is instrumental in implementing policies and practices that promote inclusivity

and equity, which are essential for closing achievement gaps among underrepresented student groups. Studies have demonstrated that diverse leadership not only improves decision-making processes but also fosters an environment where all students feel valued and supported (Astin & Astin, 2015; Brown McNair, 2021).

The role of community college presidents is crucial in driving initiatives that address equity gaps and improve student outcomes. Effective presidents leverage their diverse backgrounds to make informed, data-driven decisions that align with the institution's mission and the needs of its student body (Davis & Greenlee, 2023). By prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion, presidents can create a campus culture that encourages innovation and collaboration, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes for all students. Research highlights the importance of strong, diverse leadership in community colleges, noting that high-performing institutions often have presidents who champion change and engage in critical conversations about equity and inclusion (ATD, 2013). As the importance of strong, diverse leadership becomes increasingly evident in the pursuit of educational outcomes, the role of women in community college presidencies deserves particular attention.

Women Community College Presidents

Historically, community colleges have been more inclusive environments for women compared to other higher education institutions like doctoral universities (Astin & Astin, 2015; Eddy, 2008). This inclusivity can be traced back to the foundation principles of community college, which emphasize accessibility and equity (Astin & Astin, 2015). According to Eddy (2008), community colleges have a longstanding tradition of being equitable and open-access institutions, which may contribute to the higher representation of women in leadership roles within these settings. Despite this, men continue to outnumber women in presidential roles by

more than two to one (ACE, 2023). This disparity highlights the ongoing challenges women face in ascending to top leadership positions, even in institutions that are perceived as more welcoming to female leaders.

Current Representation of Women in Community College Presidencies

Over the past thirty years, there has been a significant increase in the number of women serving as community college presidents. In 1986, only 9.5% of college presidents were women, but today, women constitute approximately 32.8% of higher education presidents (ACE, 2023; Grant, 2022; Green, 2008). This progress reflects broader societal changes and efforts to promote gender equity in higher education leadership. However, the representation of women in these roles remains insufficient, particularly when considering the proportion of women in the overall higher education workforce, where women make up approximately 60% of all employees but only about 32.8% of higher education presidents (ACE, 2023). Eddy (2008) notes that while community colleges have been more progressive in promoting women to leadership positions compared to other higher education institutions, the pace of change has been slow, and significant barriers still exist.

Challenges and Barriers Faced by Women Leaders

The underrepresentation of women in community college presidential roles is further compounded by systemic inequities and structural barriers, who often face both horizontal and vertical oppression. Horizontal oppression, as described by Freire (1970), refers to behaviors within an oppressed group that reinforce oppression, often manifesting in the *Queen Bee Syndrome* in women's leadership, where some successful women in male-dominated fields distance themselves from other women and adopt behaviors that align with masculine norms, can foster a hostile and unsupportive environment for aspiring female leaders (Derks et al., 2016;

Ellemers et al., 2004). Vertical oppression, on the other hand, occurs when individuals in positions of power or authority perpetuate biases or discrimination, often through gender-based challenges faced by women leaders (Freire, 1970). Women frequently encounter *sticky floors*, which are invisible barriers that keep them in lower-level positions, and *glass ceilings*, which obstruct their advancement to the highest levels of leadership and decision-making within organizations (Delgado & Allen, 2019).

Despite these challenges, many women community college presidents have reported having at least one mentor who positively influenced their career paths (Campbell et al., 2010; Venzant, 2017). Although same-gender mentor-mentee relationships are considered ideal, women often have male mentors, and these cross-gender relationships have been shown to be effective (Venzant, 2017). The majority of women presidents are now serving as mentors to both men and women, reflecting their understanding of the importance of mentorship in closing the leadership gap (Hague & Okpala, 2017). Additionally, professional development programs like the North Carolina Community College Leadership Program (NCCCLP) and BRIDGES have been recognized as valuable networking and career advancement opportunities for aspiring women leaders (Hague & Okpala, 2017).

While the traditional pathway to the community college presidency has been through academic leadership roles, research highlights an increasing trend of non-traditional career paths for women aspiring to these positions (Bello-de Castro, 2010; Deal, 2019; Hill, 2017). Some women community college presidents began their careers in roles such as financial officers, library deans, or refugee counselors (Campbell et al., 2010). According to the ACE (2023), the most common route to the presidency remains through academic leadership, with more than half of current presidents having served as provosts, chief academic officers, or in other senior

academic affairs roles. Despite this traditional pathway, literature suggests that diverse routes are increasingly accessible to women leaders. Aspiring women leaders are encouraged to focus on developing diverse skills, emphasizing their passion for the institution, dedication to student success, and maintaining confidence as they navigate career opportunities rather than following a single career path (Campbell et al., 2010; Deal, 2019). These skillsets necessary for women aspiring to community college presidencies include financial and budgeting skills, community and government relations experiences, and a passion for student success, in addition to collaborative and cooperative leadership often emphasized in academic pathways (Campbell et al., 2010; Deal, 2019; Hill, 2017).

Successes and Contributions of Women Presidents

In the realm of community college leadership, women have overcome numerous challenges and barriers to achieve remarkable successes and make significant contributions as presidents. Their accomplishments highlight the capabilities and effectiveness of female leaders in shaping educational institutions (Eddy, 2005; Roueche et al., 1989). Furthermore, these achievements illuminate the positive effects of diverse leadership in higher education on advancing equitable outcomes and fostering inclusive environments (Burmicky & Duran, 2022; Shields, 2018).

Women community college presidents have been particularly effective in implementing collaborative and inclusive leadership styles. Research indicates that women leaders in higher education, including community college presidents, often adopt more cooperative and collaborative approaches that align with traditional feminine descriptors (Eddy, 2008; Gillet-Karam, 2017). This leadership style has been associated with positive outcomes in terms of

institutional climate, faculty and staff engagement, and student success (Eddy, 2008; Gillet-Karam, 2017).

Several studies have highlighted the success of women presidents in driving institutional change and promoting equity. For instance, Ballentine (2000) and Krause (2009) found that women community college presidents were effective in implementing initiatives to close equity gaps for underrepresented students. These leaders often drew on their own experiences of overcoming barriers to inform their approaches to creating more inclusive and supportive environments for diverse student populations.

Women presidents have also made significant contributions to community engagement and economic development. Krull (2011) and Humphrey (2012) noted that many women leaders excelled in building partnerships with local businesses and community organizations, leveraging these relationships to enhance educational opportunities and workforce development programs. This ability to connect the college with its broader community has been crucial in addressing local economic needs and improving student outcomes.

In terms of financial management and resource allocation, women presidents have demonstrated strong capabilities. Despite often facing budget constraints, many have successfully navigated financial challenges while maintaining a focus on student success and institutional mission. Tittle (2014) found that women presidents were adept at identifying alternative funding sources and implementing innovative cost-saving measures without compromising educational quality.

Furthermore, women community college presidents have been instrumental in advancing gender equity within their institutions. Many have prioritized the development of mentorship programs and professional development opportunities for aspiring women leaders, helping to

create a pipeline for future women presidents (ACE, 2023). This focus on mentorship and support has been crucial in addressing the underrepresentation of women in top leadership positions.

The successes and contributions of women community college presidents underscore the importance of diverse leadership in higher education. Their achievements not only benefit their institutions and students but also serve as powerful examples for aspiring women leaders. As more women assume these roles and continue to excel, they challenge traditional notions of leadership and pave the way for gender equity in community college administration. This evolving landscape of leadership invites a closer examination of the transformational leadership theory, which provides a framework for understanding how these leaders drive change and inspire progress in their institutions.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Extensive research has explored key leadership themes that shape contemporary community college presidencies (Tarker, 2019). In a comprehensive review of transformational leadership and the proliferation of community college leadership frameworks, Tarker (2019) identifies a range of leadership theories, including pervasive leadership, adaptive leadership, situational leadership, servant leadership, participatory leadership, and democratic leadership. Among these, Roueche et al. (1989) transformational leadership theory has been especially influential in elucidating effective leadership practices within community college contexts and continues to be a central framework for scholars investigating leadership dynamics in this sector (Banks et al., 2016; Tarker, 2019).

Leadership theories in education have evolved over time, with transformational leadership evolving as a significant framework for driving both individual and organizational

growth and enhancing existing systems and processes within an organization while fostering collective goals (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). Transformative leadership, as clarified by Shields (2010; 2018), helps refine the conceptualization of leadership in educational contexts. These leadership theories, while both emphasizing empowerment, collaboration, and vision, diverge significantly in their broader societal implications. Transformational leadership, as initially articulated by Burns (1978) and expanded by Bass (1985), aims to achieve organizational objectives while fostering the development of both leaders and followers. The components of transformational leadership, such as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration, are central to creating environments where individuals are motivated to exceed expectations and achieve shared goals.

However, transformative leadership in education, as defined by Shields (2010; 2018), extends beyond organizational growth to social change by critiquing and challenging existing power structures and knowledge frameworks to create a more equitable and just environment. It aims to dismantle systems of oppression that affect both individual achievement and collective social well-being. Transformative leadership style recognizes the broader context within which education operates, incorporating power dynamics and striving for both individual empowerment and community transformation. Unlike transformational leadership, which may focus more on the achievement of institutional goals, transformative leadership is committed to justice, equity, democracy, and social change.

In their work on community college leadership, Roeuche et al. (1989) highlight how transformational leadership can drive meaningful change within these institutions. This includes fostering shared visions, empowering faculty and staff, and developing inclusive policies. Community college CEOs are positioned to navigate the complex challenges faced by their

institutions, such as diverse student needs and financial constraints, by creating environments that promote innovation and equity (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Hornak & Garza Mitchell, 2016). The concept of shared vision in Roueche et al. study is pivotal, as it emphasizes the role of transformational leaders in aligning personal and institutional goals for equitable outcomes.

Overall, while transformational leadership remains a powerful tool for inspiring change and aligning organizational goals with individual development, transformative leadership takes it a step further by addressing the broader societal realities that shape education. As such, transformative leadership emphasizes the need for social justice, equity, and deep democratic change – ensuring that all students, particularly those from underrepresented groups, have the opportunity to thrive in both educational and societal contexts.

Shared Vision: Transformational Leadership in American Community Colleges

In their seminal study, Roueche et al. (1989) investigated the practices of 256 transformational community college presidents to understand how they successfully transformed their personal visions into shared institutional visions. This study was pioneering at the time, given the limited literature on transformational leadership within higher education contexts, particularly community colleges. The authors aimed to explore the phenomenon of transformational leadership as it applied to community college CEOs, focusing on the values these leaders brought to their institutions and how they influenced, motivated, and empowered their faculty and staff (Roueche et al., 1989).

Roueche et al. (1989) utilized James MacGregor Burns' (1978) distinction between transactional and transformational leadership, along with Bennis and Nanus' (1985) definition of leadership, to inform their concept of transformational leaders in community colleges. They emphasized that transformational leaders go beyond mere exchanges or transactions, as seen in

transactional leadership, by inspiring and motivating followers to achieve goals through a shared vision and collaborative efforts. This approach aligns with Burns' (1978) idea of transformational leadership as a process that changes and transforms individuals, while Bennis and Nanus' (1985) focus on visionary and influential leadership further supports the development of a leadership model tailored for community college settings.

However, Shields' (2018) definition of transformative leadership adds a critical dimension to the understanding of leadership in the context of education. Shields (2010) emphasizes that transformative leadership, in contrast to transformational leadership, not only seeks to inspire and motivate but also critiques inequitable practices and works toward fundamental social and educational change. Transformative leaders are committed to social justice, democracy, and equity, with a focus on disrupting systems of oppression that affect not just organizational outcomes but broader societal conditions (Shields, 2010). Transformative leadership in education aligns with Roueche et al. emphasis on values orientation, highlighting the commitment of community college leaders to not only create a shared vision but also to actively work toward transforming educational practices and policies to be more inclusive and equitable.

Roueche et al. (1989) highlight the unique contributions of minority and women leaders, noting that transformational leaders exhibited certain behaviors that were absent in other leaders. These behaviors included the ability to create a shared vision, foster collaboration, and build a supportive organizational culture (Roueche et al., 1989). The authors developed a theoretical framework for transformational leadership tailored to the community college environment, emphasizing themes such as vision, influence orientation, people orientation, motivation orientation, and values orientation (Roueche et al., 1989). Roueche et al. assessed the extent to

which CEOs articulated their transformational attributes by analyzing the frequency of specific attribute descriptors in their responses to interview questions. The results emphasized that having a clear vision emerged as the most significant theme, acting as the driving force that enabled leaders to implement transformational strategies (Roueche et al., 1989).

Overall, Roueche et al. (1989) work provides a comprehensive framework for understanding transformational leadership in community colleges, highlighting the importance of vision, collaboration, and a commitment to equity. This framework continues to inform contemporary studies on effective leadership in educational settings. It is important, therefore, to understand how each theme within transformational leadership contributes to the overall framework.

Vision for Excellence

Vision is a fundamental component of transformational leadership, characterized by a leader's capacity to conceptualize a compelling future state for the organization, which serves to inspire and mobilize followers toward collective goals (Roueche et al., 1989). This vision is not merely an individual aspiration but is shared across the organization, fostering a sense of shared purpose and direction. Roueche et al. assert that transformational leaders leverage their vision to guide the organization, motivating others by aligning the vision with the mission and strategic objectives of the institution. Nicdao's (2019) study on the governance style of five state university presidents from the Philippine Association of State Universities and Colleges (PASUC) highlights the significance of a shared vision with collective goals. The presidents emphasized the importance of energetic participation from all stakeholders, including industry partners and experts from various disciplines, in collaboratively crafting the university's vision (Nicdao, 2019).

Moreover, vision in transformational leadership is closely linked to risk-taking behaviors, as leaders often take calculated risks to realize their envisioned future (Roueche et al., 1989). Roueche et al. highlight that exemplary female community college presidents, in particular, demonstrate a noble willingness to engage in risk-taking, often outpacing their male counterparts. This propensity for risk-taking is frequently attributed to the challenging contexts in which these leaders operate, including issues related to curriculum, governance, budgeting, faculty, community relations, and administrative dynamics (Roueche et al., 1989). These presidents' commitment to specific courses of action, coupled with a positive orientation towards change, emphasizes their strategic approach to risk, which aligns with their vision for institutional transformation (Roueche et al., 1989).

Literature supports the significance of risk-taking as an integral aspect of transformational leadership among women community college presidents (Roueche et al., 1989). These leaders are distinguished by their resilience and strategic risk-taking capabilities, which enable them to navigate complex challenges effectively (Roueche et al., 1989). In their study, Ellis and Garcia (2017) highlight the transformational leadership practices of Generation X presidents, focusing on their ability to inspire and motivate teams through a clear and compelling vision. This vision-driven leadership is crucial in driving institutional change, aligning stakeholders toward shared objectives, and serving as a framework for strategic decision-making. Such practices inherently involve risk-taking, as leaders must often make bold decisions to align their vision with institutional goals and community needs. Eddy (2010) supports this notion, asserting that a well-articulated vision aligned with the institution's mission is essential for guiding organizational strategy and aligning efforts across the institution. This alignment often requires leaders to take calculated risks to innovate and implement new strategies. Grove-Heuser

(2016) found that transformational leaders excel in using vision to inspire and guide their teams, creating a sense of purpose that drives collective action toward common goals. These leaders' strategic risk-taking is integral to their successes in achieving transformational change and underscores the importance of vision as a catalyst for effective leadership.

Influence Orientation

Influence orientation refers to a leader's ability to shape the values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of others (Roueche et al., 1989). Transformational leaders achieve this influence by building trust, empowering followers, and encouraging open communication (Roueche et al., 1989). These practices foster a collaborative environment where followers feel empowered to actively participate in decision-making processes, thereby aligning their efforts with the shared organizational vision (Roueche et al., 1989).

Roueche et al. (1989) observed that effective community college presidents often exhibit inclusive leadership characterized by collaboration and open communication. This approach emphasizes the importance of involving others in decision-making processes and empowering followers by delegating appropriate authority and responsibility. A strong need for visibility and direct engagement with followers was also observed, facilitating the development of effective communication networks and ensuring accessibility (Roueche et al., 1989). This visibility reinforces influence by fostering trust and mutual respect through continuous dialogue with followers. Presidents also demonstrate attentiveness to individual needs and respect for individual differences, often rewarding others based on their efforts and contributions to the organization (Roueche et al., 1989).

The findings of Hagan and Olivier (2022) support this leadership approach, highlighting that successful higher education leaders are particularly relationship-focused, placing a high

value on empathy, collaboration, and individual recognition. These leaders excel in building and managing interpersonal relationships, emphasizing inclusivity, openness, and continuous learning, which are critical for fostering a collaborative and trust-based environment where followers feel valued and motivated (Hagan & Olivier, 2022). Delgado-Alban (2021) corroborates these findings by identifying *idealized influence* as central to transformational leadership, demonstrating that leaders who inspire their followers through ethical behavior and role modeling are particularly effective. Madsen (2019) also highlights the success of leaders who use transformational leadership strategies focused on collaboration and influence orientation, demonstrating that their ability to inspire respect and trust is crucial for fostering a collaborative environment where followers feel valued and motivated.

People Orientation

People orientation centers on the leader's relationship with followers by focusing on understanding and respecting individual needs. It fosters a supportive environment where each person's contributions are valued (Roueche et al., 1989). Transformational leaders demonstrate this orientation by prioritizing the development and well-being of their followers, ensuring cohesive team functioning (Roueche et al., 1989).

Recent studies further validate the significance of people orientation in transformational leadership. Hoch et al. (2018) conducted a meta-analysis that supports the effectiveness of transformational leadership, particularly through behaviors like individualized consideration, which aligns closely with people-oriented leadership. Wang and Zhao (2021) explored transformational leadership in Chinese organizations, finding that leaders who exhibit people-oriented behaviors, such as understanding individual needs and providing support, significantly enhance employee well-being and job satisfaction. Similarly, Madsen (2019) highlighted the

importance of relational leadership practices among women university presidents and chancellors, emphasizing how these leaders prioritize building trust and fostering strong relationships with their followers, which is critical to effective leadership.

Additionally, Delgado-Alban (2021) reinforces the role of people orientation in transformational leadership by highlighting leadership commitment and inspirational motivation as key themes. Their study illustrates that leaders demonstrate commitment by encouraging their teams, which is crucial for building strong relations with followers. Inspirational motivation is also essential, as leaders instill confidence and a sense of purpose in their followers through positive communication and empowering language (Delgado-Alban, 2021). By focusing on these aspects, transformational leaders cultivate an environment where individuals feel valued and motivated, thereby reinforcing a people-oriented leadership style that prioritizes the development and well-being of team members.

Motivation Orientation

Motivation orientation is defined by a leader's capacity to inspire followers to exceed their own expectations and achieve outstanding performance levels (Roueche et al., 1989). This is achieved through setting high expectations, fostering creativity, and providing the necessary support and resources to help followers develop their skills and capabilities (Roueche et al., 1989). Leaders align individual goals with the organization's vision, cultivating commitment and enthusiasm among their teams (Roueche et al., 1989).

Roueche et al. (1989) found that presidents who adopt a more transformational and inclusive leadership style emphasize empowerment, development, and ethical standards. This approach supports motivation orientation by promoting creativity and clear expectations, thereby enhancing followers' skills and commitment. Additionally, these leaders focus on long-term

development and growth rather than just specific goals and tasks, which contributes to sustained engagement and achievement.

Recent research supports these findings. Hoch et al. (2018) emphasize that transformational leaders are particularly effective in motivating followers by aligning individual and organizational goals and fostering environments that encourage innovation and commitment. Hagan and Olivier (2022) demonstrate that successful leaders excel in empowering others and fostering collaboration through inclusive decision-making processes, which creates a trusted and valued work environment. Additionally, Delgado-Alban (2021) highlights intellectual stimulation as crucial to motivation orientation, showing that transformational leaders who promote innovation and professional development effectively motivate followers to achieve higher performance levels.

Values Orientation

Values orientation in leadership emphasizes a commitment to ethical behavior, integrity, and personal development. Transformational leaders embody the values they wish to instill in their followers, such as openness, trust, and a commitment to learning (Roueche et al., 1989). By leading through example, these leaders cultivate an organizational culture that reflects these values, encouraging followers to adopt and maintain them (Roueche et al., 1989).

Roueche et al. (1989) highlight that leaders who are committed to ethical behavior and integrity may approach values orientation in different ways. Some presidents emphasize inclusivity, openness, and continuous learning, fostering a collaborative and trust-based environment (Roueche et al., 1989). Others may prioritize structured ethical standards, consistency in judgment, and alignment with the institution's strategic goals (Roueche et al., 1989).

This distinction in leadership approaches is supported by recent studies. Madsen (2019) emphasized the role of values orientation in creating inclusive and ethical environments, particularly among leaders in higher education. Similarly, Wang and Zhao (2021) emphasize that ethical leadership, which aligns individual and organizational values, is crucial for long-term success. Hoch et al. (2018) further demonstrate that leaders who model ethical standards and integrity effectively shape a values-driven organizational culture, promoting trust, openness, and personal development among followers. Collectively, these studies affirm that values-oriented leadership is essential for fostering an environment of trust and integrity, which is critical for inspiring followers and achieving sustainable organizational success.

Exemplary/Outstanding Presidents

The application of transformational leadership in community colleges involves several key practices that are said to be those exuded by exemplary or outstanding community college presidents. Roueche et al. (1989) use the terms exemplary and outstanding to describe community college presidents who demonstrate exceptional leadership qualities and are recognized for their transformative impact on their institutions. First, transformational leaders are expected to articulate a clear and compelling vision that aligns with the institution's mission and goals. This vision serves as a guiding framework for decision-making and strategic planning (Roueche et al., 1989). Second, these leaders must foster an inclusive and participatory culture, encouraging input and collaboration from all stakeholders. This approach helps to build trust and buy-in, which are essential for the successful implementation of change initiatives (Eddy, 2008; Gillet-Karam, 2017; Hagan & Olivier, 2022). Third, transformational leaders are proactive in identifying and addressing barriers to student success, particularly for underrepresented and underserved populations (Roueche et al., 1989; Shields, 2018). By prioritizing equity and

inclusion, they work to create an environment where all students have the opportunity to thrive (Brown McNair, 2021; Davis & Greenlee, 2023). Roueche et al. (1989) also highlight the importance of continuous professional development for transformational leaders. They argue that effective community college presidents must be lifelong learners who are committed to their own growth and development as well as that of their institution (Roueche et al., 1989). This commitment to learning and improvement enables leaders to stay responsive to the evolving needs of their communities.

Articulating a Clear Vision

As aforementioned, transformational leaders play a pivotal role in conceptualizing and articulating a clear and compelling vision that aligns with an institution's mission and serves as a catalyst for meaningful change. However, when examining exemplary and outstanding presidents, the articulation of this vision becomes even more crucial. These leaders not only provide a strategic framework that guides decision-making and planning processes, but they also ensure that all actions are meticulously directed toward achieving the institution's long-term objectives (Roueche et al., 1989).

Recent studies further highlight the importance of visionary leadership in achieving exceptional outcomes. Madsen (2019) highlights how transformational leaders, particularly female presidents, excel in creating and communicating a shared vision that inspires and motivates their teams to overcome organizational challenges. Hoch et al. (2018) support this by emphasizing the critical role of transformational leaders in aligning organizational vision with strategic goals, which fosters commitment and drives collective efforts toward long-term success.

In addition, Wang and Zhao (2021) demonstrate that a well-articulated vision not only aligns with the institution's mission but also acts as a catalyst for innovation and meaningful change, ensuring that all stakeholders are engaged and motivated. Furthermore, Delgado-Alban (2021) emphasizes the impact of a shared vision on team cohesion and organizational performance, particularly in the context of Colombian higher education leaders. Their study shows that creating a shared vision enhances teamwork, communication, and decision-making, all of which are essential for achieving institutional goals. Thus, in the context of exemplary presidents, the ability to effectively conceptualize and communicate a specific and compelling future for their institutions is a hallmark of outstanding leadership, driving both organizational change and meaningful change.

Fostering an Inclusive and Participatory Culture

Exemplary and outstanding presidents are particularly instrumental in cultivating an inclusive and participatory culture by actively encouraging input and collaboration from all stakeholders. This approach is crucial for building trust and securing buy-in, both of which are essential for the successful implementation of transformative initiatives (Roueche et al., 1989). By fostering collaborative environments, promoting open communication, and involving others in decision-making processes, these exceptional leaders ensure that diverse perspectives are not only considered but also valued.

Hagan and Olivier (2022) emphasize that women presidents navigate and overcome gender-based barriers such as leadership perceptions, gender stereotypes, and exclusion from informal networks. Their resilience and strategic risk-taking abilities reveal the importance of creating an inclusive culture, which mitigates these challenges and provides equal opportunities for all individuals to contribute and succeed. Furthermore, Hagan and Olivier (2022) highlight

the critical role of mentoring and professional development programs in supporting women presidents, which are vital for both their personal development and the fostering of an inclusive institutional culture.

Eddy (2010) highlights that transformational leaders create inclusive environments by being adaptable and innovative, inspiring their teams, and ensuring that diverse perspectives are embraced and collaboration is encouraged. The concept of individual adaptability in comparison to organization adaptability comes into play here as individual adaptability refers to an individual's response to new demands or problems created by uncertainty, complexity, and any rapid change in the work situation (Chan, 2014); and, organizational adaptability refers to the ability of companies to require adaptation at the unit and individual levels, as management teams, employees, and customers all respond to changing macroeconomic environment (Ployhart & Turner, 2014). Transformational leaders demonstrate flexibility and adaptability as individuals, and through their leadership approaches, they inspire and guide their institutions toward achieving organizational adaptability.

Ellis and Garcia (2017) add that transformational leaders develop a vision that encompasses all stakeholders, motivating them to work toward shared goals. Similarly, Grove-Heuser (2016) illustrates that transformational leaders model an inclusive and participatory culture by challenging the status quo, inspiring a shared, and enabling others to act, thereby promoting a collaborative environment where diverse voices are heard. ATD (2013) further reinforces that outstanding transformational leaders take significant risks to advance student success, creating strategic visions that include all stakeholders and promoting a culture of collaboration and inclusivity. By leading in this manner, exemplary presidents not only foster environments where diverse ideas and contributions are integral to the institution's success but

also set a standard for inclusive leadership that inspires and motivates all members of the community.

Proactive in Addressing Barriers to Student Success

Exemplary presidents are distinguished by their proactive efforts in dismantling barriers to student success, particularly for underrepresented students and underserved populations. By prioritizing equity and inclusion, these leaders foster an environment where every student has the opportunity to excel. Their dedication to student-centered leadership is evident through their involvement in initiatives that enhance student access and success (Roueche et al., 1989).

Hagan and Olivier (2022) highlight the exceptional commitment of women presidents to equity and inclusion, noting their focus on creating an inclusive institutional culture that supports all students. These leaders are characterized by their willingness to take strategic risks and demonstrate resilience and adaptability in overcoming challenges (Hagan & Olivier, 2022). Eddy (2010) further supports this, showing that transformational leaders promote a culture of collaboration and innovation to address and resolve barriers impacting student outcomes. Ellis and Garcia (2017) echo this by noting that female transformational leaders emphasize empowerment and collaboration to ensure success for all students.

Robison (2014) highlights that transformational leaders inspire and mobilize others through a shared vision, cultivating an environment conducive to student achievement. ATD (2013) reinforces this by noting that these leaders prioritize student success through bold strategic planning and risk-taking. Collectively, these attributes highlight how transformational leaders act as catalysts for change, advancing equitable outcomes within educational institutions.

Commitment to Continuous Professional Development

Roueche et al. (1989) highlight the critical importance of continuous professional development for exemplary leaders. Effective leaders are characterized as lifelong learners committed to both their personal growth and development and institutional advancement (Roueche et al., 1989). This dedication to ongoing learning allows transformational leaders to remain responsive to the evolving needs of their communities and to promote intellectual growth among their colleagues (Roueche et al., 1989).

Hagan and Olivier (2022) build on the concept of continuous professional development for exemplary leaders by emphasizing the importance of lifelong learning for women presidents, reflecting Roueche et al. (1989) insights. Their study reveals that transformational leaders exhibit high levels of self-efficacy and continually strive for greater professional efficacy and growth. The leaders not only advance their own skills but also mentor future leaders, ensuring the sustainability of their institution's vision (Hagan & Olivier, 2022).

Robison (2014) highlights the practical application of transformational leadership behaviors, such as empowering others and fostering innovation, in community college leadership development programs. ATD (2013) further emphasizes that transformational leadership is essential for driving lasting change within community colleges, requiring leaders to have a deep commitment to student success and the ability to create a strategic vision. These studies illustrate that transformational leaders in community colleges thrive on collaboration, vision, and equity. They effectively navigate the complexities of community college administration by fostering inclusive practices, motivating stakeholders, and driving institutional change.

Change in Higher Education

Roueche et al. (1989) emphasize that transformational leaders are profoundly dedicated to enacting meaningful change. The landscape of higher education is continually evolving, driven by financial constraints, fluctuating enrollment, technological advancements, and shifting student needs (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Hornak & Garza Mitchell, 2016). The ability to effectively lead change is crucial for institutions to adapt while maintaining their mission and enhancing student success. Hornak and Garza Mitchell (2016) highlight that the decisions made by higher education leaders, particularly presidents, are pivotal in navigating these challenges. Their research indicates that many decisions revolve around financial issues, enrollment trends, and programmatic offerings, all requiring adaptable leadership to guide change.

Transformational leaders, characterized by their vision, influence, people orientation, motivation, and values, foster environments conducive to significant and enduring improvements.

Organizational Change vs. Institutional Change

Organizational change involves modifications in an organization's structure, strategies, processes, or culture to enhance efficiency and effectiveness (Stobierski, 2023). This change can be driven by internal dynamics or external pressures such as technological advancements or market shifts. In contrast, institutional change in community colleges entails deeper, systemic changes affecting foundational aspects, such as governance, mission, policy, and educational approaches (Oreg et al., 2011). This type of change aims to ensure long-term sustainability and relevance in response to evolving community needs and educational landscapes (Oreg et al., 2011). Eddy (2010) suggests that community college leaders should view change not as an

episodic event but as a long-term process, potentially an era in the institution's history (as cited in Tarker, 2019, p. 681).

Transformational Leadership and Institutional Change

Transformational leadership is particularly effective in facilitating institutional change in community colleges due to its focus on vision, influence, people orientation, motivation, and values. Transformational leaders articulate a compelling vision aligned with the institution's mission and goals, serving as a guiding framework for all change initiatives (Roueche et al., 1989). They build trust and empower stakeholders by fostering a collaborative environment and engaging faculty, staff, and students in decision-making processes, thus ensuring that institutional changes are well-informed and supported (Roueche et al., 1989). This collaborative approach is essential for gaining buy-in and facilitating the successful implementation of change initiatives (Roueche et al., 1989).

Moreover, transformational leaders prioritize the development and well-being of their followers, maintaining morale and commitment during periods of change by ensuring individuals feel respected and valued (Roueche et al., 1989). They inspire and motivate followers to exceed their expectations by setting high standards and encouraging creativity, fostering a sense of ownership and commitment among stakeholders (Roueche et al., 1989). Transformational leaders also model ethical behavior and integrity, creating an organizational culture that reflects these values, ensuring that changes are strategic, ethical, and aligned with the institution's core principles (Roueche et al., 1989).

Tarker (2019) emphasizes that the literature on community college leadership over the past two decades highlights the necessity for leaders to guide substantive change within their institutions. Nevarez and Wood (2010) argue that leadership and change are inextricably linked,

often involving cultural transformations within the institution (as cited in Tarker, 2019, p. 682). Heifetz et al. (2009) note that resistance to change is frequently rooted in a fear of loss, resulting in defensive responses (as cited in Tarker, 2019, p. 681). Phelan (2016) suggests that involving employees in the change process by communicating its necessity, soliciting feedback, and providing professional development is key to successful implementation (as cited in Tarker, 2019, p. 681).

The COVID-19 pandemic further revealed the importance of change, compelling institutions to rapidly adapt course offerings, assessment requirements, and delivery methods, often with significant fiscal implications due to decreased enrollment and negative impact on student success and persistence toward graduation (Watermeyer et al., 2021). This period highlighted the necessity for higher education leaders to possess robust behaviors to make effective and efficient decisions that ensure institutional sustainability (Marinoni et al., 2020). Burmicky and Duran (2022) suggest leaders must swiftly reframe their policies and practices to respond to the pandemic's long-term effects. Aristovnik et al. (2020) argue that the challenges presented by the pandemic have emphasized the need for adaptive leadership capable of navigating complex, rapidly changing environments, thereby meeting the needs of diverse student populations and closing existing equity gaps.

The literature identifies several challenges to efficient and inclusive change in higher education, including a lack of leadership development programs and clarity in the decision-making process (Vlachopoulous, 2021). Effective leadership development is crucial for equipping higher education leaders with the skills necessary to navigate complex organizational changes and drive equity initiatives (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). Additionally, clarity in decision-making processes fosters transparency and trust within institutions, enabling leaders to

implement strategic changes effectively (Bolman & Deal, 2017). These challenges can hinder the ability of institutions to implement necessary changes effectively. Addressing these issues is essential for advancing equity and inclusion within higher education. By enhancing leadership development and streamlining decision-making processes, institutions can better support leaders in their efforts to foster equitable environments and drive meaningful change.

Equity and Inclusion in Community Colleges

Community colleges have long been recognized as institutions that play a crucial role in promoting equity and inclusion in higher education. These institutions serve as gateways to higher education for many underrepresented students, including, but not limited to, racial and ethnic minorities, first-generation college students, low-income students, students with disabilities, non-traditional students, students from rural backgrounds, LGBTQ+ students, and veterans (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; HE Professional, 2023; Tanner, 2019). However, despite their mission of open access and equity, community colleges face significant challenges in achieving equitable education outcomes for all students (Astin & Astin, 2015).

The Current State of Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education

Across the nation, higher education institutions, including community colleges, are grappling with persistent equity gaps. While overall college enrollment rates have increased over the past few decades, significant disparities remain (NCES, 2021). African American and Hispanic students continue to be underrepresented in higher education, particularly at 4-year institutions (NCES, 2021). In 2019, the college enrollment rate for White students aged 18-24 was 41%, compared to 36% for African American students and 36% for Hispanic students (NCES, 2021). Students from low-income families are less likely to enroll and complete college compared to their higher-income peers (Cahalan et al., 2020). In 2019, the immediate college

enrollment rate for high school completers from high-income families (78%) was 21 percentage points higher than the rate for those from low-income families (57%) (NCES, 2021). First-generation college students face unique challenges in navigating higher education. They are more likely to drop out and less likely to graduate within six years compared to their peers whose parents attended college (Cataldi et al., 2018). While women now outnumber men in college enrollment overall, significant gender gaps persist in certain fields of study, particularly in STEM disciplines (National Science Foundation, 2021).

The elimination of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in government has had significant repercussions for higher education institutions, particularly community colleges, which have long been recognized for their commitment to serving diverse student populations (Kezar & Posselt, 2020). With a focus on increasing access and improving outcomes for underrepresented groups, community colleges have historically been at the forefront of DEI efforts in the education sector. However, recent policy changes and the rollback of DEI programs have created significant barriers for these institutions in maintaining equitable access and outcomes. The impact of these policy shifts has left colleges and universities struggling to uphold their missions of inclusivity amidst evolving political and financial landscapes (Gasman et al., 2021). These challenges are further compounded by declining enrollment and financial constraints (Harper & Harris, 2012). The termination of DEI policies has resulted in the reduction of funding and support for programs designed to close equity gaps, particularly those that serve students from historically marginalized backgrounds (Kezar & Posselt, 2020).

Before the 2024 election, opposition to DEI programs in higher education had already begun to gain momentum. In 2023, the United States Supreme Court's ruling on affirmative action policies deemed race-based admissions unconstitutional, making a significant step in the

rollback of DEI policies across the nation (Figueroa et al., 2025). Concurrently, Republican legislators in several states introduced bills targeting the core components of DEI work, including banning DEI offices, diversity training, and the use of diversity statements in public colleges (Chronicle Staff, 2025). By early 2023, at least 39 bills aimed at limiting DEI efforts had been introduced in 19 states, with four passing into law (Chronicle Staff, 2025). These legislative moves set the stage for more aggressive actions post-2024, significantly altering the landscape for DEI in higher education.

The aftermath of the 2024 election saw the rapid acceleration of DEI dismantling efforts. In January 2025, President Donald Trump issued an executive order mandating the cessation of DEI programs, policies, and activities within federal agencies, a move that set a precedent for other sectors, including higher education (Figueroa et al., 2025). This executive order also imposed new restrictions on institutions receiving federal financial aid, potentially affecting their employment, procurement, and contracting practices (Figueroa et al., 2025). Furthermore, the administration threatened to withdraw federal funding and revoke accreditation from colleges and universities that failed to comply with these changes (Figueroa et al., 2025). The result has been the closure of DEI offices at multiple universities, including the University of Alabama, Iowa State University, and the University of Utah, and the elimination of DEI-related programs across numerous campuses (Gretzinger et al., 2025).

As a consequence of these sweeping changes, higher education institutions are facing a range of challenges. Many colleges have been forced to eliminate or rebrand DEI-related programs and activities, including the closure of LGBTQ+ centers and the renaming of diversity-focused curricula (Gretzinger et al., 2025). Additionally, substantial funding cuts have affected DEI-related budgets by millions of dollars (Spitalniak, 2024). These shifts have created a chilling

effect on campus discourse surrounding race, equity, and inclusion as faculty, staff, and students navigate the uncertainty brought on by legal and regulatory changes (Blake, 2025). Legal challenges are expected, with institutions potentially fighting for the ability to reinstate DEI programs in court (Blake, 2025). The future of DEI in higher education remains uncertain, but the rollback of these policies will have long-term implications for faculty, staff, and students – particularly those from underrepresented groups.

Equity Initiatives in Community Colleges

Community colleges have been at the forefront of efforts to address equity gaps. Many institutions have implemented targeted initiatives to support underrepresented students. The Guided Pathways model aims to provide clear, structured educational paths for students, helping them navigate the often complex college system more effectively (Bailey et al., 2015). Many colleges have adopted comprehensive support systems under the umbrella of Holistic Student Support that addresses the academic, financial, and personal needs of students (Karp, 2011). Efforts to incorporate diverse perspectives and culturally relevant pedagogy into curriculum and instruction have also become more widespread (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Institutions are increasingly using disaggregated data to identify and address equity gaps in student outcomes (Bensimon, 2005). There is growing recognition of the importance of diverse leadership in promoting equity and inclusion. However, as noted earlier, women and people of color remain underrepresented in top leadership positions (ACE, 2023).

Despite these efforts, significant challenges remain. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequities, with disproportionate impacts on students of color, low-income students, and other vulnerable populations (Barker-Smith et al., 2020). Community colleges have

seen sharper enrollment declines compared to four-year institutions, particularly among African American and Hispanic students (Weissman, 2022).

The role of leadership, particularly the college president, is crucial in driving these equity initiatives. Presidents who prioritize equity and inclusion can shape institutional culture, allocate resources effectively, and implement policies that support underrepresented students (Davis & Greenlee, 2023). One way some community colleges have been able to accomplish their equity initiatives has been their partnership with such organizations as Achieving the Dream (ATD).

ATD is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to helping community colleges identify and close equity gaps, thereby achieving equitable education outcomes for all students. Since its inception in 2004, ATD has worked with over 300 community colleges across the United States to implement evidence-based strategies that improve student success, particularly for underrepresented and underserved populations (ATD, 2024). The organization provides a comprehensive framework for colleges to assess their current practices, identify areas for improvement, and implement strategic initiatives that foster inclusive educational environments. By leveraging data-driven decision-making and fostering a culture of continuous improvement, ATD enables institutions to address systemic barriers to student success and equity.

Research indicates that colleges participating in ATD initiatives have made significant strides in closing achievement gaps. For example, a report by the Community College Research Center found that ATD colleges showed improvements in student retention and completion rates, particularly among minority and low-income students (Jenkins & Cho, 2010). These outcomes are attributed to ATD's emphasis on leadership development, faculty engagement, and the use of data to inform policy and practice. By prioritizing equity and inclusion, ATD helps colleges

create pathways for student success that are tailored to the unique needs of their diverse student populations.

The impact of ATD's work is further validated by its recognition of institutions that demonstrate significant progress in achieving equitable education outcomes. The ATD Leader College of Distinction Award honors colleges that have met challenging student success goals and reduced equity gaps in student outcomes (ATD, 2024). This recognition not only highlights the effectiveness of ATD's framework but also serves as a model for other institutions striving to enhance their commitment to equity. Through its comprehensive support and resources, ATD plays a crucial role in transforming community colleges into engines of social mobility and equitable education.

The Intersection of Change, Equity, and Leadership

The intersection of leadership, equity, and change is a vital area of exploration in higher education. Effective leadership is essential for driving change initiatives that promote equity and inclusion within institutions. Transformational leadership, as articulated by Roueche et al. (1989), emphasizes the ability of leaders to influence the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of others by working collaboratively to achieve the institution's mission and purpose. This leadership style is particularly relevant in the context of community colleges, which serve diverse and often underrepresented student populations. Research by Tarker (2019) supports the application of transformational leadership in community colleges, highlighting its role in fostering an inclusive and equitable educational environment.

Community college presidents play a crucial role in enacting change to close equity gaps for underrepresented students. Their leadership is instrumental in creating and implementing policies and practices that promote student success and institutional equity. Studies have shown

that women community college presidents, in particular, have been effective in leading equity-focused initiatives (Weisman & Vaughan, 2002). They often adopt collaborative and inclusive leadership styles that align with transformational leadership principles, fostering a supportive environment for all students (Eddy, 2008; Gillet-Karam, 2017). This is further supported by research indicating that diverse leadership teams are more likely to implement policies that effectively address the needs of underrepresented student groups (Brown McNair, 2021).

The ability of leaders to navigate complex institutional dynamics and implement change management strategies is critical for promoting equity. This involves not only addressing immediate challenges but also creating a long-term vision for institutional growth and inclusivity. Leaders must be proactive in identifying and dismantling barriers to student success, particularly for historically underserved populations. By prioritizing equity and inclusion, transformational leaders can create a more just and equitable educational environment. Research by Davis and Greenlee (2023) emphasizes the importance of community college presidents championing change and engaging in critical conversations about equity.

Gaps in the Literature and Need for Further Research

Despite the growing body of research on women in community college leadership, significant gaps remain that warrant further examination. One gap is the limited understanding of how women community college presidents navigate the intersection of leadership, equity, and change management. While existing studies have highlighted the challenges and successes of women leaders, there is a need for narrative-based research that captures the lived experiences and personal stories of these leaders leading change management initiatives (Ballentine, 2000; Eddy, 2008; Gillet-Karam, 2017; Krause, 2009; Shields, 2018). Such research can provide richer

insights into the strategies women presidents use to overcome gendered barriers and drive institutional change.

Another gap in the literature is the lack of focus on the specific impact of transformational leadership practices on equity outcomes in community colleges. While transformational leadership theories provide a robust framework for understanding effective leadership, more empirical studies are needed to examine how these practices are implemented in real-world settings and their direct effects on achieving equitable education outcomes. This includes understanding how transformational leadership fosters inclusive environments, engages diverse stakeholders, and creates sustainable change.

Chapter Summary

Understanding the intersection of leadership, equity, and change management is essential for advancing the mission of community colleges and ensuring the success of all students. By examining the experiences of award-winning women community college presidents, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the strategies and practices that contribute to effective and equitable leadership. The findings will contribute to the broader discourse on leadership in higher education and inform the development of future leaders who are committed to promoting equity and driving positive change within their institutions.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore the experiences of award-winning women community college presidents achieving equitable education outcomes. This study aimed to illuminate the leadership practices, strategies, and challenges faced by these presidents as they worked towards creating more inclusive and equitable institutions. By focusing on their personal narratives within the context of transformational leadership theory, this research sought to provide insight into how women presidents at community colleges navigated complex organizational dynamics, implemented change initiatives, and defined success in their roles.

Research Question

This study employed a qualitative approach, specifically narrative inquiry, to capture the rich, contextual experiences of award-winning women community college presidents. Through in-depth interviews and document analysis, the research sought to answer the question:

- What stories do award-winning women community college presidents tell about how their personal experiences informed their leadership approaches to equitable education outcomes?

This study is grounded in social constructivism and person-centered ontology, both of which emphasize how individuals actively construct meaning from their experiences. Social constructivism focuses on how meaning is negotiated and created through social interactions and contexts (Bogna et al., 2020). Person-centered ontology asserts that understanding is shaped by each individual's history, beliefs, and experiences (Frohlich et al., 2018). Together, these perspectives provided a comprehensive framework for exploring how award-winning women community college president interpret their leadership roles, approaches, and efforts to achieve

equitable education outcomes, emphasizing the interplay between individual agency and social context.

This research recognizes that meaning and knowledge are shaped not only by personal experiences but also by broader social and historical factors. The experiences of these women presidents were influenced by the political climate, the historical underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, and the evolving discourse on DEI in higher education. By viewing their leadership within these contexts, the study explored how these women navigated institutional challenges.

The researcher was not a detached observer but an active participant in the co-construction of knowledge. The researcher's values and experiences, particularly regarding change, equity, and leadership in higher education, contributed to the collaborative exploration of the participants' experiences. This participatory approach enabled a deeper understanding of how these women leaders led change initiatives and addressed the unique challenges they faced.

Research Methodology

This study aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the experiences of award-winning women community college presidents. Qualitative inquiry, rooted in anthropology and sociology, allows researchers to gain in-depth knowledge about particular phenomena or experiences, constructing a complete picture from participants' words and experiences (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004). This approach is particularly suitable for examining social circumstances through in-depth inquiries within a small sample of a population (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Narrative inquiry emphasizes the power of storytelling and personal experiences to understand how individuals make sense of their world (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This

method requires a structured approach to storytelling, capturing the beginning, middle, and end of participants' narratives to provide a comprehensive view of their experiences. By incorporating narrative elements, this study captured the nuanced, personal accounts of the presidents' leadership journeys, challenges, and successes. The beginning of the narrative explores the initial motivations and circumstances that led these women to pursue leadership roles in community colleges. The middle delves into the challenges and strategies they employed to navigate complex institutional dynamics and promote equity. Finally, the end reflects on the outcomes of their leadership efforts and their visions for the future. Through this structured storytelling approach, the study aims to provide a rich, contextualized understanding of the experiences of award-winning women community college presidents achieving equitable education outcomes.

By grounding the study in social constructivism, incorporating person-centered ontology, and employing narrative inquiry, this research highlights how leadership is not fixed or the same for everyone but is shaped by individual histories and social contexts. This methodology allowed for a deep exploration of the presidents' experiences within the complex context of community college leadership, acknowledging the influence of both individual and societal factors on their narratives. This study provides valuable insights into how social and cultural contexts shaped these leaders' approaches to change management and their ability to achieve equitable education outcomes, offering a nuanced understanding of the challenges they face.

Methodological Framework

The methodological approach for this study is narrative inquiry, qualitative research that focuses on the power of storytelling and personal experience. Narrative inquiry is particularly suitable for examining social circumstances through in-depth inquiries within a small sample of a

population (Bhattacharya, 2017). This method allows for a deep exploration of the experiences of women community college presidents within their specific institutional contexts. As Bhattacharya notes, narrative analysis serves as "a framework that helps researchers explore, discover, understand, and construct stories based on the participants' recounting of their experiences" (p. 93).

Narrative inquiry recognizes that humans make sense of their world and their experiences through storytelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). By focusing on the stories and lived experiences of the participants, this study captured the nuanced, personal accounts of the presidents' leadership journeys, challenges, and successes. This approach allowed for a rich, detailed examination of how women community college presidents lead change and define success within their institutional contexts.

Josselson and Hammack (2021) define narrative analysis as "a method that centers the individual as the unit of scrutiny, preserves the voice of the individual through close analysis and presentation of narrative data, and investigates how individuals make meaning of life's challenges and opportunities" (p. 4). This approach will enable the capture of rich, detailed stories of the participants, providing insight into how they construct their leadership, define success, and navigate the complexities of institutional change.

By employing narrative inquiry, this study aligns well with the transformational leadership framework. It allows for an in-depth exploration of how women community college presidents embody and enact transformational leadership principles in their efforts to promote equity and drive institutional change. By analyzing their narratives within the context of their specific institutions, valuable insights can be gained into the challenges they face, the strategies they employ, and how they define and measure success in their roles.

This methodological approach involved conducting in-depth interviews with award-winning women community college presidents, analyzing relevant institutional documents, and contextualizing their experiences within the broader landscape of community college leadership. The narrative inquiry method emphasizes the importance of storytelling, requiring the researcher to capture the participants' experiences from beginning to middle to end. This approach paid close attention to the chronology of events, plot development, key characters, institutional settings, and recurring themes throughout their narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). By structuring the narratives this way, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the leadership journeys of the presidents, highlighting their strategies, challenges, and successes in promoting equity. This narrative framework not only enriches the data analysis but also offers valuable insights into how these leaders navigate complex institutional dynamics and contribute to the advancement of equity in higher education.

By employing narrative inquiry as the methodological framework, this study aims to contribute to the current literature on community college leadership, particularly focusing on how award-winning women community college presidents construct their leadership styles, navigate institutional change, and work toward achieving equitable education outcomes. The findings provide valuable insights for understanding effective leadership in community colleges and transformational leadership in the context of community college leaders, inform professional development opportunities for future community college leaders, and policymaking in higher education.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry design to explore the experiences of award-winning women community college presidents achieving equitable education outcomes.

Narrative inquiry was a particularly suitable for this research as it allows for an in-depth examination of how these leaders construct meaning from their experiences and navigate complex institutional dynamics (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This approach involves telling the story from beginning to middle to end, capturing the rich, personal stories of these presidents, and providing insights into their leadership journeys, decision-making processes, and strategies for implementing change initiatives aimed at promoting equity. By structuring the narratives to follow a chronological sequence, the research highlights the initial motivations and challenges faced by these leaders, the strategies they employed and refined over time, and the outcomes of their efforts in fostering equity within their institutions. This comprehensive storytelling approach not only enriches the understanding of their leadership experiences but also offers valuable insights into the broader impact of their work on promoting equity in community colleges.

The pilot study conducted before this dissertation provided crucial insights into the leadership dynamics within community colleges, focusing on a higher education administrator's effort to achieve equitable outcomes for underrepresented students. The preliminary research highlighted the pivotal role of leadership in driving equity-focused initiatives and revealed the complex challenges leaders face in implementing change. The findings highlight the importance of examining the experiences of women community college presidents, particularly those recognized for their achievements in equity, as they navigate these challenges.

The pilot study focused on the lived experiences of a higher education administrator at a community college in the Southeastern United States, responsible for leading initiatives toward equitable outcomes for underrepresented students. The study revealed key themes such as familial influence, professional presentation, personal choices, and institutional practices,

highlighting the multifaceted nature of leadership in community colleges. The participant's emphasis on holistic student support and data-driven decision-making emphasized the importance of leadership in addressing equity gaps.

The pilot study findings informed the decision to shift from a case study to a narrative inquiry methodology, as narrative inquiry allows for a more comprehensive exploration of personal and professional stories, capturing the beginning, middle, and end of participants' experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Additionally, the pilot demonstrated the value of examining multiple perspectives, leading to the decision to expand the number of participants from one to at least three to five award-winning women community college presidents. The expansion aimed to provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of how these presidents navigated complex institutional dynamics to achieve equitable education outcomes.

Research Participants

This study employed purposive sampling to select award-winning women community college presidents who could provide rich, detailed information about their experiences in achieving equitable education outcomes. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where participants are selected based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2015). For this study to be aligned with narrative inquiry methodology, the criteria inclusion were: (a) individuals who identify as women, (b) currently serve as presidents of community colleges in the United States, (c) have held their presidential position for at least one year to ensure sufficient time for implementing equity initiatives, and (d) have been recognized for their efforts in achieving or improving educational outcomes.

Specifically, the study focused on women presidents from colleges that have earned the Achieving the Dream (ATD) Leader College of Distinction Award between 2021 - 2023. The

ATD Leader College of Distinction award recognizes colleges that have pursued and met challenging student success goals, demonstrating improvement in at least three student outcome metrics and reducing equity gaps in at least two metrics for at least two student groups (ATD, 2024). By selecting participants from this pool, the study ensured that the women presidents had demonstrated success in leading equity initiatives, making their experiences particularly relevant to the research question. The use of purposive sampling allowed for the selection of information-rich cases to provide in-depth insights into the phenomena under study, aligning with the narrative inquiry approach and the goals of this research.

The intersectionality of this group of women community college presidents is reflected in their diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, career trajectories, institutional challenges, and leadership strategies. Ranging in age from approximately 40 to 55, they have led institutions in rural, urban, and suburban communities, each serving between 8,000 and 27,000 students. Their collective experiences highlight the varied pathways to the presidency and the institutional contexts that shape their leadership approaches. Table 3.1 describes each participant's profile and lists the institutional documents they provided to the researcher. This information is expounded upon in the narratives of these participants presented in Chapter 4 - .

Table 3.1. Participant Profiles

Participant	Profile	Institutional Documents
Clara	- Started career in student affairs; advanced through various roles to presidency - Overcame challenges, including inheriting a dysfunctional leadership team and navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. - Advocates for data-driven decision-making and transparency in leadership - Implemented innovative equity-focused initiatives, including restructuring academic terms - Balances collaboration and directiveness while promoting trust and equity	- Leadership team's commitment statement - Strategic themes - Student success data
Elena	- Transitioned to presidency unexpectedly from a mid-level administrator role - Completed MBA as a non-traditional student and earned a Ph.D. in Community College Leadership - Led major reforms in developmental education and student support as senior administrator. - Focuses on removing barriers and linking education to economic mobility. - Uses data-driven decision-making to create a student-ready college.	- Title III evaluation report - External visit overview - Assessment results - Achievement gap closure strategies
Naomi	- Former college dean now leading strategic planning efforts as president. - Addressing financial issues, enrollment declines, and resistance to change in a unionized environment. - Works to balance institutional traditions with change management strategies. - Uses data and transparency to build consensus and navigate political challenges.	- Strategic plan - Strategic plan development process - Mass leadership communication email
Sophia	- Began as an instructor and progressed into leadership roles before presidency. - Committed to equity and student success through professional development and leadership training. - Implemented data-driven and equity-focused initiatives, reducing achievement gaps. - Overcame challenges such as relocating to a new state and the COVID-19 pandemic. - Focuses on creating an inclusive culture and fostering economic mobility for students.	- Excel spreadsheet detailing closed achievement gaps

- | | | |
|--------|--|--|
| Vivian | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Entered higher education from the private sector, with experience in workforce training and teaching. - Leads efforts to advance DEIB initiatives in a historically homogenous institution. - Prioritizes data-informed decision-making, workforce development, and community engagement. - Focuses on institutional transformation and equitable student outcomes. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strategic plan |
|--------|--|--|
-

Research Site

The interviews for this study were conducted using Zoom to allow for flexibility in scheduling and to provide an opportunity to connect with award-winning women community college presidents across various locations within the United States. This virtual setting ensured that participants could engage in discussions from the comfort of their own environments, which helped to foster a more open and relaxed atmosphere conducive to sharing personal narratives. Additionally, using Zoom allowed for the recording of interviews, enabling accurate transcription and analysis of the rich, detailed stories shared by the participants.

Background and Role of the Researcher

As a qualitative researcher using narrative inquiry, it was essential to reflect on my positionality and acknowledge potential biases. Tracy (2010) emphasizes transparency in qualitative research, particularly in addressing challenges and the evolution of the research focus. In line with this, I embedded reflexivity throughout the study to maintain self-awareness and ensure the research remained authentic and rigorous.

My identity as an African American woman, a first-generation college graduate, and a senior leader at a community college in a state with diversity, equity, and inclusion restrictions significantly influenced my approach to this research. This multifaceted perspective fuels my passion for understanding how institutional leaders, particularly women community college

presidents, promote equity and foster inclusive environments. My professional background in training and development, coupled with my leadership experience, has provided me insight into the complexities of organizational change within community colleges.

Witnessing the challenges of enacting substantial change to address equity gaps has heightened my interest in identifying effective leadership strategies. My familiarity with institutions that have successfully closed equity gaps has highlighted the crucial role of presidential leadership in driving such initiatives. Consequently, I was mindful of how my positionality could have potentially influenced the research design, and I remained committed to maintaining objectivity. I allowed the narratives of the award-winning women community college presidents to emerge naturally and did not project my personal experiences onto the participants.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) assert that in narrative inquiry, the researcher's position is central to the research process. My role as both an insider and outsider allowed me to appreciate the nuances of the participants' experiences while maintaining a critical distance. My insider knowledge of community college administration did help to facilitate deeper discussions, but it required careful attention to my biases. I documented my reflections throughout the study and maintained the objectivity necessary for rigorous analysis and interpretation of the data.

Data Collection

Data collection for this narrative inquiry was conducted using a combination of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the participants and document analysis to explore the experiences of award-winning women community college presidents achieving equitable education outcomes. This approach aligns with the narrative inquiry method, which emphasizes capturing the full arc of participants' stories from beginning to middle to end, providing a

comprehensive understanding of their leadership journeys (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The interviews were conducted in two rounds. The initial round used open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about the president's leadership journey, approaches to enacting change, and strategies for promoting equity at their institutions. Participants were encouraged to share their unique perspectives on decision-making, describing success towards achieving equitable education outcomes and leading change initiatives. To facilitate storytelling, questions about their upbringing, career path, and current positionality were included.

Following the first round of interviews, a preliminary analysis was conducted to identify key themes and areas requiring further exploration. The second interview was adapted based on these initial findings, allowing for a deeper dive into emerging topics. In addition to interviews, participants were asked to provide documents that they felt were most relevant to demonstrate the progress of their equity initiatives. These documents varied from participant to participant and included strategic plans, equity initiative reports, and public announcements recognizing them or their institution's equity efforts. The participant profiles in Chapter 4 - identify the types of documents provided by each participant. This comprehensive approach to data collection enabled the construction of holistic narratives that captured the nuanced experiences of these award-winning women community college presidents in their pursuit of equity (Creswell, 2007). By integrating multiple data sources and focusing on the chronological narrative structure, the study aimed to provide a rich, contextualized understanding of the participants' leadership experiences and their impact on promoting equity in higher education.

Interview Process

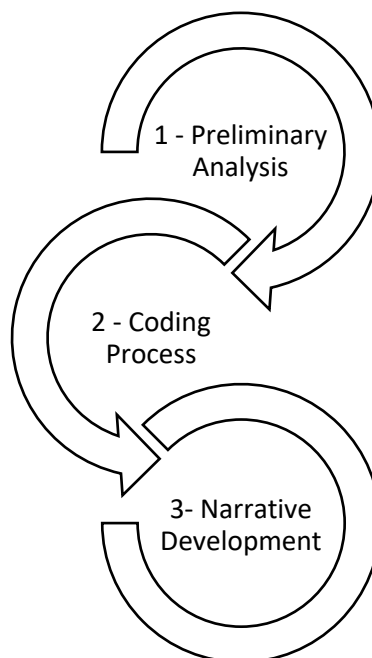
In the iterative interview process, there was a focus on building rapport and trust with participants to encourage openness and candor in their responses. Ensuring confidentiality and

addressing any concerns about anonymity helped the participants feel more comfortable sharing sensitive information. This approach aligns with the principles of ethical qualitative research, which emphasize the importance of creating a safe and trusting environment for participants (Tracy, 2010). By fostering a sense of security and respect, researchers can facilitate more honest and insightful exchanges, ultimately enriching the quality of the data collected (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). Additionally, narrative inquiry requires a storytelling approach that captures the participants' experiences from beginning to middle to end, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of their leadership journeys and the contexts in which they operate (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study was structured around a narrative inquiry framework. The following diagram visually presents the cyclical and iterative process employed.

Figure 3.1. Data Analysis Process



Beginning with the initial interviews, each phase of the analysis built on the previous one, continuously reshaping the findings. The process started with a preliminary analysis, where initial insights from the first interviews guided the development of follow-up questions for the second interview. This step was followed by a detailed examination of the narratives, focused on key decisions, institutional contexts, and leadership challenges. The data was then organized through a First Cycle Coding, which identified key phrases and codes relevant to the research questions. These codes were refined in the Second Cycle Coding phases, where broader thematic categories emerged. Finally, during the Narrative Development phase, the coded data were synthesized into themes and meaningful vignettes. Analytic memos were used throughout this cycle process to reflect the ongoing refinement of ideas and insights to document emerging themes and connections.

Preliminary Analysis

After the first interview with each participant, the researcher rewatched the interview recording and read the transcript to identify key stories, insights, and leadership strategies by jotting down notes and highlighting keywords in the transcript. This allowed the researcher to determine which aspects of the participants' narratives could be further explored for clarification in the second interview. The goal was to refine and tailor follow-up questions to enable a deeper understanding of the participant's experiences and leadership approaches. This iterative process ensured that each subsequent interview was responsive to the developing insights of the researcher and provided richer data for the study.

After completing all interviews, a detailed examination of the narratives provided by each participant was conducted. This analysis included a meticulous exploration of the chronology of events, plot developments, key characters, and the institutional settings the participants described

by rereading the interview transcripts, jotting down notes, and highlighting these elements throughout the transcripts. During this step, the researcher traced the sequence of decisions and actions taken by the participants, identified key individuals influencing their leadership, and analyzed how their institutional contexts – shaped by broader equity initiatives – impacted their experiences and strategies. This method reflects the principle that individuals must be considered within the dual lens of their unique personal narratives and their roles within larger systemic contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

In alignment with established qualitative research methodology (Bhattacharya, 2017), the substantial volume of data was managed by segmenting it into manageable analytical units. These segments, primarily derived from interview transcripts supplemented by institutional documents related to equity initiatives, facilitated a focused and rigorous analysis. This segmentation allowed for an alignment of the data with existing literature and theories, ensuring a robust analysis. By systematically breaking down the transcripts into smaller sections, the researcher could identify patterns and connections across the different narratives, enhancing the comprehensiveness and grounding of the analysis.

Coding Process

The coding process began by identifying potential codes directly from the data segments. According to Saldaña (2021), data segments can range from a single word to a large passage of text and are assigned codes that capture their essence. In this study, the data was systematically broken up by the research question, ensuring that the coding process focused on the most relevant elements of the participants' narratives. This selective coding approach allowed for the identification of meaningful codes that were directly tied to the research question to provide a precise and targeted analysis.

The coding process was iterative, involving continuous analytic memo writing to record reflections, emerging codes, categories, themes, and potential connections among different data segments. Each interview was meticulously analyzed, specific stories were extracted, and similar narratives and concepts were grouped for further analysis.

First Cycle Coding Approach

During the first cycle of coding, In Vivo coding was employed to directly extract terms and phrases from the participants' narratives (Saldaña, 2021). This approach is invaluable for narrative inquiry and helped to preserve the authenticity of the participants' stories by utilizing their own voices, thus maintaining the integrity of their narratives. An example is provided below in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2. Demonstration of In Vivo Coding

Participant Quote	In Vivo Coding
"Because I am a first-generation college student, low-income background – that just aligned to where I came from, and me wanting to get back and lift people up."	"first-generation college student" "low-income background"
"My dad was college educated...and my mom, while she was not college educated, she worked in the school library – so that value was always embedded."	"My dad was college educated" "My mom was not college educated" "that value was embedded"
"Returning as an adult student while raising 2 daughters and working full time – I really understood what it's like to be that adult learner on a community college campus and needing some of the kinds of supports that I needed."	"returning as an adult student" "adult learner on a community college campus" "needing some of the kinds of support"
"I have been that person that has had kids trying to go to school full time..."	"had kids trying to go to school full time"

The researcher then meticulously documented recurring and similar concepts and significant quotes from the participants, turning the data into codes. These elements were

organized into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, which facilitated a systematic analysis. This initial coding captured the raw data – the actual words and phrases the participants used, providing a granular view of their perspectives and experiences. An example is provided below in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3. Demonstration of Recurring/Similar Concepts and Significant Quotes

Participant	Significant Quote	Codes
Clara	"One of the students, somehow, I got connected with him...I knew he was in recovery...I told him 'I want to help hold you accountable to this, and we did and he has since graduated."	Mentorship
Elena	"I never had the goal or dream of becoming a community college president. It really has been a very organic journey filled with opportunities along the way."	Non-traditional pathway
Naomi	"My inspiration is to do access work in higher education."	Community College Mission
Sophia	"And so, really from a culture perspective, the culture piece and leadership, I believe, just go hand in hand."	Culture and Leadership
Vivian	"Our strategic foundation is built from diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, and I purposely call it out as a separate pillar."	Equity Agenda

Subsequently, the researcher utilized narrative coding to delve deeper into the structured forms of the participants' stories, enriching the narrative through a more aesthetic retelling (Saldaña, 2021). This method allowed for a detailed and multi-dimensional exploration of the participants' lives, particularly focusing on their evolution over time. Narrative coding is particularly suited for this research as it aligns with the methodological focus on exploring the storied natures of human experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Transitioning to Second Cycle Coding

Transitioning to the second cycle, the focus was on identifying patterns relevant to the research question and grouping similar codes into broader categories for further refinement. This

involved sifting through the initial codes to find repetitive, significant words and short phrases that directly addressed the research question, transforming them into more expansive, thematic statements, as discussed by Saldaña (2021) and further emphasized by Braun & Clarke (2006).

In this phase, focused coding was used to distill major categories from the data, selecting those initial codes that were analytically significant to develop into salient categories. An example of this is shown in Table 3.4 below. This stage required an open and emergent approach to ensure the data wasn't constrained by bias or preconceived notions, allowing categories to naturally emerge from the data. Concurrently, analytic memo writing continued, serving as a crucial tool for developing and refining codes and categories.

Table 3.4. Demonstration of the Focused Coding Process

Initial Codes	Focused Codes	Emerging Themes	Analytic Memo
"first-generation college student, low-income background"	Personal Experiences	Socioeconomic background	Impact on leadership approach based on similar background with students.
"returning as an adult student"	Personal Experiences	Non-traditional student	Similarity to the population of students served in community colleges.
"unplanned journey"	Non-traditional pathway	Road to the Presidency	4 out of 5 participants.
"diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging"	Equity agenda	Strategies toward equity	Central theme from multiple participants; importance of a shared definition.
"leaders cultivating leaders"	Leadership Team	Challenges of the President	The importance of mentorship and creating pathways – multiple participants.
"engines of equity"	Community College Mission	Strategies toward equity	Accessible opportunities; socioeconomic impact on students.
"goal setting and accountability"	Culture and Leadership	Challenges of the President	Strongly resonated across all participants.

Narrative Development

To effectively convey the data and facilitate a deeper connection between the reader and the participants, narrative vignettes were crafted. The vignettes were composed by carefully selecting and organizing excerpts from the interview transcripts to construct engaging and coherent stories that underscored significant themes and insights (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). This approach not only preserved the authentic voices of the presidents but also ensured their perspectives were represented accurately and vividly. Crafting these narratives was instrumental in providing a comprehensive view of the complex dynamics at play in leadership, change management, and the pursuit of equity within community colleges.

Key narratives were extracted from the interviews that directly answered the research question, using participants' own words to craft coherent narratives presented in Chapter 4 - . This step involved revisiting the examination of the timeline of events in each participant's story, along with their institutional and external environments, which was conducted during the preliminary analysis. The goal was to identify common threads as well as unique experiences. After synthesizing the findings, data were connected back to the research question, highlighting relevant quotes to emphasize key points, thus presenting detailed narratives of the experiences of these award-winning leaders in achieving equitable education outcomes.

In this narrative inquiry, data is represented through written summaries and stories shared by the participants, focusing on their experiences in social and historical contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Central to this analysis are narrative vignettes, which present key stories in the participants' own words, preserving the authenticity of their experiences (Josselson & Hammock, 2021). Chapter 4 - details themes that emphasize the participants' leadership approaches and equity efforts. The data representation prioritizes interpretation and discovery over confirmation,

blending implicit and explicit meanings to construct a thematic narrative that captures the essence of their stories (Saldaña, 2021).

Standards of Rigor

This study adhered to Tracy's (2010) *big-tent* criteria for excellent qualitative research, ensuring rigor and trustworthiness. Member checking and triangulation enhanced the accuracy and credibility of the findings. This study maintained transparency and self-reflexivity, aligning with ethical guidelines, including informed consent, confidentiality, and participant autonomy. Continuous reflexivity was maintained through a reflective journal to document thoughts and decision-making processes. Acknowledging positionality and committing to ongoing reflection allowed for the authentic capture of participants' experiences while upholding the highest standards of qualitative research integrity. This research contributes to the broader discussion of effective leadership in community colleges, providing insights that can inform leadership practices and policies.

Worthy Topic and Contribution

Focusing on the experiences of women community college presidents addressed a timely and significant issue – understanding effective leadership strategies for achieving equitable education outcomes for underrepresented students. By exploring how these leaders promoted equity and drove positive change, the study provides crucial insights into leadership strategies that impact underrepresented student populations. The findings contribute to filling a gap in the literature on women's leadership in higher education, offering valuable perspectives for policy and professional development in community college leadership.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was paramount to this study. It prioritized transparency, respect for participants, and the protection of their confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from participants, ensuring they understood their rights, including voluntary participation and the ability to withdraw at any time. Data were securely stored, with pseudonyms used to protect participants' identities. This approach aligned with best practices in qualitative research and ensured that the study's findings remained credible and ethically sound.

AI Usage Transparency

Additionally, AI tools ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Perplexity were utilized to support the research process by summarizing research articles to assess their relevance to the literature review and by recommending structural organization for coherence and symmetry across sections throughout the dissertation. These tools also assisted in refining sentence clarity and coherence, identifying spelling and grammatical errors, and reviewing initial participant narratives for logical flow. Table 3.5 provides examples of prompts used in the different AI tools.

Table 3.5. AI Usage Prompts Examples

Prompt Purpose	Example Prompt	AI Tool Used
Literature summarization	<i>Summarize the attached Shields' transformative leadership in education article</i>	PerplexityAI
Writing assistance	<i>In the literature review, is it okay to use Black and African American interchangeably?</i>	PerplexityAI
Writing assistance	<i>Do you understand the context in which I mean macro-structural in this statement, if so, explain it to me: Although participants focused on improving existing processes to close equity gaps, they did not explicitly critique power structures – a critical tenet of Shields' transformative leadership. This distinction highlights the participant's emphasis on enhancing systems to achieve equitable outcomes while maintaining a shared commitment to driving change and upholding core values, but it further helped develop my understanding of the difference between these two theories and the role of these presidents in achieving equitable education at the institutional level, but not necessarily on a macro-structural level.</i>	ChatGPT

While these tools aided in the research process through refinement and organization, all original ideas, analyses, and conclusions presented in this dissertation were written by and are entirely by the researcher. AI tools were used solely to support the refinement process by checking for clarity, consistency, and structural flow.

Chapter Summary

This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry methodology, focusing on the lived experiences of these leaders to inform policies and practices that enhance equity and inclusion in higher education. Grounded in social constructivism and person-centered ontology, this research recognizes that meaning and knowledge are shaped not only by personal experiences but also by broader social and historical factors. Through in-depth interviews and narrative inquiry, the

research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effective leadership practices necessary for closing equity gaps in community colleges.

Chapter 4 - Findings

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore the experiences of award-winning women community college presidents who have been recognized by the Achieving the Dream (ATD) organization for their efforts in achieving or improving educational outcomes. Five women community college presidents shared rich and detailed information during their interviews about their experiences and provided documents to highlight their institution's success. The interviews and relevant institutional documents illuminated the leadership practices, strategies, and challenges faced by these presidents while striving to foster equity within their institutions and uncovered compelling interpretations of how change is enacted within community colleges.

The research question that guided this study is: What stories do award-winning women community college presidents tell about how their personal experiences informed their leadership approaches to equitable education outcomes? This allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the lived experiences of the participants through storytelling. This chapter provides an overview of the study's participants, the themes that emerged through the data analysis to answer the research question, and a conclusion of the findings. This study contributes to community college literature, highlighting the strategies award-winning women community college presidents use to lead effectively and promote equity within their institutions.

Study Participants

This study involved interviews with five award-winning women community college presidents (see Chapter 3 - for details). Participant profiles, drawing from interviews and other data highlight their leadership journeys, approaches to change, and strategies for promoting equity. In Table 4.1, a quote from each participant is used to further describe who they are as

people and community college CEOs as an expansion of their profile descriptions provided in Table 3.1 in Chapter 3 - .

Table 4.1. Participant Quotes

Participant	Descriptive Quote
Clara	"I really see community colleges as engines of equity...engines of helping people to improve their lives. I've seen how the education we provide for students and how giving students the opportunity really changes their lives."
Elena	"Part of my style is busting the barriers. And when you are in the leadership role, you know people can design, and they can come up with ideas, but at the end of the day the responsibility rests squarely on my shoulders. So, equity is obviously something we're committed to."
Naomi	"I have had a great deal of success in diversifying leadership, diversifying faculty, recruiting and retaining...diversifying the environment, improving the culture...elevating equity as a core focus..."
Sophia	"Connecting with students directly, being accessible...is important. Students that look like me, seeing me, and knowing who I am, and knowing of the supports that I make sure we put in place...is part of how we center equity in our work."
Vivian	"Our strategic foundation is built from diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, and I purposely did not call it out as a separate pillar, because it's a through line...DEIB should be automatically embedded. You don't get to decide that you want to help this student, and you don't get to help that student."

Narrative Analysis: The Experiences of Award-Winning Women Community

College Presidents' Achieving Equitable Education Outcomes

The narratives shared by the participants in this study offer rich insights into their leadership journeys and approaches to achieving equitable education outcomes. The study explores the intricate relationship between their personal journeys and professional strategies to answer the research question. Each theme provides valuable insights into the complex interplay between personal history, leadership, and the pursuit of equitable education outcomes.

From the data, four distinct thematic categories emerged, each illustrating the complex dynamics these leaders navigate to spearhead transformative change within their institutions. These themes directly respond to the research question by revealing the decision-making processes and successful strategies employed in equity initiatives: (a) personal foundations shaping leadership, (b) foundations of leadership: the journey to the presidency, (c) navigating challenges in leadership, and (d) driving equity: strategies for institutional change as shown below in Table 4.2. The data uncovers how the participants' personal experiences served as a foundation for their leadership approaches, shaped their strategies for driving equity, and guided their actions in the face of challenges.

Each theme is introduced by a direct quote from one of the participants, embedding their unique voice and perspective. The narrative vignettes within each theme provide a vivid account of how these presidents' personal experiences not only inform but actively shape their leadership approaches. Two themes, personal foundations shaping leadership and driving equity: strategies for institutional change, feature subthemes that emerged during the narrative analysis, further detailing the common experiences shared among the participants. These subthemes, as well as the main themes, are detailed in Table 4.2 providing a structured overview of how personal narratives are intertwined with professional leadership practices.

Table 4.2. Emergent Themes in Leadership and Equity Advancement

Theme	Subthemes	Description
Theme 1 - Personal foundations shaping leadership	Subtheme 1a – Socioeconomic background	The personal backgrounds and experiences that lay the groundwork for the president's leadership philosophies and practices.
	Subtheme 1b – Non-traditional students	
Theme 2 - Foundations of leadership: the journey to the presidency		The professional pathways and critical career moments that guided the presidents to their roles – highlighting how these experiences equipped them to handle the challenges of leadership.
Theme 3 – Navigating challenges in leadership		Focusing on the obstacles these presidents encountered – examining the resilience and strategic adaptability required to maintain focus on equity goals amid institutional and external pressures.
Theme 4 - Driving equity: Strategies for institutional change	Subtheme 4a – Defining equity	The specific actions and strategies the presidents employed to foster equitable environments, demonstrating direct applications of their personal and professional experiences in policy and practice.
	Subtheme 4b – Barrier busting	
	Subtheme 4c – Data and information sharing	

Theme 1: Personal Foundations Shaping Leadership

"My lived experiences...seeing the cycles of poverty...continue to this day."—Elena

This first theme, Personal Foundations that Shape Leadership, plays a crucial role in how these presidents described their roles. Specifically, this theme explores the participant's socioeconomic background as children and adolescents and their personal experiences as non-traditional students, which both influence their leadership approaches. Their narratives provide insight into how economic circumstances and life experiences have informed their commitment to equity and student success.

Subtheme 1a: Socioeconomic Background

This subtheme explores how participants described how their socioeconomic backgrounds influenced their leadership approaches as community college presidents. They attributed their personal experiences with economic challenges and educational opportunities to shaping their understanding of education's role in social mobility, the systemic barriers students face, and the importance of comprehensive support for student success. Their stories highlight how their personal experiences translated into their leadership practices.

Elena

Elena described how her upbringing in a household where education was valued but not widespread among extended family influenced her leadership approach. With one parent having a college degree and the other working in an education setting without formal higher education, she expressed growing up with the understanding of both the importance of academic achievement and the barriers to accessing it. "My dad was college educated, but across the siblings, and in my parents' families...it was rare," she recounted. "And my mom, while she was not college educated, she worked in the school library, so that value was always embedded."

Despite the foundation, she described that witnessing the persistent cycles of poverty within her family shaped her perspective on opportunity and resilience. According to Elena, seeing generations struggle to break free from economic hardship reinforced her belief that education is a powerful tool for change and has led to her commitment to championing education throughout her career. Elena stated:

My lived experience in terms of seeing the cycles of poverty that continue to this day among family members is very challenging to see when we recognize that education is

the pathway to make that change. So, generations of people living in poverty has been a lens that I've had.

Elena described that her personal experiences were further deepened by watching a close family member move from one unstable job to another as economic forces dictated opportunities. Elena explained that she took it upon herself to encourage educational pursuits at the local community college, offering support and resources in hopes of fostering change. However, she described that the challenges of balancing work and life responsibilities for her family members proved difficult to overcome. "You know the students who have struggles, and they're doing it, but you have to have that internal motivator as well...or, one challenge, and you're out." Elena described these experiences as having provided her with a firsthand understanding of the systemic obstacles many individuals face in pursuing higher education, fueling her dedication to creating accessible pathways for students.

Naomi

According to Naomi, when entering college, she assumed that she shared similar cultural capital with her peers and believed she was well-prepared, coming from an upper-middle-class background. However, she described it not taking long for her to realize the stark contrasts in educational preparation and financial privilege between herself and many of her classmates. "I was stunned by the wealth and privilege of my peers," she recounted, noting how eye-opening it was to encounter classmates whose resources and experiences far exceeded her own.

She described a defining moment happening during her senior year when her closest friends planned a spring break trip. Despite their encouragement and offer to cover the costs, she expressed that she declined, unable to afford the trip herself. "They all went without me," she described - a moment that deepened her awareness of the financial divides that often go

unspoken. Naomi described how these types of experiences heightened her sensitivity to issues of economic disparity, shaping her leadership philosophy today.

Sophia

As a first-generation college student from a low-income background, Sophia described witnessing the transformative power of education. Recounting her own experience, she noted how fortunate she was to receive a full-ride scholarship to complete her undergraduate degree. "They covered my tuition, fees, books, housing- literally everything," she explained. She described that opportunity not only changing her life but also instilling in her a sense of responsibility to give back and lift others up.

Sophia explained that every day in her role, she carries with her an empathy for students facing economic challenges. She described how recognizing barriers that financial hardship can create allows her to remain committed to ensuring that students have access to the resources they need to succeed. She said, "I cherish each day that I get to do that and see the outcomes and the impact on students and their families for generations to come."

Summary of Sub-Theme 1a

The participants described how their socioeconomic background significantly influences their leadership approaches and commitment to equity. They attributed their personal experiences with economic challenges and educational opportunities as shaping their understanding of the value of education as a tool for social mobility, the systemic barriers many students face in accessing higher education, and the importance of providing comprehensive support for student success. These leaders described drawing on their firsthand knowledge of financial hardships and educational disparities to develop empathy for students from diverse economic backgrounds and prioritize support services.

Subtheme 1b: Non-Traditional Students

This subtheme explores how some of the participants described drawing upon their experiences as non-traditional students to inform their leadership approaches. These leaders expressed their concern about the challenges of balancing multiple responsibilities, including work, family, and education, which they shared provided them with firsthand insight into the struggles many community college students encounter. They explained that their personal journeys as non-traditional students shaped their understanding of the support systems necessary for student success.

Elena

According to Elena, returning to college as an adult learner while raising two daughters and working full-time gave her a deep understanding of the challenges faced by non-traditional students. She described experiencing first-hand the struggle of being out of school for years and the difficulty of tackling subjects that were never her strengths. She recounted feeling the weight of these challenges when she found herself in a master's level statistics class, overwhelmed and unsure of how to keep up. Elena explained:

I was a very nontraditional student doing my MBA. I had graduated from my undergraduate degree 20 years prior to that, so, returning as an adult student while raising two daughters and working full-time, I really understood what it's like to be that adult learner on a community college campus and needing some of the kinds of supports that I needed. In my first semester, I almost withdrew...

She described seeking support at the tutoring center only to be told that no resources were available for her specific course. Elena expressed that she felt like a failure and considered withdrawing, but instead, she sought help elsewhere.

Determined to persist, Elena recounted contacting her dean, who connected her with an adjunct professor who went above and beyond. She described the professor attending her classes with her, breaking down complex theories into real-world applications, and providing tailored support that helped her and her classmates succeed. Elena explained that what started as a personal request for help turned into an experience that highlighted the power of embedded tutoring – long before it became a widely recognized practice. Through this experience, Elena described realizing the importance of intensive wraparound services to meet students where they are. She expressed that her journey fueled her passion to ensure that all students have access to the resources they need. She recounted that she often shares this exact story with students to reinforce the message as she says, "Never, ever think you aren't important."

Vivian

Vivian described that while she was not a first-generation college student, she understands the challenges students face. "I have been that person that has had kids trying to go to school full time, trying to work full time," she said. Juggling these responsibilities, she described knowing the firsthand struggles of trying to make ends meet. "Money is funny, change is strange," she expressed as an example of how she relates to students and acknowledges the financial uncertainty that many of them experience. Vivian recounted that sharing this personal story with the students allows her to relate to them on a personal level and build meaningful connections based on shared experiences.

Vivian shared that she believes that trust is built when students realize that college leaders/mentors have faced similar challenges. She explained that she reminds students that success doesn't happen overnight – getting to where she is today took perseverance, sacrifice,

and resilience. Vivian also explained that she strives to be a role model to show students that despite the obstacles, success is within reach.

Summary of Subtheme 1b

These participants described sharing similar experiences in juggling multiple responsibilities while pursuing their education, the importance of perseverance and resilience in overcoming obstacles, and using their personal stories to connect with and inspire students to demonstrate that success is achievable despite challenges. However, there were some differences in their specific experiences. Elena described her struggle with academic subjects and the importance of tailored support services, particularly embedded tutoring, while Vivian recounted financial uncertainties and the importance of building trust with students through shared experiences. Both leaders expressed that their experiences as non-traditional students have directly influenced their leadership approaches.

Summary of Theme 1

The theme, Personal Foundations Shaping Leadership, emphasizes the influence of socioeconomic backgrounds and non-traditional student experiences on the leadership approaches of these community college presidents. The participants' personal encounters with economic challenges informed their perspectives on education as a mechanism for social mobility and illuminated the systemic barriers many students face. Elena explained that her upbringing in a household with limited exposure to higher education and her observations of persistent cycles of poverty fostered her belief in education as a transformative tool for breaking intergenerational hardship. Naomi described that her experience as a student from an upper-middle-class background, juxtaposed with the wealth and privilege of her college peers, heightened her awareness of economic inequities and shaped her sensitivity to issues of access

and inclusion, demonstrating the idealized influence aspect of transformational leadership. Similarly, Sophia described that her journey as a first-generation, low-income college student, made possible through a full-ride scholarship, instilled in her a sense of responsibility to provide students with the resources necessary to overcome financial barriers, showcasing fostering innovation in her approach to leadership.

Additionally, the experiences of Elena and Vivian as non-traditional students balancing work, family, and education were described as further informing their leadership philosophies and enhancing their ability to practice personalized support for diverse needs. Elena expressed that her academic challenges, coupled with limited access to support services, highlighted the importance of comprehensive, embedded resources tailored to students' needs, while Vivian explained that her struggles enhanced her ability to build trust and foster resilience in students through shared experiences. Collectively, these leaders lived experiences revealed a deep commitment to equity and student success, as well as a nuanced understanding of the systemic and personal challenges faced by diverse student populations.

Theme 2: Foundations of Leadership - The Journey to the Presidency

"You are exactly where you are supposed to be."—Vivian

The journeys to community college presidency among these leaders revealed both unique paths and common threads. Their narratives illustrate how diverse experiences in education, business, and public service converge into a shared mission of promoting equity and student success. From unexpected opportunities to deliberate career choices, each leader's story highlights the importance of mentorship, personal growth, and deep commitment to the transformative power of community colleges.

Clara

Clara described her journey to the presidency as beginning at the very community college where she earned her associate degree. Starting as an academic advisor, she expressed that she continuously took on more responsibilities, driven by an innate desire to contribute. "It's not like, I think I ever sat out and said, I want to be in a leadership position," she said in describing her willingness to take on challenges. With each new role she embraced, Clara described that her passion grew, and her responsibilities expanded naturally.

According to Clara, early in her career, she quickly advanced into leadership and became a dean while still relatively young – leading a team of professionals with far more experience. She described that as she progressed, she pursued her master's and doctorate degrees and positioned herself for greater impact. She explained that she was then offered a vice president position and that she and her family relocated and embraced the challenge wholeheartedly. She shared that later, another opportunity presented itself at a larger institution and recounted that once again, meeting the call, she spent nearly a decade in the role of shaping student success initiatives.

Clara described that at that time, despite her accomplishments, she hadn't actively considered a college presidency. "I really wasn't thinking about applying for a presidency," she recounted. An unexpected email changed everything. According to Clara, during a routine retreat with her team, she checked her phone and saw a message from a search firm. She described scheduling an appointment with the search firm, which they were very encouraging. She said it led her to submit her application and seek clarity through prayer. With each interview, Clara described that her sense of belonging deepened, and she recounted visiting the campus for the final round and feeling an undeniable connection with the people. "It just felt so right. And that's

what led me here." Clara expressed that she doesn't just see community colleges as institutions of learning but as powerful engines of equity – places where lives can be transformed through education.

Elena

Elena described her journey to the presidency as something she never planned. "I never had the goal or dream of becoming a community college president," she recounted, "It really has been a very organic journey filled with opportunity along the way." She explained that having spent multiple decades at the same institution, she was aware that her career path had been somewhat unique but that she fell in love with the mission of community colleges.

Elena described her career in higher education as beginning in a non-academic role in student services. Coming from the corporate sector, she recounted finding the community college environment inspiring. She described being encouraged by a supportive president who served as a mentor to pursue an MBA while balancing work and family responsibilities. She explained that with her MBA, she advanced into a newly created vice president position, which allowed her to shape new initiatives and expand her leadership skills.

Despite initial hesitation, Elena described pursuing a Ph.D., a journey, she shared, that took several years as she juggled professional and personal challenges. Nearing the completion of her doctorate, she described again being encouraged by her mentor to pursue another promotion. She expressed being reluctant at first but shared that the role gave her the experience to lead faculty and oversee student success initiatives at *the college*, which she described as proving to be pivotal to the equity work the institution is still engaged in.

According to Elena, when the college president retired, she applied for the position and was ultimately selected after a national search. Now serving in the role for nearly a decade, she

recounted that her journey has been one marked by persistence, mentorship, and a deep commitment to student success.

Naomi

Naomi expressed that her journey to the presidency was due to her deep commitment to access and opportunity in higher education. She shared her background spanning nonprofits and local government and explained that her career has consistently focused on underserved populations and creating pathways to opportunity. She described spending several years as a dean at a unique institution within a prestigious university, where she embraced the challenge of balancing access with the competing demands of an elite academic environment. Naomi noted that despite never aspiring to a traditional academic career, she pursued a Ph.D. later in her professional journey, driven by her passion for making a tangible impact in education.

Recounting her career path, Naomi shared, "It's not the case that I especially wanted to be a president of a community college. It's more that the opportunity came up, and it seemed like the right...a great opportunity." Naomi explained that her career decisions were never about following a predefined trajectory; instead, she said she pursued roles that aligned with her values and interests. She described that over time, she realized that higher education provided the most leverage to create meaningful access for students. She expressed that she was encouraged by the system chancellor, and due to a familiarity with the institution, she embraced the role without hesitation, recognizing the potential to make a broader impact.

Naomi described that returning to public higher education provided her with the autonomy and scope she desired to further her mission. She shared that while her experience in an elite private institution offered valuable insights, she was drawn to the public sector's focus on accessibility and inclusivity. Naomi expressed that to her, the presidency is not about prestige or

a position; it is about ensuring that students from all backgrounds have the opportunities they deserve.

Sophia

Sophia explained that her journey to the community college presidency began with a deep-seated passion for teaching at the college level. She described being inspired by a favorite professor during her undergraduate studies and envisioning herself making a difference in higher education. However, she shared that after moving back home to be closer to family, she found herself teaching at a private high school, where she witnessed the stark contrast in wealth among students. She described recognizing that her impact could be far greater in a community college setting and that she was drawn to the open-access mission that provided opportunities to individuals who had often been overlooked or had given up on themselves. Sophia recounted embracing the community college sector as a place where she could truly make a difference.

She shared that after just three years into her teaching role, she was encouraged to step into leadership. Sophia described being initially hesitant due to personal circumstances but was ultimately persuaded by a supportive supervisor who saw her potential. Embracing this new responsibility, Sophia described quickly realizing the broader impact she could have beyond the classroom. She noted that she later decided to participate in a professional development program for African American mid-level leaders, which she expressed was pivotal for her career trajectory. She recounted being surrounded by esteemed leaders in the field during this program, who she said emphasized the critical need for committed individuals in community college leadership, which she shared inspired her to pursue additional credentials to better equip herself for institutional management and leadership.

According to Sophia, as she moved up the ladder in various roles, she remained focused on improved academic programs and increasing access for students and intended to continue teaching at the college level. "I never envisioned myself as leading the institution until that was highlighted...and the president of my institution thought I was worthy enough to be in the [professional development] institute," Sophia recounted. She noted, "Leaders cultivating leaders is a key piece..." She expressed that although her goal was simply to teach, through self-motivation, the encouragement of others, and the opportunities presented, she was propelled toward the presidency.

Vivian

Vivian described that her path to leadership in higher education was anything but conventional. She shared that with a strong background in business and executive retail management, she initially had no interest in teaching. "I don't want to teach," she had said when first introduced to the idea of working in education. However, Vivian recounted soon finding herself in the community college sector, leading workforce training initiatives and later stepping into the classroom as an adjunct professor. She said that it was during this time that she realized the significance of representation. "When you looked at the leadership, I was it," she recounted, recognizing the lack of diversity in leadership roles at her institution and the impact her presence had on students of color who sought guidance and support.

Vivian shared that despite her growing influence, she took a step away from higher education to explore opportunities in government, focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). She expressed that after doing so, she felt something was missing – the immediate, tangible impact she had experienced in the community college setting. She described that having a life-changing conversation with one of the first Black female presidents (who became her

mentor) in her region reignited her passion. "Community colleges truly are the economic engine within the community," she recounted, inspired by their shared commitment to making a deeper impact. Vivian explain that through the encouragement of her mentor, she decided to return to higher education and pursue leadership and also pursued a doctorate to advance in the field.

Vivian described her return to higher education as marked by rapid professional growth, stepping into leadership positions that allowed her to bridge the gap between the institution and the community it served. She expressed that she felt affirmed that she was where she needed to be and found purpose in helping students reach their goals. She shared that her work expanded beyond local efforts to state and national levels, which she described as solidifying to her, "You are exactly where you are supposed to be." She described that she ultimately ascended to the presidency and that she continues to advocate for equitable access for students and representation in higher education.

Summary of Theme 2

The theme Foundations of Leadership: The Journey to the Presidency revealed diverse yet interconnected paths taken by these participants. While most participants did not initially aspire to become college presidents, they shared being drawn to the role through a combination of opportunity, mentorship, and a growing passion for the community college mission.

The narratives highlight continuous professional development, including the pursuit of advanced degrees while balancing work and family responsibilities. A strong emphasis on representation and diversity in leadership roles was also evident, particularly for leaders of color who recognized the impact of their presence on students and the broader community. Despite their backgrounds – all leaders shared a profound commitment to creating accessible pathways for students and driving institutional change.

Theme 3: Navigating Challenges in Leadership

"The culture piece and leadership, I believe, just go hand in hand."—Sophia

The experiences that these participants shared about their initial challenges when stepping into the presidency all centered around their institution's culture and the leadership teams they inherited. Though they experienced similar challenges, they recounted encountering unique obstacles related to accountability and inclusivity, requiring strategic approaches to navigate entrenched mindsets, rebuild trust, and align leadership practices with institutional values. The stories within this theme offer deeper insight into the intricate relationship between leadership, culture, and equity in advancing their colleges' missions.

Clara

Clara shared that when she first stepped into the role of president, she observed the atmosphere at *the college* being thick with distrust. She explained that faculty and staff had little faith in the administration, communication was scarce, and established processes – if they even existed – were anything but transparent. She recounted that during those first sets of meetings, she found herself in conversations that felt more like venting sessions. She described people coming to her office not to discuss solutions but to share grievances, offering long lists of reasons why they resented the college.

Clara described that beyond the negativity, there were additional challenges within the leadership team itself. She explained that the team was a complex mix- some members had been there for years and carried a sense of complacency, believing they were already the best at what they did. "We're just the best," she narrated them saying. But she recounted that as she reviewed the data, it told a different story. She described there being a clear disconnect between perception

and reality and noted that she knew that addressing it would require a thoughtful yet firm approach.

She explained that to bring clarity and accountability, she had to take action. Clara described sitting down with the leadership team and providing them with a document that outlined her expectations for collaboration and performance. She explained that she didn't stop there- these expectations were also shared across the college to ensure consistency across the institution. She expressed that setting clear expectations was just the first step, and the real challenge lay in sticking to the expectations and reinforcing a culture of accountability.

Clara described that on top of that, the ingrained culture of bypassing the chain of command persisted. She shared that regardless of position, employees felt entitled to go straight to the president for approval, circumventing established structures. She described being determined to establish order and maintaining a disciplined stance. She recounted that each time a request came directly to her, she firmly responded, "Nope, you need to go back to your chain of command." She expressed that it became a near-constant restraint refrain in those early days - "Go back, go back, go back."

It was during the COVID-19 pandemic that Clara said that she made the bold decision to include the Faculty Senate president, Support Staff president, and the Professional Staff Association presidents as members of her president cabinet. She described that these leaders have input into the highest-level decisions at the college and having them at the table has helped with the sharing of information across the institution. It was through these types of efforts, Clara expressed that although the process was tedious and, at times, exhausting, she remained committed to transforming the institution's culture and building a collaborative leadership team.

Elena

Elena described her belief that *the college's* success is a direct result of the people who dedicate themselves to its mission. "It's student first on the student side, and it's people first on the employee side," she explained. She described knowing from the beginning of her presidency that she recognized that culture isn't just about policies – it's about how people experience the institution every day. She expressed that creating a culture of equity and inclusion wasn't just an initiative for her; it had to be embedded into every plan and decision the college made. "We've made equity and inclusion part of our ecosystem. It's not something we do; it's who we are," she said with conviction.

Elena shared that one of her biggest challenges was stepping into the presidency after serving in other roles within the institution. "People viewed me through the lens of my previous positions and the past administration," she described. "I had to establish my own identity as a leader and build a team that shared my vision for the future." Drawing on lessons from leadership development programs, she explained that she focused on assembling a team that not only aligned with her strategic goals but also she embraced the evolving culture of equity and excellence. Elena recounted that looking back over the last decade of cultural transformation, she has begun to see the deep and lasting impact of her efforts.

Sophia

Sophia explained that early in her tenure, she established a culture and climate committee to better understand students' and employees' experiences. She narrated that she cultivated trust and reinforced her belief, "You can't lead without first listening and learning" through listening sessions. She described that her approach emphasized the importance of thoughtful, informed decision-making rather than rushing to implement changes without context.

Sophia recounted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the college hosted regular town halls to maintain transparency and open communication. She explained that these sessions allowed employees to voice concerns, ask questions, and engage directly with her leadership team. She described that during these sessions, she and her leadership provided honest responses and followed up when answers weren't readily available. Sophia attributed these listening sessions and open communication to fostering trust and accountability and demonstrating her commitment to addressing challenges collaboratively.

Sophia also described working to dismantle what she called a "historically male-dominated" culture within the institution while advancing equity and inclusion efforts. She explained that she empowered her team to negotiate and problem-solve, that she only stepped in when necessary, and that she encouraged all employees to contribute to equity goals. Sophia explained that for her, equity wasn't solely the responsibility of a specific office – it was a shared accountability. She described that by aligning leadership, culture, and equity, she created an environment where students and employees alike could experience belonging and growth. She expressed that she believes that "...the culture piece and leadership just go hand in hand."

Vivian

Vivian described stepping into her role as college president with a sharp focus on understanding her team and their collective capacity. She explained that early on, she identified critical gaps in her senior leadership team's engagement, including the startling discovery that key members hadn't been tracking enrollment numbers. Vivian explained that to her this was not just an operational oversight but a symptom of deeper system challenges. She said that it emphasized the importance of evaluating whether her team possessed the skills and mindset necessary to meet the institution's goals.

Vivian narrated that one of her self-defined leadership moments came in conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). She shared that a member of her senior leadership team proposed reframing DEI discussions under the neutral umbrella of "student outcomes" to make the dialogue more comfortable. Vivian described standing firm. She said she unequivocally responded to the member, "Nope." While acknowledging the importance of student outcomes, she described making it clear that equity work couldn't be diluted or rebranded for palatability. She shared that she challenged her team to confront the realities faced by marginalized and disadvantaged students, whose paths to success are often lengthened by systemic barriers and adversity.

Vivian explained that to her, equity was about more than semantics; it was about accountability and clarity. She described refusing to let the conversation shift into a space that ignored the lived experiences of underrepresented students. Vivian described that she cultivated a culture where her team was required to grapple with uncomfortable truths and align their actions with the institution's mission of equitable access and outcomes for all students by explicitly naming their challenges.

Summary of Theme 3

A central theme across the narratives is the leaders' emphasis on addressing cultural and systemic challenges within their institutions. Clara and Sophia both prioritized rebuilding trust and establishing accountability. Clara focused on transparency and reinforcing chains of command, while Sophia leveraged listening sessions and town halls to foster collaboration. Similarly, Elena and Vivian worked to embed equity and inclusivity into their institutional cultures. However, Elena focused on leveraging her leadership experiences to align her team with a long-term vision, whereas Vivian directly challenged efforts to dilute equity work,

insisting on explicitly naming and addressing systemic inequities. Despite differing approaches, all four leaders demonstrated a commitment to creating inclusive, accountable, and equitable environments.

Theme 4: Driving Equity- Strategies for Institutional Change

"I made it very clear how we were going to function. We were going to focus on closing gaps."—Sophia

This final theme delves into the approaches and strategies employed by the participants to advance equity and dismantle systemic barriers within their institutions. Through their experiences, this theme explores common strategies shared by the participants, including the importance of defining equity, barrier-busting, and sharing data and information. These narratives highlight the challenges of navigating varying interpretations of equity, the complexity of addressing non-academic obstacles to student success, and the importance of data transparency and utilization.

Subtheme 4a: Defining Equity

This subtheme explores how participants described their approaches and established a shared understanding of equity within their institution. While there was a general commitment to equity, participants described that early on they recognized that there was a lack of consensus on the precise meaning of equity and implications.

Sophia

Sophia recounted that when she arrived at the college, she noticed a recurring theme – everyone was talking about equity. "Oh, yeah, we need to focus on equity," she said she often heard in meetings and conversations. But something felt off, she expressed. "Well, what do you mean by equity?" she described, asking her team, only to be met with a variety of interpretations

and perspectives. Sophia said that their answers made it clear to her that while the commitment to equity was present, the understanding of what it truly meant varied widely across the institution.

Sophia described recognizing the gap and knowing that before any meaningful progress could be made, *the college* needed a shared definition. "One of the first things I think we need to do is define what equity means for us as an institution," she said, she asserted. Sophia explained that having a common language and understanding of equity was essential to ensure that the college's efforts were aligned and impactful. She described envisioning an environment where equity was not just a buzzword but a clearly articulated commitment embedded in every decision and practice.

Through what she described as thoughtful dialogue and collaboration, Sophia explained that she led efforts to create a unified definition of equity that resonated with faculty, staff, and students alike. She recounted that by establishing this foundation, *the college* could move forward with clarity and purpose, ensuring that every initiative and policy was guided by a shared vision of what equity truly meant for their community.

Vivian

Vivian described that in her first year at the college, she quickly realized that discussions around diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) required a more foundational approach than she initially anticipated. She explained that early on, her approach in these conversations was with the presumption that her team and the broader community had a shared understanding of what equity meant. She expressed that it became evident that many associated the term "equity" solely with race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation – reflecting the limited scope of prior discussions before her arrival.

Vivian described knowing that she had to shift her strategy when she recognized the gap in understanding of DEIB. She described taking a step back and encouraging the institution to take a closer look at what equity truly means. "Let's define what we are talking about," she said she would say, emphasizing the need to break equity down into practical, tangible concepts. Vivian recounted expanding the conversation to include aspects often overlooked, such as accessibility for individuals with disabilities. She shared that she challenged the community to consider whether their documents, classrooms, and communications were truly accessible- were they ensuring compliance with accessibility standards, using closed captioning in videos, and considering the diverse needs of all students?

To build a shared understanding, Vivian described leaning into relatable analogies and visual tools. She conveyed that she frequently used what she described as the well-known comparison of equality versus equity, emphasizing that fairness does not always mean equity. "If everyone needs shoes, equality means giving everyone a pair, but equity means ensuring that each person gets shoes that fit their unique needs," she explained. She shared that this simple yet effective analogy helped shift mindsets and foster buy-in across the college.

Vivian described that the narrative around equity at *the college* continues to evolve, although there are still moments of resistance and occasional skepticism. She shared that her colleagues have begun to approach equity with a more nuanced understanding. Vivian explained that through patience and strategic reframing, she has remained steadfast in building a strong foundational understanding of equity for sustainable change.

Summary of Subtheme 4a

Sophia and Vivian shared similar descriptions of their experiences in encountering varied interpretations of equity across their respective institutions. Both leaders identified the need for a

clear, shared definition as a crucial first step in advancing equity initiatives. They both described taking proactive approaches to address these issues, with Sophia leading efforts to create a unified definition through dialogue and collaboration and Vivian using relatable analogies and visual tools to expand understanding. Vivian noted ongoing resistance and skepticism in her institution, highlighting the challenges in changing established mindsets about equity.

Subtheme 4b: Barrier Busting

This subtheme explores how these leaders identify and address systemic obstacles that hinder student success. Through their narratives, we gain insight into how these leaders described taking proactive steps to remove barriers that extended beyond the classroom. They recognized that factors such as food insecurity and transportation challenges can significantly impact a student's ability to succeed academically.

Elena

Elena recounted that in her first year as president, she made a bold decision: *the college* would become a Hunger-Free campus. Elena explained that the announcement was met with confusion. "What do you mean? What are you talking about?" she described people asking. But for Elena, the answer was, "We are a microcosm of our community, and hunger is a huge issue," she explained. She described knowing that if students or their families were struggling with food insecurity, their chances of success would be severely compromised. She conveyed that addressing hunger wasn't just an initiative – it was a necessity.

Elena described her leadership philosophy as centering on what she called "barrier busting." She revealed that she believes that true leadership means more than just ideas and designs; it requires actions. "People can come up with ideas, but at the end of the day, the responsibility rests squarely on my shoulders," she expressed. She shared that under her

leadership, the college began breaking down obstacles to ensure that students had access to the resources they needed to focus on their education without the weight of food insecurity holding them back.

Elena attributed the success of the Hunger-Free campus initiative to her commitment to equity. "Advancing equity for all in all that we do" is not just a slogan, she said, "It's a guiding principle."

Sophia

Sophia described that in her first semester as president, she quickly realized that transportation was a significant challenge for both students and employees. "So much so," she recounted, "that I ended up launching a task force to understand what that really meant." Sophia expressed that she knew that addressing this issue required more than just surface-level solutions; it needed deep engagement with those most affected. She shared that she established a culture and climate committee to better understand the experiences of employees and set the tone for collaboration and shared values. She noted that listening sessions and informal conversations became a cornerstone of her approach to provide critical insights into the everyday struggles students faced just trying to get to class.

With the knowledge gained, Sophia described taking decisive action by forming a transportation task force that brought together elected officials, transportation providers, and other stakeholders. "Being new, I didn't know all the stakeholders at first," she noted, "but I knew who could help us move forward." Partnering with local transit agencies, *the college* expanded access to discounted rides, offering students multiple reduced-fare trips per month starting or ending at one of the college sites. Sophia revealed that the initiative aimed to provide

students with reliable transportation options, removing the uncertainty of relying on family members or unreliable alternatives that often stand in the way of their education.

Sophia described that the impact of this effort was profound. She told the story of one student who had been working toward her degree for nearly a decade, finally gaining the independence she needed to complete her nursing program. "She no longer had to wait on someone," Sophia recounted. "With her phone, she could arrange a ride and get to her clinical sites." And with that, the student crossed the stage at graduation. Sophia described the student's story as an example of what she called "Tailoring our solutions to what the students actually need and removing the barriers so they can focus on their studies lends itself to them being more successful."

Summary of Subtheme 4b

These leaders' descriptions of their approaches to barrier-busting shared several similarities. Both leaders demonstrated a commitment to addressing issues that significantly affect student success. They both emphasized the importance of understanding the broader community context and how it impacts their students. Elena's focus on creating a hunger-free campus and Sophia's efforts to improve transportation access highlight their recognition that basic needs must be met for students to fully engage in their education.

However, there are also contrasts in their specific approaches. Elena's initiative centered on food security, while Sophia tackled transportation challenges. Elena's approach appears to have been more top-down, while Sophia's approach extended beyond the campus. The choice between them seems to be based on the specific barrier being addressed, the institutional culture, and the leader's personal style. Ultimately, both leaders described a demonstration of commitment to removing obstacles to student success, albeit through different methodologies.

Subtheme 4c: Data and Information Sharing

This sub-theme focuses on the leaders' approaches to data transparency, disaggregation, and utilization in decision-making processes. Through their narratives, we gain insight into how these presidents described using data to identify gaps, inform strategies, and foster a culture of accountability and continuous improvement in their institutions.

Clara

Clara explained that sharing information for her was not just about transparency; it was about transformation. "I think sharing information is critical to advancing equity and really advancing anything at the college," she explained. She described that one of her first actions was making data widely available to everyone, ensuring the data was disaggregated by race, income level, age, and other key metrics. Clara described understanding that without clear, accessible data, meaningful change couldn't happen. She also described introducing a new level of transparency by sharing cabinet meeting minutes with the entire campus community – something that had never been done before. "Previously, there were no minutes," she explained. "And if there were, they certainly weren't shared." Now, the information is readily available to all, and as she described, fostered a culture of openness and accountability.

Beyond sharing data, Clara also described recognizing the need to create inclusive processes to engage the entire campus in decision-making. She recounted implementing a structured policy review process that allowed every member of the college to have input. "We created a two-level review process," she explained, "where representatives gather feedback from their constituents before making final recommendations." This approach empowered faculty, staff, and students to have a voice in shaping institutional policies.

Clara described that her commitment to transparency and equity was driven by a hard truth – when she examined the college's success rate, particularly among special populations, the results were troubling. "It was awful across the board," she recounted. She described realizing that real change required bold action, even if it came at the cost of popularity. "I had to ask myself: how could I say student success is the most important thing if I'm not willing to risk being liked to actually do something?" Clara described making a decisive shift, moving the college beyond incremental changes to systemic transformation. "We were doing things on the margins," she said, "but none of it was true change – so I just said, we're doing this."

Elena

Elena shared that embedding equity and inclusion into *the college's* culture started with data – data that was not only shared widely but also deeply ingrained into decision-making at every level. She explained, "It has been about deepening equity and inclusion into our culture. It's part of the metrics we use." However, Elena described that early on, the college faced a critical realization. "We didn't disaggregate the data, and it was like, whoa. We didn't know we had these gaps. Shame on us! But we had to own that past and say, our students deserve better." This acknowledgment, she described, marked a turning point that led to a renewed commitment to equity across the institution.

Elena described that a cornerstone of her approach has been "what matters most metrics" – deliberate, specific data points that guide faculty and program coordinators in their efforts to support students. "We share so much data," she explained. "And it's utilized by all of our faculty and program coordinators." By disaggregating the data based on race, income level, and other critical factors, Elena recounted that the college was able to identify and address disparities that

had previously gone unnoticed to ensure that equity remained central to every decision and initiative.

Elena noted that the "what matters most metrics" provided a clear and actionable roadmap to ensure that equity remained central to every decision and initiative. In her recount of the work of these efforts, Elena described feeling that using data empowered teams across the institution to take ownership of student success. "It has been a huge commitment from all facets of the college," she explained, highlighting their collective efforts to create a more equitable environment for every student.

Sophia

Data transparency was described as a cornerstone of Sophia's leadership. "We've done college-wide meetings focused on disaggregated data," Sophia explained. By breaking down student performance by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and age, the institution gained a clear picture of where gaps exist and how to address them. "The data is democratized," Sophia emphasized. "Anyone can log into our employee portal and see enrollment numbers, success rates, and strategic plan outcomes."

According to Sophia, she believes that the true use of data comes from applying evidence-based strategies that respond to the insights revealed. "You could say you're using data because it's available," she noted, "but no, you're actually using it to inform strategy, and you're seeing results." For Sophia, she reported that data-driven decisions are not about trial and error; they are about targeted, research-backed solutions that make a measurable difference.

Sophia described setting a clear expectation for the college. "I made it very clear how we were going to function. We were going to focus on closing gaps," she recounted. She shared that the college has remained prescriptive in the strategies they use, whether they are addressing

barriers to transportation or academic support. She described her approach as ensuring that data not only informs decisions but empowers the institution to create lasting change for students.

Vivian

Vivian explained that to her transparency in data isn't just a tool – it's a strategy for driving meaningful change. "Sharing the data has been an eye-opener," she reflected. She described that by openly examining key metrics, the college community could see exactly where they were excelling and where challenges remained. At the time of the interview, Vivian shared that the college had an upcoming visit from ATD, and she expressed that being transparent about their progress has been crucial. "We can say we're doing good here, and we're not doing so good there," she said, describing her prioritization of honest reflection and continuous improvement.

Vivian conveyed that sharing data as a leadership approach was not new for her. She shared that at her previous institution, she led efforts, to "call out data," and disaggregate it to better understand the diverse experiences of students. She described believing that breaking down the data by key demographics allowed for targeted interventions and ensures that equity efforts are data driven. "We used this strategy before, and it made a difference," she explained.

Vivian described feeling that she's set a stage for actionable change and that sharing data has become a way to align the college community around common goals. She revealed that she is sure that faculty, staff, and administrators are equipped to make informed decisions. "We're beginning that work," she said, confident that data transparency has paved the way for greater student success at her institution.

Summary of Subtheme 4c

The narratives of Clara, Elena, Sophia, and Vivian reveal several common themes in their approach to data and information sharing. All four leads emphasize the importance of

transparency, making data widely accessible to faculty, staff, and sometimes the entire campus community. They consistently highlight the critical role of disaggregated data in identifying and addressing equity gaps, particularly along the lines of race, income, age, and other key demographics. These presidents have implemented systems to ensure that data is not only available but also actively used to inform decision-making and strategy development at all levels of the institution.

However, there are nuances in their approaches. Clara focuses on creating inclusive processes for policy review and decision-making, while Elena emphasizes embedding equity metrics into the college's culture. Sophia stresses the importance of using evidence-based strategies in response to data insights, and Vivian views data transparency as a means to align the college community around common goals. Despite these variations, all four leaders share a commitment to using data as a catalyst for systemic change.

Summary of Theme 4

This theme examines strategies used by the majority of the participants to advance equity and eliminate barriers to student success. Three subcategories highlight their approaches: defining equity, barrier-busting, and data and information sharing. Sophia and Vivian emphasized defining equity, recognizing that varying interpretations across their institutions hindered progress. Sophia led collaborative efforts to establish a shared definition, ensuring alignment and purpose, while Vivian expanded equity discussions to include often-overlooked areas such as accessibility, using relatable analogies to foster buy-in.

Elena and Sophia focused on barrier-busting, addressing systemic obstacles like food insecurities and transportation through targeted initiatives. Elena's leadership prioritized creating a hunger-free campus, while Sophia collaborated with community stakeholders to provide

reliable transportation options for students. Lastly, Clara, Elena, Sophia, and Vivian shared a commitment to data transparency, utilizing disaggregated data to identify gaps, inform strategies, and foster accountability. While Clara concentrated on inclusive policy review, Elena embedded equity metrics into institutional culture, Sophia prioritized evidence-based interventions, and Vivian leveraged data to align the community toward shared goals. These leaders demonstrate diverse but interconnected approaches to driving equity within their institutions.

Conclusion of Findings

The narratives shared by the five award-winning women community college presidents in this study offer profound insights into their leadership trajectories and strategies for achieving equitable education outcomes. Four key thematic categories emerged from their experiences: personal foundations shaping leadership, the journey to the presidency, navigating challenges in leadership, and driving equity through institutional transformation. These categories illustrate how the participants embodied transformational leadership principles, leveraging their personal histories, confronting complex institutional dynamics, and enacting transformative practices to promote equity and student success.

The participants demonstrated an unwavering commitment to advancing equity, as informed by their diverse backgrounds and experiences. Central to their leadership were efforts to define equity within their institutions, dismantle systemic barriers to student success, and utilize data transparency as a tool for accountability and strategic decision-making. Despite encountering significant obstacles, such as institutional resistance, leadership team dynamics, and ingrained cultural mindsets, these presidents prioritized the creation of inclusive, equitable, and accountable environments for both students and employees. The findings of this study establish a foundation for deeper exploration of these themes through the lens of

transformational leadership, which will be applied to real-world contexts and related literature in Chapter 5 - .

Chapter 5 - Discussion

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore the experiences of award-winning women community college presidents who have been recognized by the Achieving the Dream (ATD) organization, a national entity committed to increasing the success of community college students, for their efforts in achieving or improving equitable outcomes for underrepresented students. This study employed a qualitative approach, specifically narrative inquiry, to capture the rich, contextual experiences of award-winning women community college presidents.

Through in-depth interviews and document analysis, the research sought to answer the question:

- What stories do award-winning women community college presidents tell about how their personal experiences informed their leadership approaches to equitable education outcomes?

Chapter 4 - presented the findings from narrative inquiries with five award-winning women community college presidents, exploring their experiences in achieving equitable education outcomes. The analysis revealed four key themes: personal foundations shaping leadership, the journey to the presidency, navigating challenges in leadership, and driving equity through institutional transformation. These leaders drew on their diverse backgrounds and experiences to inform their approaches to equity and student success. They demonstrated unwavering commitment to advancing equity by defining it within their institutions, dismantling systemic barriers, and utilizing data transparency for accountability and strategic decision-making. Their leadership styles reflected adaptability, resilience, and a readiness to challenge entrenched norms. Despite encountering significant obstacles, such as institutional resilience and ingrained cultural mindsets, these presidents prioritized creating inclusive, equitable, and accountable environments for both students and employees. Their narratives highlighted the

complex interplay between personal experiences, institutional dynamics, and leadership strategies in promoting equity and transforming community colleges.

This chapter includes a discussion of the study's major findings - including the key areas of leadership practices, the challenges women community college presidents face, the strategies these leaders use to promote equity and drive institutional change - and their implications related to the literature and the transformational leadership theory used for this study. This chapter will also include implications and recommendations for practice, study limitations, and future research.

Results and Interpretation

This study contributes significantly to the existing literature on transformational leadership, particularly in the context of women community college presidents working to achieve equitable education outcomes. Through an analysis of the experiences of these leaders, several key findings emerged that offer new insights into the nuanced and dynamic nature of leadership in community colleges. These findings extend the current understanding of leadership by focusing on personal experiences, mentorship, data-driven strategies, and adaptive leadership styles.

Personal Experiences Shaping Transformational Leadership

A critical finding of this study is how transformational leadership, shaped by personal experiences, can be applied within community colleges to address systemic inequities and promote sustainable student success. The personal stories of the participants – such as overcoming socioeconomic barriers and navigating first-generation college experiences – were key drivers of the leaders' commitment to equity. As described in Chapter 4 - , these lived experiences allowed the presidents to be particularly attuned to the needs of underrepresented

students, guiding their leadership in areas such as access to resources and support services and fostering inclusivity. These insights offer a deeper understanding of the why behind transformational leadership, exploring how personal experiences influence leadership decisions and expanding beyond traditional models that typically emphasize what leaders do. This adds a new dimension to the theoretical framework, suggesting that leaders are not just strategic actors but also individuals whose life stories shape their leadership choices.

Personal experiences, particularly those rooted in socioeconomic challenges, class distinctions, and the non-traditional student experience, emerged as significant factors influencing the participants' commitment to equity work. The presidents' firsthand understanding of socioeconomic issues drove their leadership approaches and their prioritization of support systems for students. The depth of their personal experiences suggests that diverse life backgrounds may contribute to more empathetic and targeted equity initiatives. The study indicates that leaders who have navigated similar challenges as those faced by underrepresented students are better positioned to design and implement more compassionate and effective solutions. These insights emphasize the value of diverse perspectives in leadership and demonstrate how these perspectives translate into actionable equity strategies.

Additionally, many of the participants did not initially aspire to the presidency. Their career trajectories were influenced by a combination of factors, including passion for their work, mentorship, and a strong desire to drive institutional change. This discovery contrasts with the more linear, goal-oriented career paths often described in leadership literature, which typically assume a direct trajectory toward executive roles (Bello-de Castro, 2010; Hagan & Oliver, 2022; Krause, 2009). This finding expands current literature by offering insights into the non-linear and more flexible career paths can lead women to executive positions within community colleges.

While transformational leadership literature often highlights the behaviors and actions of leaders (Bass, 1990; Burns, 1978; Shields, 2018), this study contributes to the literature by addressing the role of lived experience in informing leadership actions. It reveals that transformational leaders are not just visionaries but also individuals whose personal histories significantly shape their approach to leadership, including how they build trust, influence change, and motivate others toward common goals. This study adds a layer of depth to the understanding of transformational leadership, offering a more nuanced view that ties leaders' motivations to their lived experiences. Shields' (2010) concept of transformative leadership further emphasizes this point by focusing on how leaders' personal narratives and their commitment to social justice can drive institutional change, positioning their lived experiences as integral to the leadership process.

The Importance of Mentorship and Professional Development

Tying mentorship and professional development to the non-traditional career paths of these presidents is particularly significant as the data revealed that pathways to leadership for women in community colleges may be more indirect and roundabout, shaped by external opportunities rather than predetermined career goals. Recognizing this non-linear path emphasizes the importance of creating institutional frameworks that foster leadership development and mentorship for those who may not envision themselves in top leadership positions.

This study further emphasizes the critical role of mentorship, professional development, and advanced degrees in preparing women for the presidency (Bello-de Castro, 2010; Campbell et al., 2010; Deal, 2019; Hague & Okpala, 2017; Hill, 2017; Venzant, 2017). The data revealed that these elements were instrumental in the participants' career progression, equipping them

with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate the challenges of leadership in community colleges. Three of the participants specifically highlighted their focus on developing future leaders within their institutions, demonstrating the cyclical nature of mentorship. This cyclical mentorship model, where established leaders actively cultivate the next generation of leaders, represents a valuable contribution to leadership development best practices within community colleges.

The findings highlight the critical role of mentorship in advancing individual careers and promoting institutional sustainability while also addressing broader equity goals. The creation of mentorship pipelines ensures continuous leadership development, a finding supported by existing literature (Deal, 2019), which also reinforces an institution's commitment to equitable education outcomes. This process fosters a culture of inclusivity and growth within the institution, encouraging a steady influx of diverse leaders who bring unique perspectives and approaches to solving complex challenges, as highlighted in previous studies (Deal, 2019; Eddy, 2008). Institutions that prioritize mentorship ensure the continuation of effective leadership that aligns with the evolving needs of underrepresented student populations, further solidifying their commitment to long-term equity and student success.

Nuances in Women's Leadership in Community Colleges

The study highlights the context-specific nature of leadership in community colleges, especially for women. These findings challenge traditional leadership paradigms, which are often based on corporate or four-year institutional models (Tarker, 2019), by illustrating how leadership in community college is informed by both the unique challenges of the sector and the diverse student populations these leaders serve. The data gathered in this study reveal key nuances in the leadership of women community college presidents. In particular, women leaders

were found to balance collaborative, inclusive decision-making with strong advocacy for systemic change, often navigating challenges specific to institutional biases. As noted in Chapter 4 - , many participants described instances where they had to adapt their leadership approaches, such as the balancing of assertiveness with empathy or the need to demonstrate both strength and vulnerability. These findings echo the work of Eddy (2008) and Gillet-Karam (2017), who suggest that while women in leadership roles face unique challenges, their ability to navigate these barriers and drive institutional change is crucial for promoting equity.

While the participants preferred collaborative decision-making, they also recognized the necessity of directive leadership in specific situations – particularly when advancing equity initiatives. This finding suggests that effective leadership in community colleges requires flexibility and an ability to adapt one's leadership style to the needs of the institution and the specific challenges at hand. In cases where deeply entrenched inequities needed to be addressed, a more directive approach was necessary to overcome resistance and ensure progress. This flexibility between collaborative and directive leadership adds a critical nuance to the transformational leadership theory, which is often associated with more participatory approaches. The study reveals that adaptability is essential for leaders navigating the complex dynamics of community colleges, particularly when tackling systemic issues related to equity.

Women presidents in this study described facing implicit biases that sometimes undermined their authority. Yet, they demonstrated resilience by applying transformational leadership qualities such as individual consideration and intellectual stimulation. These women consistently advocated for inclusive environments, modeling ethical leadership approaches that broke down systemic barriers and empowered other women to follow in their footsteps. The study thus contributes to the literature by presenting an example of how women leaders can

simultaneously challenge and conform to leadership expectations within the specific context of community colleges, an environment that has historically provided more opportunities for women compared to other higher education sectors.

Transformational Leadership and Equitable Outcomes

Another significant contribution of this study is the exploration of how transformational leadership practices influence the achievement of equitable education outcomes based on the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Through the analysis of the presidents' narratives, it became evident that their work aligns more closely with the principles of transformational leadership. Specifically, they focus on enhancing existing processes to close equity gaps, rather than explicitly critiquing power structures, which is a central tenet of Shields' (2018) transformative leadership. This discovery highlights a key distinction between the two leadership approaches, revealing the presidents' emphasis on improving existing systems. However, both theories share a common emphasis on driving change, upholding values, and making a lasting impact on leadership.

The study emphasizes the importance of data-driven equity leadership, specifically as presented in the institutional documents the participants provided. By demonstrating how transformational leaders use data to identify gaps and implement targeted interventions, this study offers a practical approach for future leaders seeking to promote equitable outcomes in similar institutional contexts. Moreover, the holistic approach to addressing both systemic issues and immediate student needs provides valuable lessons for leaders aiming to create inclusive, student-centered environments. The women presidents in this study implemented a range of targeted initiatives – such as a hunger-free campus, transportation programs, and mentorship networks – that directly addressed the basic needs of their diverse student populations and they

used data to track and measure progress through completion to ensure these initiatives were meaningful and impactful. These actions align with the principles of transformational leadership, particularly the ability to motivate and inspire stakeholders to work toward a shared vision of equity (Roueche et al., 1989). As seen in Chapter 4 - , these leaders used data-driven decision-making to identify equity gaps, track progress, and refine strategies, which demonstrates a sophisticated integration of both leadership theory and practice.

The data emphasizes the challenges these presidents faced in effecting institutional change, particularly when dealing with entrenched cultures of complacency, distrust, and a lack of transparency. To overcome these challenges, the leaders employed a variety of strategies, including clear communication of institutional vision and data-driven decision-making, often facilitated by their participation in the ATD program. These strategies highlight the importance of organizational culture in achieving equity goals and reinforce the need for transformational leaders to be proactive in overcoming resistance within their institutions. These findings suggest that effective leadership requires not only vision but also the ability to align institutional culture with the mission of equity. The presidents in this study were able to move beyond traditional leadership approaches to implement more transformative strategies that targeted and addressed long-standing barriers to student success.

The study also reveals the participants' candid acknowledgment of shortcomings in serving certain student populations, followed by decisive action to rectify these gaps. This combination of self-reflection and assertive problem-solving aligns with Roueche et al. (1989) transformational leadership theory, particularly in the area of implementing organizational change for equity, and further resonates with Shields' (2018) concept of transformative leadership, which emphasizes the role of leaders in challenging inequities and fostering social

justice within educational settings. This revelation adds to the literature by highlighting the rarity of higher education presidents self-reporting on shortcomings in serving underrepresented student populations, a practice not commonly found in existing studies. This aspect of leadership emphasizes the importance of self-awareness and responsiveness to data in driving equitable outcomes, moving beyond inspiration to action.

Leaders in this study used data not only to measure progress but also to identify disparities and implement targeted initiatives. The willingness of these presidents to engage in self-reflection, even in the face of institutional resistance, adds an important dimension to transformational leadership theory. It suggests that effective leaders must be continuously responsive to feedback and willing to adapt their strategies in response to new data, highlighting the ongoing cycle of reflection and action that drives successful leadership in the pursuit of equity.

Lastly, this study revealed that the traditional understandings of transformational leadership are insufficient to capture the nuance, adaptability, and resilience these leaders demonstrated in achieving equitable education outcomes. While transformational leadership has proven effective under certain predictable conditions, more complex environments, particularly those involving equity challenges, require a deeper focus on building adaptability and resilience in community college CEOs. This finding suggests a need to move beyond transformational leadership toward a transformative leadership model, one that better reflects how leaders must flex their approaches to meet evolving institutional and societal demands.

Equitable Education Outcomes

The presidents created cultures of equity by ensuring that their colleges offered support systems for underrepresented students. This reflects the findings of Roueche et al. (1989), who

emphasized the role of community college CEOs in fostering organizational change to meet the needs of a diverse student body. Innovative initiatives led by these presidents illustrate a holistic approach to equity work. These initiatives, aimed at addressing basic student needs, form the foundation for broader efforts to close equity gaps. The data suggests that addressing immediate student needs creates a stable environment in which students can focus on their academic success. This approach challenges traditional models of academic support by recognizing that equity leadership requires attention to both systemic issues and immediate student needs.

Through a review of each participant's institutional documents, these leaders intentionally designed and initiated equity-focused programs and plans to close achievement gaps for underrepresented students. Their leadership approaches included leading through a balance of collaboration and directiveness, open and transparent information sharing, and personal connections to the students based on the leaders' personal histories and experiences. The significance of the participant's institutions' receiving the ATD Leader College of Distinction Award is based on the award's specific emphasis on recognizing colleges that have pursued and met challenging student success goals, demonstrating improvement in at least three student outcome metrics and reducing equity gaps in at least two metrics for at least two student groups (ATD, 2024). Through the participants' stated descriptions of their experiences and the institutional data showing the progress of their initiatives, it can be interpreted that their leadership approaches were instrumental in accommodating the diverse needs of underrepresented students leading to these students having equal access to educational resources and opportunities, and to persist and graduate (Bloomberg, 2024). The ability of these participants to achieve equitable education outcomes for underrepresented students at their

institutions will have a longstanding impact on the students who benefitted from their commitment to equity and inclusion.

These findings provide critical insights into the nature of equitable education outcomes, suggesting that effective equity leadership in community colleges must extend beyond classroom support to include broader social and economic factors. This holistic approach is essential for ensuring that all students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, have the support necessary to succeed academically. The study contributes to the literature by providing concrete examples of how leadership grounded in transformational principles can be applied within community colleges to address systemic inequities and advance sustainable student success, while also highlighting the need to evolve these frameworks to more directly engage with power imbalances.

Implications

The findings from this study present significant implications for community college leadership, particularly as it relates to achieving equitable education outcomes. These implications stem from the alignment between the theoretical framework provided by Roueche et al. (1989) transformational leadership theory and the lived experiences of award-winning women community college presidents.

The study highlights how the personal backgrounds and experiences of women presidents shaped their leadership approaches to equity. As seen with the participants, those who have experienced being non-traditional students or faced socioeconomic challenges tend to bring a deep understanding of the barriers that underrepresented students face. These leaders' personal histories, therefore, not only inform their leadership but also drive their commitment to equitable outcomes. This finding implies that community colleges could benefit from more personalized

leadership development programs that help cultivate empathy and understanding through mentorship and professional growth opportunities.

The study highlights the significance of mentorship in shaping the leadership trajectories of women presidents. The literature also emphasizes mentorship as a key to advancing women into higher leadership positions in community colleges. Given the barriers that women often face in male-dominated educational settings, targeted mentorship and professional development programs are essential for fostering the next generation of female leaders. These programs should emphasize both the technical and interpersonal aspects of leadership, helping women develop the confidence and skills necessary to navigate complex political and cultural dynamics within their institution.

The study affirms the critical role of transformational leadership in fostering institutional change. Both the literature and the study's findings highlight that leaders who embrace transformational leadership practices – such as fostering a shared vision, motivating stakeholders, and creating an environment of trust – are best positioned to drive equity initiatives. Community colleges, which often face systemic challenges like financial constraints, low retention rates, and enrollment declines, require leaders who are capable of navigating these obstacles with resilience and innovation. Transformational leadership, particularly as it pertains to community colleges, emphasizes the importance of not just managing but inspiring change. These findings suggest that institutions should invest in cultivating leaders who embody the principles of transformational and transformative leadership to address the multifaceted issues faced by community colleges.

Another important theme in both the literature and the findings is the challenge of navigating institutional culture and overcoming resistance to change. The women presidents in

the study demonstrated the ability to balance collaboration with decisiveness in environments that were resistant to change, particularly in areas involving diversity, equity, and inclusion. The implications of these findings suggest that future leaders must be equipped with strategies for overcoming institutional inertia, particularly when it comes to tackling long-standing systemic inequities. This includes fostering a culture of continuous improvement and providing professional development for staff to learn adaptability and resilience skills, and engaging in transparent communication about the need for change.

The study's findings also reveal that the obstacles faced by women presidents are often context-specific, shaped by the unique cultures and challenges within their institutions. While the literature offers broad recommendations and theories, this study provides concrete examples of how leadership practices manifest within specific institutional settings. The implications here suggest that solutions to equity challenges in community colleges cannot be one-size-fits-all. Instead, strategies for equity must be adapted to the unique characteristics of each institution, whether that involves addressing particular enrollment patterns, local community needs, or specific faculty dynamics. Leaders must be prepared to implement flexible, context-sensitive solutions that resonate with their campus community.

Both the literature and the findings place a strong emphasis on the role of data in shaping decisions to improve student outcomes. The women presidents in this study, much like the leaders described in the literature, use data to identify gaps, set goals, and track progress toward closing achievement gaps. These findings suggest that community colleges should prioritize the use of disaggregated data to better understand the specific challenges faced by underrepresented student populations. Moreover, data should not only inform strategic decisions but also be a tool for transparent communication with faculty, staff, and stakeholders about the progress and

challenges surrounding equity initiatives. The institutional documents provided by the participants demonstrated the exact metrics and initiatives that contributed to their success in closing achievement gaps, offering concrete examples of how data-driven strategies led to measurable improvements. While these examples are institution and case-specific, they serve as blueprints that emphasize the importance of using data to track and measure progress, continuously evaluate initiatives, and make necessary adjustments to ensure long-term success in achieving equitable education outcomes.

Finally, it emphasizes the importance of collaborative leadership in advancing equity. The findings support the literature's suggestion that leadership is most effective when it involves collaboration among faculty, staff, students, and external community stakeholders. Leaders who foster a culture of inclusion and shared decision-making are better able to build trust and ensure that equity initiatives have broad support across the institution. For community colleges, this means not only involving key stakeholders in decision-making but also creating structures that facilitate ongoing dialogue and collaboration. However, the participants in this study shared that while they preferred to lead collaboratively, there were times when they had to be more direct in their approach. The presidents recognized that leadership effectiveness depends on adaptability and resilience, or rather the ability of one to adapt their approach to a situation and to remain steadfast and firm while engaging in their approach. At certain moments, a direct approach was essential for ensuring clear communication and driving change, illustrating that successful leadership is about flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of the moment, not rigidly defined traits. The presidents had to strike a delicate balance between their preferred collaborative style and the need to be directive when the situation demanded it. This balance was essential for effective leadership, as it allowed them to maintain trust and inclusivity while also taking the

decisive actions required to move equity initiatives forward. This is supported by previous literature and also suggests that community college leaders must find a balance between collaborative leadership and directness, recognizing when to embrace both approaches to effectively drive equity initiatives while maintaining trust and inclusivity (Eddy, 2010).

This study adds to the growing body of research on leadership in community colleges, particularly the role of women presidents in achieving equitable education outcomes. The findings suggest that transformational leadership, reinforced by personal experience, data-driven decision-making, and collaborative practices, is essential for enacting meaningful change. As community colleges continue to serve an increasingly diverse student body, the importance of visionary and inclusive leadership will only grow. Therefore, institutional policies and leadership development programs must focus on fostering leaders who are not only capable of navigating the complexities of higher education but also deeply committed to achieving equitable education outcomes.

Recommendations

Drawing from the literature and the findings, several key recommendations are proposed to enhance leadership effectiveness and promote equity in community colleges. These recommendations focus on fostering a culture of collaboration, improving transparency and communication, supporting professional development, and ensuring data-driven decision-making. The study's findings reveal critical insights into the leadership practices of women community college presidents, highlighting the need for strategic policies and programs that empower leaders and create inclusive, equitable environments. By implementing these recommendations, community colleges can better address the complex challenges they face and

ensure that all students, particularly those from underrepresented groups, have the opportunity to succeed.

One of the strongest recommendations from this study is the implementation of institutional policies and procedures that emphasize collaboration, transparency, open communication, and data sharing. The findings, particularly from Theme 3, Navigating Challenges in Leadership, and Subtheme 4c, Data and Information Sharing, highlight the importance of these elements in rebuilding trust and ensuring accountability. Leaders such as Clara, Elena, and Sophia demonstrated that fostering an environment of transparency can help navigate institutional challenges, particularly in times of crisis. For example, Sophia's initiative to hold regular town halls during the pandemic to engage the community in open conversations exemplifies how transparent communication can address challenges collaboratively. The literature also supports this, with Roueche et al. (1989) emphasizing that transformational leaders thrive when they facilitate open communication and foster collaboration. Recent studies, such as those by Hagan and Olivier (2022), also stress the importance of inclusive decision-making processes in creating a culture of trust and enhancing leadership effectiveness.

Community colleges and individuals interested in community college leadership investing in professional development programs, especially those with a focus on mentorship, is another key recommendation supported by both the literature and the study's findings. Theme 2, Foundation of Leadership: The Journey to the Presidency, illustrated the significant role of mentorship and professional development in shaping leadership paths. All five participants highlighted how mentorship and development programs were pivotal in their journeys to leadership roles. For instance, Sophia's participation in a professional development program for African American mid-level leaders provided her with invaluable guidance and resources that

played a crucial role in her career progression. The literature, particularly the work of Eddy (2008) and Gillet-Karam (2017), also emphasizes the importance of mentorship and professional development in advancing women's leadership in community colleges, offering a pathway for emerging leaders to gain the necessary skills and support.

Partnering with organizations like ATD is an effective strategy for colleges to close equity gaps and enhance student success. While not explicitly discussed in the findings, the emphasis on data-driven decision-making in Theme 4, Driving Equity: Strategies for Institutional Change, specifically Sophia's story and mention of measuring outcomes, aligns with the work of organizations such as ATD. This organization has been instrumental in helping colleges identify and address equity gaps, particularly for underrepresented students, and all of the participants' institutions received national recognition from ATD for achieving equitable education outcomes. The literature supports this approach, with Jenkins and Cho (2010) highlighting the significant contributions of ATD in improving student retention and completion rates by focusing on data, leadership development, and policy changes that promote equity.

A critical recommendation for fostering effective leadership is for community college leaders to prioritize their own professional development. Both the literature and the findings from this study highlight the importance of continuous learning for leaders. All participants demonstrated their commitment to professional growth by pursuing advanced degrees and engaging in ongoing learning opportunities. The literature, particularly Roueche et al. (1989), stresses that effective community college presidents must be lifelong learners who continuously develop their skills to address the dynamic challenges of the educational landscape. This ongoing commitment to growth is essential for leaders to stay responsive to institutional needs and drive meaningful change.

These recommendations, grounded in both the literature and the findings of this study, provide a comprehensive framework for enhancing leadership and promoting equity in community colleges. They address key areas such as fostering a culture of collaboration, transparency, and data sharing, investing in professional development and mentorship, and prioritizing continuous learning for leaders. By focusing on these areas, community colleges can better equip their leadership teams to navigate the complexities of the modern educational environment and ensure equitable outcomes for all students.

Limitations

While this study provides valuable and nuanced insights into the experiences of award-winning women community college presidents in achieving equitable education outcomes, several limitations must be acknowledged. The small sample size, which included leaders with varying tenure lengths and experiences, may have limited the range of perspectives captured. While their experiences provided rich narratives, a larger sample could have offered broader insights into leadership practices across diverse institutions. Additionally, because the study focused on a highly specific subset of leaders, maintaining participant anonymity was a challenge. The need to protect confidentiality required careful consideration of which details could be included in the findings, sometimes necessitating the omission of certain contextual elements that may have added further depth to the analysis.

Another limitation of the study was its reliance on self-reported data, which inherently carries the risk of recall bias and self-censorship. However, the participants were generally candid in sharing both their successes and challenges, demonstrating a willingness to engage in open and honest dialogue. At times, some participants hesitated or initially censored themselves, requiring reassurance of confidentiality before fully sharing their experiences. Additionally,

differences in verbal communication styles influenced the richness of the data, as some participants were naturally more expressive, while others required further prompting to provide detailed narratives. While every effort was made to ensure the authenticity and depth of the data, the subjective nature of qualitative research remains a factor, as interpretations of the narratives are shaped by both the participant's and the researcher's perspectives. Despite these challenges, the study offers meaningful contributions to understanding leadership and equity in higher education and reinforces the need for future research.

Future Research

This study has provided valuable insights into the leadership approaches of women approaches of award-winning women community college presidents achieving equitable education outcomes and how they navigate the complexities of driving equity initiatives. However, several areas remain unexplored that could provide further depth and understanding of leadership in community colleges, especially as it relates to promoting equitable outcomes for underrepresented students.

While this study focused on the experiences of women community college presidents, further research could explore the impact of tenure length and how race/ethnicity influences leadership stories. It would be valuable to explore whether longer tenures result in different leadership approaches, particularly in navigating institutional cultures and driving equity. Understanding how gender and race intersect with leadership practices can provide deeper insights into the unique challenges faced by underrepresented groups in leadership roles. Additionally, investigating these factors across diverse groups of leaders would further contribute to the discourse on inclusive leadership in community colleges. Future research should also examine how the urban, rural, and suburban communities these presidents serve

influence their leadership strategies, institutional priorities, and approaches to student success, as geographic and demographic contexts shape the challenges and opportunities within each institution.

Another important area for future research is examining the impact of lifelong learning and the role of presidents with longer tenures in their ability to drive institutional change. As noted in this study, the women presidents interviewed emphasized their commitment to ongoing professional development. Understanding how continuous learning shapes the leadership capabilities of community college presidents could provide valuable insights into how such development influences their ability to navigate complex challenges and lead equity initiatives. Additionally, exploring the experiences of presidents with longer tenures could reveal how institutional knowledge and experience influence their capacity to lead change and sustain long-term equity efforts.

Future research could benefit from exploring other leadership theories that may influence effective leadership in advancing equity initiatives in community colleges. The complex dynamics of community college leadership may require diverse leadership styles that are adaptable to various institutional contexts and challenges. Research that integrates alternative leadership theories, such as servant leadership, adaptive leadership, or authentic leadership, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how leaders address the equity gaps within their institutions. Such studies could also examine how different leadership theories contribute to fostering collaboration, building trust, and navigating resistance to change.

This study used qualitative methods to explore the stories of five women presidents, but future research could incorporate quantitative methods to study a larger group of community college presidents. By using surveys or other data collection methods, researchers could identify

patterns in leadership approaches that are particularly effective in promoting equity initiatives. Quantitative studies would allow for a broader analysis of the relationship between leadership styles, institutional contexts, and student outcomes, providing valuable data to inform policy and professional development programs. This approach could also help identify key leadership characteristics and practices that contribute to closing equity gaps at a larger scale.

Lastly, while Roueche et al. (1989) transformational leadership was a key framework in this study, Shields' (2018; 2010) transformative leadership theory was also integrated. This study specifically examines the lived experiences of transformational leadership in community colleges, exploring how their personal narratives and socio-cultural contexts shaped their leadership practices, while navigating complex, equity-driven environments that require ongoing adaptability and resilience. By emphasizing transformational leadership and including transformative leadership, this study moves beyond the traditional understanding of leadership to emphasize the necessity for leaders to flex their approaches in response to systemic inequities, providing a more comprehensive perspective on how leaders in community colleges advance equity initiatives and foster inclusive change within their institutions.

The recommendations and implications presented in this study suggest a need for further research into the intersection of leadership, equity, and institutional change in community colleges. Future research in the areas outlined will contribute a deeper understanding of effective leadership in advancing equity and offer valuable insights that can inform leadership development, policy-making, and strategic planning in community colleges. By exploring these avenues, researchers can provide a more nuanced and comprehensive framework for understanding how community college presidents – especially women and those from

underrepresented groups – can lead with impact and drive meaningful change in the pursuit of educational equity.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the leadership experiences of award-winning women community college presidents recognized for their efforts to achieve equitable education outcomes. Through a narrative inquiry design grounded in transformational and transformative leadership theory, the research sought to uncover the leadership practices, challenges, and successes of these women as they navigated complex institutional dynamics to close equity gaps. By centering the voices of these leaders, this study provides rich insights into how they approach leadership in the face of societal and institutional pressures, including the increasingly polarized climate and growing opposition to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The key findings of this study reflect the significant impact that these women presidents have had in promoting equity within their institutions. Firstly, the participants demonstrated a deep commitment to inclusive leadership, often leveraging their personal experiences and transformational leadership qualities to influence institutional practices that prioritize underrepresented student success. Secondly, these leaders reported navigating a range of challenges, including resource constraints, political pressures, and the complexity of balancing innovation with tradition. Despite these obstacles, they successfully implemented data-driven, collaborative strategies that advanced equity-focused initiatives across their campuses. Their leadership was marked by an ability to inspire and motivate diverse stakeholders, build partnerships, and foster a culture of belonging and inclusion.

The research has important implications for both the field of higher education leadership and the broader landscape of community college administration. It emphasizes the critical role of

women leaders in shaping inclusive educational environments that close equity gaps, especially within the context of community colleges, which serve a diverse, often underrepresented student population. The study highlights the importance of leadership development programs that emphasize qualities such as empathy, collaboration, innovation, adaptability, and resilience. Furthermore, it reinforces the need for sustained commitment to equity and inclusion, even in the face of external challenges that threaten progress made in these areas. The experiences of these women presidents can serve as models for aspiring leaders, demonstrating that effective leadership is not only about institutional management but also about guiding institutions toward social justice and greater opportunity for all students.

Future research should expand upon this study by exploring the experiences of women presidents in different geographic regions and institutional contexts, such as rural versus urban community colleges, or by focusing on the intersectionality of gender, race, and leadership. Additionally, further exploration is needed to understand how leaders apply flex leadership, adjusting their approaches based on evolving institutional challenges and contexts, to sustain equity-focused efforts. Research that investigates how these adaptive strategies influence long-term institutional outcomes, particularly student success metrics, would provide valuable insights into the durability and impact of equity initiatives.

In conclusion, this dissertation contributes to the growing body of literature on leadership in higher education by offering a nuanced exploration of how award-winning women community college presidents navigate the complexities of their roles. Their stories of perseverance, leadership, and commitment to equity serve as a powerful reminder of the transformative potential of women in higher education leadership and the importance of continuing to invest in their development as champions of equity and inclusion.

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Appendix A - Informed Consent Form

PROJECT TITLE: The experiences of women community college presidents achieving equitable outcomes for underrepresented students

PROJECT APPROVAL DATE/ EXPIRATION DATE: *provided in the approval letter, must be in place before distributing to subjects.*

LENGTH OF STUDY: 12 weeks

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR/CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Susan Yelich Biniecki

CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS: susanyb@ksu.edu

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION: *For the subject should he/she have questions or wish to discuss on any aspect of the research with an official of the university or the IRB. These are:* 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.

PROJECT SPONSOR: Funding/contract entity.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH: The purpose of this narrative inquiry is to explore the experiences of award-winning women community college presidents who have been recognized by the Achieving the Dream (ATD) organization, a national entity committed to increasing the success of community college students, for their efforts in achieving or improving equitable outcomes for underrepresented students. By conducting in-depth interviews and analyzing relevant institutional documents, this study aims to illuminate the leadership practices, strategies, and challenges faced by these presidents as they strive to foster equity within their institutions. Through the lens of transformational leadership theory, this research seeks to provide insight into how women leaders navigate complex organizational dynamics, implement change initiatives, and define success in their roles. The study's significance lies in its potential to contribute to the broader understanding of effective leadership in higher education, particularly, in addressing systemic inequities and creating inclusive environments within community colleges. By highlighting the unique perspectives and approaches of women leaders, this research aims to inform future leadership development and policy-making, offering actionable insights that can enhance equity-focused practices across the higher education landscape.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED: You will be asked to participate in (2) interviews via Zoom, and to provide data from your college (e.g., strategic plans, equity initiative reports, public statements related to recognized efforts to close equity gaps). Zoom recordings and audio, transcripts, interview notes, and student data will be collected. This information will be stored in a password protected computer, in a locked office. Only the

research team will have access to this data. Electronic data will be destroyed by deleting the information and working with IT to use a data destruction service or help dispose of it securely. Your participation is strictly voluntary.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED: There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this study. At any point you can exit the study if you feel uncomfortable, without penalty.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED: To advance the field of research on change, leadership, and equity in higher education.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY: I will maintain your confidentiality by keeping data collected in a locked office and password-protected computer and by using a pseudonym for you. Only the research team will have access to this data. Electronic data will be destroyed after 3 years by deleting the information and working with IT to use a data destruction service or help dispose of it securely. I will protect your identity in written reports by not collecting or including any personal identifiers that might link responses to you. Personal identifiers might be removed from the identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens and that, after such removal, the information or biospecimens could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent.

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/SIGNATURE:

WITNESS TO SIGNATURE (PROJECT STAFF):

Appendix B - Interview Guide

Name: _____ Location: _____ Time/Date: _____

Note: Below are the interview processes and questions intended for two rounds of interviews with participants throughout this study. Also listed are the anticipated interview questions for rounds 1 and 2 of the interview process. Due to the nature of qualitative research, interviews in round 2 will be adapted based on responses offered in the first round of interviews allowing new and unforeseen topics to be explored in the research process. What is listed below, are the anticipated questions and intended lines of inquiry established at the beginning of the research process.

Questions and Interview Process:

Round 1

Part 1: Introductions

1. Confirmation of Informed Consent signature, and receipt of the project summary handout allowing for questions and clarifications.
2. Remind participants of steps taken to ensure confidentiality, and their participation is voluntary, allowing them to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Part 2: Questions

1. What inspired you to take on a leadership role at a community college?
2. When you first became president, what were some of the biggest challenges you faced? How did you handle them?
3. How have your personal experiences influenced your leadership style, especially when it comes to promoting equity at your college?
4. Can you tell me about a project you led to help underrepresented students succeed? How did you make it happen?
5. How do you get faculty, staff, and others involved in your efforts to boost equity and inclusion at the college?
6. What strategies have worked best for you in closing equity gaps at your school, and how do you know they're working?
7. Looking back on your time as a leader, what do you see as your biggest success in promoting equity?
8. What are your goals moving forward?

Round 2

Part 1: Introductions

1. Reminder of informed consent signed in the first interview.
2. Remind participants steps taken to ensure confidentiality, and their participation is voluntary, allowing them to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Part 2: Questions

- 1) Can you share a time when feedback or results made you change your approach to promoting equity?
 - a) What did you do differently, and how did it turn out?
- 2) How have your interactions with faculty, staff, and students shaped your strategies for equity?
 - a) How do you use their feedback in your decisions?

- 3) Can you tell me about a challenge you faced in promoting equity that made you rethink your leadership style?
 - a) How did you handle it?
 - b) What did you learn?
- 4) In your last interview you said XXXX, Could you tell me more about...
- 5) Here are some of the primary things I'm hearing from you.....XXXXXX.....is this accurate?

Part 3: Debriefing statement to be read aloud at the conclusion of the interviews

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed and be part of this study. As the project moves forward, I may periodically be contacting you regarding questions or clarifications related to some of the information you shared with me throughout this project. Overall, I am hoping to represent your words as accurately as possible. I also intend to keep your contributions anonymous and use a pseudonym to protect your identity in any publications that come from this research. Please know that you may withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty, and you are welcome to contact myself or the individuals listed on your consent form at any time if you have questions or concerns. Thank you for your contributions to this research.

Appendix C - Recruitment Email

Hi [Participant Name],

My name is Elizabeth Ross. I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at Kansas State University.

I am reaching out to request your participation in a research study related to Achieving the Dream, Inc. (ATD) recognizing your institution as a Leader College of Distinction, and your work in leading equity initiatives for underrepresented students. The research project explores the experiences of women community college presidents achieving equitable education outcomes for underrepresented students.

I have attached a consent form for you to sign that explains the details of the project. I am requesting that you provide institutional data that you feel may be relevant (e.g., strategic plans, equity initiative reports, public statements related to recognized efforts to close equity gaps, etc.), and to interview you about your experience as a community college president leading this work.

Are you willing to participate in two (2) interviews?

If yes, please respond to this email as soon as possible and I will follow up with you to schedule the recorded interviews via Zoom with you within the next few weeks.

Interviews will take about 1.5 hours each. The questions will ask you about your leadership journey, **strategies for implementing change, and, challenges and successes.**

If not, I understand! Your participation is completely voluntary and I thank you for taking the time to consider this request. Don't hesitate to reach out with any questions.

Respectfully,
Elizabeth Ross
Adult Learning and Leadership
Doctoral Student
Kansas State University