

Exploring the journeys of Hispanic and Latinx women leaders in community colleges: A focus
on the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity in leadership

by

Vasiliki Arca

B.S., Tarleton State University, 2020

M.S., Tarleton State University, 2022

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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John E. Roueche Center for Community College Leadership
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2026

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Approved by:

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This qualitative narrative inquiry study explored the lived experiences of Latinx women who held executive positions in community colleges, with particular attention to identity, barriers, and sources of support. Existing research revealed an underrepresentation of Latinx women in executive leadership across community colleges, despite serving increasingly diverse student populations. This disparity highlights a need to understand experiences and contextual factors that influence professional journeys of Latinx women leaders. The study applied intersectionality and leadership identity development theories as its guiding framework to examine how gender and ethnicity intersected to shape the career progression of Latinx women in higher education. An illustrative sample of Latinx women in executive roles across community colleges in various regions of the United States participated in the study. Participants shared their lived experiences through semistructured interviews, offering insights into their pathways to leadership, challenges they faced, and internal and external factors that supported or hindered their advancement. This study contributes to the literature by illuminating how the intersecting identities of gender and ethnicity shape the leadership journeys of Latinx women in community college executive roles, and offers implications for research, leadership development, and institutional policies aimed at advancing equitable and representative leadership in higher education.

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Dedication

To my daughters—you are my greatest purpose and inspiration. This work is for you. May you grow up knowing that your voices matter, your identities are powerful, and that there are no limits to the spaces you can lead and transform. I hope this journey shows you that you belong in every room you choose to enter.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Leadership in higher education has become increasingly diverse, yet women, particularly those from minority ethnic backgrounds, are underrepresented in senior leadership roles. Despite increased attention to the importance of diversity in leadership, women of color and foreign-born women often encounter challenges in accessing opportunities for advancement into executive roles. Research has suggested structural factors, stereotypes, and unconscious biases shape their lived experiences in leadership positions; for example, Bhopal (2020a) explained women from underrepresented groups frequently navigate professional environments where both racial and gender dynamics influence their experiences. Similarly, the American Council on Education (ACE, 2022) reported only 6% of higher education presidents identify as women of color, highlighting disparities in representation. In alignment with inclusive language practices, Latinx was used throughout this dissertation as a gender-inclusive term encompassing individuals of Latin American and Hispanic descent. Although “Hispanic” may appear in cited sources, Latinx is applied consistently to reflect evolving scholarly discourse (de Onís, 2017; Salinas & Lozano, 2019). This study explored the lived experiences of women leaders in higher education, focusing on how the intersection of gender and ethnicity shaped their leadership roles and professional realities.

Statement of the Problem

According to the most recent report by ACE (2022), women remain underrepresented in leadership positions in higher education. According to ACE, 32% of college presidents were women in 2022, reflecting a slight increase from previous years. However, women of color represent 6% of these leadership roles, underscoring a persistent gap (ACE, 2022).

According to Bhopal (2020a), women from diverse ethnic backgrounds often face challenges such as implicit bias, stereotyping, and restricted access to leadership networks. Leadership structures in higher education continue to be male-dominated, creating environments where women from diverse ethnicities may find it challenging to advance (Osei-Kofi et al., 2021d). According to Morley (2018), addressing the intersection of gender and ethnicity is essential to ensure that leadership opportunities are equitable and accessible to all qualified candidates.

Background of the Problem

In the late 20th century, as more women entered higher education, their presence in academic roles increased significantly. By the 1990s, women constituted a substantial portion of the faculty; however, their representation in leadership roles remained notably lower. Pew Research Center (2015) indicated women held 19% of college presidencies, illustrating a significant gap in leadership. Efforts to promote gender balance in higher education leadership gained momentum in the early 2000s. By 2017, women held 30% of leadership roles in higher education, reflecting progress in gender representation (ACE, 2017). However, these gains were not equally distributed across racial and ethnic groups. By 2022, women held 32% of college president positions, reflecting a modest but continued improvement (ACE, 2022). However, ethnic minority women remained disproportionately underrepresented, with underrepresentation across various ethnic groups, including Latina, Asian American, Native American, and other women from diverse racial backgrounds (ACE, 2022). Despite the growing Hispanic and Latinx student population, Latina women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership roles. For example, according to the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (2021), Latina women comprised less than 3% of college and university presidents, even though Latinas have

been a fast-growing demographic in faculty and administrative roles. According to Gándara (2019), Latina leaders often face a combination of gender and cultural biases and an expectation to conform to leadership models may not align with their cultural values and experiences.

Asian American women in academia are often stereotyped as passive or submissive, hindering their advancement into leadership roles (Lee & Kumashiro, 2020). Furthermore, Asian American women face the “model minority” stereotype, which can create additional pressure to conform to rigid expectations of success and render their unique challenges invisible (Museus & Kiang, 2009). The model minority stereotype refers to the perception that Asian Americans are uniformly successful, highly educated, and hardworking, and this stereotype is often used to contrast them with other minority groups. Although this stereotype may appear positive on the surface, it can be harmful as it dismisses the diversity of experiences in Asian communities, ignores systemic barriers, and places unrealistic expectations on individuals (Lee & Kumashiro, 2020; Ngo, 2018b). As a result, many Asian American women are often overlooked for leadership roles or pigeonholed into support or midlevel administrative positions rather than considered for top leadership roles such as presidencies (Ngo, 2008).

Native American women often lack mentorship and professional development opportunities, hindering their progression into senior leadership roles (Brayboy, Castagno, & Maughan, 2012). Research has indicated mentorship plays a crucial role in leadership development by providing guidance, advocacy, and networking opportunities that facilitate career progression (G. Brown, 2005). However, Native American women often encounter structural barriers that limit access to both formal and informal mentorship networks, placing them at a disadvantage in leadership pipelines (Fox, 2021). The underrepresentation of Native American women in executive positions further exacerbates this challenge, as there are fewer

role models and mentors in their professional and cultural communities (Shotton et al., 2013). Additionally, professional development opportunities tailored to address unique challenges faced by Native American women in higher education leadership remain scarce, creating additional obstacles to career advancement (Minthorn & Chavez, 2015). Systemic factors (e.g., historical exclusion, institutional biases, socioeconomic disparities) also contribute to the limited representation of Native American women in senior leadership roles (Lopez, 2018). Addressing these disparities requires intentional efforts from institutions, including the implementation of culturally responsive mentorship programs, targeted leadership training, and policies designed to create equitable career pathways (Osei-Kofi et al., 2021a).

Although women's representation in leadership has improved over time, women of color remain disproportionately affected by barriers such as implicit bias, limited access to professional networks, and a lack of mentorship and sponsorship opportunities (S. R. Johnson, 2021). Ethnic minority women often experience the "double bind" of facing both racial and gender biases, which can influence how their leadership abilities are perceived and evaluated (Turner et al., 2019a).

Furthermore, concepts of the "glass ceiling" and the "concrete ceiling" are relevant in this context (Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). Although women generally encounter the glass ceiling, women of color often face an even more impenetrable concrete ceiling due to the compounded effects of racial and gender discrimination (Collins, 2018). This additional layer of difficulty has contributed to the significant underrepresentation of ethnic women in university leadership positions.

In addition to these barriers, studies have suggested that ethnic minority women are often not considered equally for promotions into leadership roles (S. C. Airini et al., 2019; Bhopal,

2020a). They may face skepticism about their abilities and qualifications, leading to a lack of trust and respect in institutional structures (Jones, 2020). ACE (2022) highlighted persistent challenges that women of color face in higher education leadership, noting despite efforts to promote diversity, they have remained significantly underrepresented in senior leadership roles.

The implications of this underrepresentation extend beyond individual professional journeys. Research has suggested leadership diversity is crucial for fostering inclusive policies and practices that support all members of an academic community (Thomas & Hollenshead, 2017). The absence of ethnic women in presidential roles may limit the range of perspectives brought to institutional decision making and reduce the effectiveness of diversity initiatives aimed at serving increasingly diverse student bodies (Garcia, 2021).

As the demographics of community colleges shift to include more students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, it becomes increasingly important for leadership structures to reflect this diversity. Ensuring ethnic minority women have access to leadership opportunities is essential for fostering fairness and diversity in leadership. Institutional factors such as organizational culture, networking opportunities, and mentorship programs significantly influence women's career advancement in community colleges (Eddy & Ward, 2015). Arini et al. (2020) indicated many women experience challenges in balancing professional and personal responsibilities, often compounded by the expectations and norms of academic leadership. These challenges are further nuanced by the intersection of gender with other identity factors, such as ethnicity. Women from diverse ethnic backgrounds may face additional difficulties in accessing leadership opportunities and support systems due to cultural misalignments with established leadership models, which are predominantly rooted in Western ideals (Osei-Kofi et al., 2021b).

Although studies have explored barriers to leadership advancement for women in higher education, a gap remains in understanding how the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity uniquely impacts the experiences of women leaders in community colleges. Limited research exists on specific challenges faced by foreign-born women in these roles, particularly in navigating institutional structures and cultural expectations. This study addressed this gap by examining the lived experiences of women in executive leadership roles in community colleges, focusing on the influence of intersecting identities on their professional journeys.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Hispanic and Latinx women in executive positions in community colleges, with a particular emphasis on how the intersection of gender and ethnicity shaped their professional journeys.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

- How do Latinx Women who have moved into leadership roles in a community college describe their lived experiences as they progressed?
- How do Latinx women describe the influence of their gender and ethnicity on their leadership experience and achievement?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Intersectionality theory, developed by Crenshaw (1989), served as a theoretical component of the framework for this study. Crenshaw (1989) explained, “The intersection of race and gender” (p. 140) creates a unique lived experience that cannot be understood by examining these identities separately. The theory emphasizes that social identities (e.g., gender, ethnicity) are interconnected and influence individuals’ experiences in social structures

(Crenshaw, 1991). This perspective allows for a detailed analysis of how these identities interact to shape the professional journeys of women leaders.

Crenshaw (1991) further argued “the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (p. 1245) is essential for understanding the barriers faced by marginalized groups. By applying intersectionality theory, this study explored how women leaders navigated overlapping identities in community colleges and analyzed their challenges and strategies. This approach provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities and nuances in the experiences of women from diverse backgrounds as they progressed in their careers.

The leadership identity development (LID) theory, developed by Komives et al. (2005), served as the conceptual framework for this study. The theory outlines how individuals develop their leadership identities, emphasizing this development is a dynamic and evolving process influenced by social interactions and self-awareness. According to Komives et al. (2005), leadership identity progresses from an initial “awareness” of leadership to integrating leadership as a core part of one’s self-concept, influenced by experiences, relationships, and social contexts.

This framework was particularly relevant for examining how women form their professional identities, make decisions, and develop their leadership styles over time, especially when considering the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity. The application of LID theory allowed for exploring how multiple identities interact with and influence leadership development, aligning with the study’s focus on women’s lived experiences in leadership roles (Komives, Longerbeam, et al., 2006).

Methodology

Qualitative narrative inquiry served as the methodology for this study, which explored the lived experiences of women in executive positions in community colleges. Narrative inquiry was particularly well-suited for this research because it focuses on understanding and interpreting stories individuals tell about their lives and experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). By using this approach, the study aimed to uncover the ways intersectionality of gender and ethnicity shaped the professional journeys of women leaders.

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry enables researchers to examine how individuals “make meaning of their experiences through the stories they live and tell” (p. 20). This method aligned with the study’s goal of capturing the complexities of women’s leadership experiences by focusing on the unique narratives that reflected the interplay of social identities and professional contexts. It provided a framework for exploring how gender and ethnicity intersected to influence participants’ understanding of their leadership roles and their interactions in institutional systems.

Riessman (2008) highlighted narrative inquiry allows for the exploration of “not just what happened, but how participants interpret and give meaning to their experiences” (p. 11). Through semistructured interviews, this study gathered rich, detailed narratives directly from participants, enabling them to share their stories in their own voices. This approach ensured the depth and nuance of their experiences were captured, allowing for a comprehensive examination of how intersecting identities influenced their leadership paths.

Clandinin (2013) emphasized narrative inquiry also considers the relational, temporal, and contextual dimensions of experiences, making it particularly valuable for understanding how leadership is shaped by personal and institutional histories and broader social contexts. By

engaging with participants' narratives, the study revealed how these women navigated intersectional challenges they encountered and how they constructed their leadership identities over time. This narrative inquiry approach allowed for the generation of findings that authentically represented participants' lived experiences, contributing to a deeper understanding of the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity in community college leadership.

Alignment Table

A constructed alignment table (see Appendix A) provides an overview of how the study's elements align. The alignment table includes problems based on the literature findings, research questions, the theoretical and conceptual framework, methodology, and interview questions.

Delimitations and Assumptions

The study focused on women leaders in community colleges who held executive positions, which necessitated expanding the geographical reach and diversity of institutions to identify eligible participants. This approach assumed these women would consent to participate and share their experiences, a critical component for achieving the study's objectives. To ensure a broad and inclusive representation of perspectives, efforts were made to recruit participants through professional networks and leadership organizations. This study operated under the assumption that participants provided honest and authentic responses during interviews, an assumption that was fundamental to qualitative inquiry and essential for generating credible representations of participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Significance of the Study

This study on Latinx women leaders aimed to provide insights into how participants navigated their roles and challenges, offering practical implications for institutions to consider when developing policies and practices that support leadership development and career growth

for women in community colleges. The study may ultimately provide insights into barriers and the resilience involved in the leadership development process, highlighting the complex ways intersecting identities influence professional growth and adaptation in higher education (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Komives et al., 2005; Komives, Longerbeam, et al., 2006). Its aim was to deepen existing literature on leadership dynamics and the unique challenges women face in leadership roles.

Definitions of Terms

This section defines key terms used throughout the study to promote clarity and consistency in how concepts are understood and applied within the research. Definitions reflect their use in the literature and relevance to the context of community college leadership.

Authenticity

Gardner et al. (2005) explained, “Authenticity refers to the degree to which individuals understand and express their true selves in their leadership roles, remaining congruent with their values, identities, and lived experiences rather than conforming to externally imposed norms” (p. 344).

Emotional Labor

Hochschild (1983) reported, “Emotional labor refers to the effort required to manage emotions, self-presentation, and interpersonal interactions in order to meet organizational expectations and maintain professional credibility, particularly within roles shaped by power and social norms” (p. 7).

Ethnicity

Cornell and Hartman (1998) shared, “Ethnicity refers to shared social, cultural, and historical experiences among a group, often connected by common ancestry or geographic origin, which foster a sense of identity and belonging” (p. 19).

Executive Positions

For the purposes of this study, executive positions are defined as chancellors, presidents, or provosts within community colleges.

Glass Ceiling

A glass ceiling is an invisible barrier that prevents women or minorities from rising in an organizational hierarchy (Bynum, 2000).

Implicit Bias

Implicit bias refers to unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that influence actions and decisions without awareness. These biases can unintentionally affect behaviors and perpetuate inequities (Staats et al., 2017).

Institutional Culture

Institutional culture refers to the shared norms, values, and assumptions that influence how leadership, behavior, and legitimacy are understood and enacted within an organization (Schein, 2010; Tierney, 1988).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is the concept of various social identities (e.g., gender, race, class) overlapping to create unique experiences of discrimination or privilege. Intersectionality emphasizes how individuals face compounded challenges based on the interplay of these identities in systems of power and oppression (Crenshaw, 1989).

Latinx

Latinx women are individuals who identify as women and belong to the Latin American diaspora, encompassing diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. This term acknowledges the gender inclusive and nonbinary perspectives in the Latinx community and recognizes the unique sociopolitical and historical experiences that shape identities of women from this group (Salinas & Lozano, 2019).

Race

Race is a social construct that reflects perceived differences in physical traits deemed socially significant, leading to differential treatment among groups (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998).

Underrepresented Groups

Underrepresented groups refer to populations with disproportionately low representation in a specific field or context, often due to structural barriers or historical inequities. In higher education, this includes women, racial and ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups (ACE, 2020).

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the problem, background information, purpose of the study, and research questions. The chapter presented the theoretical and conceptual framework, an alignment table, and the methodology. It outlined the delimitations and assumptions, the study's significance, and essential terms.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 introduced the background of the problem and provided an overview of the study. Chapter 2 presents a literature review that examines the research problem and highlights gaps in the existing research. Chapter 3 details the research methodology, including the study's

approach, research questions, and target population. Chapter 4 analyzes the collected data and presents the study's findings. Finally, Chapter 5 interprets the findings, explores their implications, and provides recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This chapter explores the theoretical and conceptual framework of intersectionality theory and leadership identity development (LID) theory, providing a lens to examine how gender and ethnicity shape leadership experiences in community colleges. Organized thematically, it addresses key barriers to leadership, including structural biases, exclusion from networks, and societal expectations, alongside psychological challenges such as imposter syndrome and code-switching. The chapter also discusses systemic phenomena (e.g., glass ceiling, glass cliff, cement ceiling) to illustrate unique challenges Hispanic and Latinx women face in executive and senior leadership roles. Finally, it identifies gaps in the literature and concludes with a summary of key findings. It will conclude by identifying gaps in the literature and providing a conclusion.

Research Sources

The literature for this study was sourced from credible academic platforms to ensure a comprehensive and well-rounded review. Primary sources included the Kansas State University Library, interlibrary loan services, and online databases such as ProQuest and ERIC, which provided access to peer-reviewed journals, books, and scholarly articles on leadership, gender, and higher education. Google Scholar was also used for additional scholarly articles and conference papers.

Carefully selected keywords such as “women leaders,” “leadership roles,” “higher education and women leaders,” “community colleges,” “women presidents,” and “men in leadership roles” guided the identification of relevant studies. These strategies ensured the study built a strong foundation for examining women’s leadership experiences in community colleges through an intersectional framework.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Intersectionality theory, introduced by Crenshaw (1989), provided a framework for understanding how overlapping social identities (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, class) create unique experiences of privilege and oppression. Developed initially to critique the limitations of single-axis approaches in addressing the compounded challenges Black women face in legal contexts, intersectionality theory argues these identities interact to produce distinct forms of marginalization. Crenshaw (1989) contended, “The intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (p. 140), emphasizing the need to move beyond isolated analyses of identity. Over time, the theory has been adopted across disciplines, including sociology, education, and leadership studies, to explore systemic inequalities and institutional dynamics (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

Compared to other theories, intersectionality theory offers a multidimensional lens for examining social inequalities. For example, social role theory (Eagly, 1987) focuses on the societal expectations associated with gender roles but does not address the intersection of other social identities, such as race or ethnicity. Similarly, critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) centers on the role of race in perpetuating social inequities but does not inherently integrate gender or other identity categories. Intersectionality theory bridges these gaps by recognizing the interconnectedness of social identities and the systems of power that influence them.

In leadership studies, intersectionality theory also complements the application of transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978), which examines leadership styles but lacks consideration of how a leader’s intersecting identities shape their experiences. By integrating intersectionality theory, researchers can explore how gender, ethnicity, and other identities

influence not only the challenges faced by leaders but also their leadership styles and contributions to their organizations.

Intersectionality theory has been widely applied to examine the experiences of marginalized groups, particularly in higher education leadership. S. C. Airini et al. (2020) used this framework to explore how systemic factors influence women's leadership development in education, noting that intersecting identities can present unique challenges in accessing professional growth opportunities. S.C. Airini et al. highlighted the presence of structural barriers in leadership pathways and indicated the need for further research on how these factors shape the experiences of Hispanic and Latinx women in community college leadership.

Similarly, Osei-Kofi et al. (2021d) applied intersectionality theory to examine the career trajectories of Hispanic and Latinx women in higher education leadership. Osei-Kofi et al. identified structural biases and cultural expectations as influential factors in career progression, suggesting intersecting identities can shape leadership experiences. These findings indicated that Hispanic and Latinx women in leadership may navigate similar professional landscapes, where both institutional and cultural factors contribute to their leadership experiences.

In addition, Osei-Kofi et al. (2021d) applied the concept of the concrete ceiling to describe how women of color encounter compounded barriers in leadership roles, a phenomenon directly linked to intersectional dynamics. Such research underscored the value of intersectionality theory in capturing the nuanced realities of leadership in diverse contexts, particularly in fields like higher education, where traditional leadership models often align with dominant cultural norms.

LID theory, introduced by Komives et al. (2005) and Komives, Longerbeam et al. (2006), provided a framework for understanding how individuals develop a leadership identity over time.

Rooted in grounded theory methodology, LID theory identifies leadership development as an iterative, relational, and contextual process. According to Komives, Longerbeam et al. (2006), leadership identity evolves across six stages: (a) awareness, (b) exploration or engagement, (c) leader identified, (d) leadership differentiated, (e) generativity, and (f) integration or synthesis. This progression reflects shifts in how individuals view leadership, from positional authority to a relational and collaborative process.

LID theory offers a developmental perspective on leadership that distinguishes it from other leadership models. For instance, trait theory (Stogdill, 1948) focuses on inherent qualities and characteristics that define leaders, whereas LID theory emphasizes that leadership is learned and shaped through experiences, relationships, and social contexts. Similarly, transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978) explores how leaders inspire and motivate followers but does not address how individuals come to identify as leaders in the first place. In contrast, LID theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding leadership identity formation, integrating personal, relational, and contextual factors.

LID theory has been widely applied in higher education research to explore how students and professionals develop leadership capacities. For example, Komives et al. (2005) used the theory to examine undergraduate students' leadership experiences, revealing the critical role of mentorship, involvement in organizations, and meaningful relationships in shaping leadership identity. Komives et al. emphasized leadership is not a fixed trait but a dynamic process influenced by interactions and experiences over time.

Guthrie et al. (2020) used LID theory to investigate how leadership identity developed among women in higher education. The research highlighted the importance of relational dynamics, such as mentorship and peer networks, in fostering leadership growth. Similarly,

Priest and Clegorne (2021) applied the framework to analyze how professional development opportunities impacted leadership identity among academic professionals, demonstrating the importance of intentional support structures in leadership development. These studies aligned with previous research on LID theory that suggested leadership identity is not a fixed trait but rather an evolving process shaped by experiences, social interactions, and institutional environments (Komives et al., 2005; Komives, Longerbeam et al., 2006).

The LID model emphasizes that leadership identity develops through various stages, where individuals move from recognizing leadership as external (positional leadership) to internalizing leadership as a relational and collaborative process (Komives, Longerbeam et al., 2006). This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of higher education, where mentorship, institutional culture, and exposure to leadership opportunities significantly influence leadership trajectories (Rosch & Collins, 2017). Kezar and Lester (2010) found women in leadership, particularly those in academic settings, benefit from structured mentorship programs and leadership development initiatives that reinforce leadership identity over time.

Furthermore, applying LID theory to this study was particularly fitting because it provided a framework for understanding the leadership journeys of Hispanic and Latinx women in community colleges. Given both personal experiences and systemic factors shape leadership development, LID theory allowed a nuanced exploration of how these leaders navigated institutional barriers, mentorship opportunities, and professional networks. Research has indicated historically marginalized groups often experience unique challenges in leadership development such as limited access to informal networks and systemic biases that affect career advancement (Osei-Kofi et al., 2021d; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). By using LID theory, this study

examined how Hispanic and Latinx women developed and sustained their leadership identity in the face of such challenges and the role of supportive structures in facilitating their growth.

Integrating LID theory into this study also contributed to broader discussions on leadership development in higher education. As institutions increasingly prioritize diversity and inclusion, understanding how leadership identity evolves in underrepresented groups can inform policies and programs that foster equitable leadership pathways. Prior research has emphasized the importance of institutional commitment to leadership development, particularly for women of color, through targeted initiatives such as leadership training, mentorship, and sponsorship programs (Airini et al., 2020; Rosch & Collins, 2017). Situating this study in the LID framework aligned it with ongoing efforts to understand and support diverse leadership development in academia.

Barriers to Leadership

The Cement Ceiling Versus the Glass Ceiling

The glass ceiling represents an invisible but breakable barrier that prevents women from reaching top leadership positions due to gender bias and exclusion from leadership networks (Bruckmüller et al., 2014; Hewlett & Rashid, 2010). Although some women break through with institutional support, the cement ceiling is more rigid and deeply entrenched, disproportionately affecting women of color, including Latinx women (Beckwith et al., 2016). The cement ceiling is reinforced by systemic exclusion, limited mentorship, and racialized leadership biases (Faniko et al., 2022; Osei-Kofi et al., 2021f).

Latinx women in community college leadership often face the cement ceiling, as institutional hiring trends favor white candidates, and traditional mentorship structures do not address their unique barriers (S. C. Airini et al., 2019; Bhopal, 2020a). Breaking this ceiling

requires structural reforms, including intersectional mentorship, sponsorship, and leadership pipelines tailored to Latinx women's experiences (Osei-Kofi et al., 2021a).

Despite progress in addressing gender disparities, women continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles in higher education institutions worldwide (Morley, 2013). This underrepresentation is particularly pronounced for women from minority ethnic backgrounds, who encounter compounded barriers in accessing high-level positions such as deans, provosts, and presidents (American Council on Education [ACE], 2017, 2020, 2022). Structural biases in higher education institutions can create challenges to career advancement for Hispanic and Latinx women, often making traditional leadership pathways less accessible. Bhopal (2020b) explained, "Structural inequalities in institutions of higher education operate to exclude women of color, both subtly and overtly, from positions of power" (p. 125), illustrating how institutional practices may limit opportunities for advancement.

Women of color in community college leadership continue to face systemic barriers that limit their advancement into executive roles. Hines (2021) examined the underrepresentation of minority leaders in community college presidencies and revealed institutional cultures often perpetuate exclusionary practices. In the study, participants shared experiences of bias in hiring processes, such as being questioned about their family responsibilities, an inquiry not typically directed at male candidates (Hines, 2021). One participant noted, "They asked how I would manage the role with children at home. No man in the same process was asked the same" (Hines, 2021, p. 87). These microlevel interactions reflected deeper structural inequalities that shaped access to leadership roles for women of color (Bhopal, 2020a).

Hines (2022) further found leaders of color were often subject to disproportionate scrutiny, especially in political dynamics involving governing boards or local communities.

Hines (2022) reported one male college president shared people of color must be “two to three times pristine or perfect” (p. 59) to counter institutional bias. This sentiment aligned with Bhopal’s (2020b) assertion that higher education institutions often exclude women of color from positions of power through both overt and subtle structural inequalities.

Hines’s (2022) research underscored challenges faced by women of color broadly and highlighted the role of mentorship and institutional support in addressing these inequities. However, women of color often struggle to find mentors who share their lived experiences. Hines (2022) explained, “Mentorship programs rarely reflect the unique social realities faced by Latinx women, often limiting their effectiveness” (p. 64). This finding aligned with Faniko et al. (2022), who argued exclusion from informal power networks continues to hinder the leadership progression of women of color.

Willis served as a community college president and contributed a lived perspective on these dynamics. Willis (2022) shared how race, gender, and age intersected in her leadership journey, noting, “Proving myself wasn’t a one-time effort; it became a daily, emotional labor in spaces that weren’t built for leaders who look like me” (p. 20). Willis’s emphasis on equity-minded and authentic leadership styles contributed to a broader understanding of how leaders born between 1970 and 1995 were challenging traditional models of authority in higher education.

Elenes, a Chicana feminist scholar, provided a cultural epistemology that supported this inquiry. Elenes (2000) introduced *testimonios* as a research method rooted in narrative resistance and cultural truth-telling. In later work, Elenes explained, “Testimonios allow us to write ourselves into history and challenge the structures that silence our voices” (p. 70). This approach

complemented the narrative inquiry methodology of this study and validated the lived experiences of Latinx women in executive positions.

Cohen et al. (2014) offered structural insight into how community colleges function and systemic conditions shape leadership opportunities. Cohen et al. (2014) emphasized, “Although community colleges serve increasingly diverse populations, executive leadership has not kept pace with this demographic transformation” (p. 315). This statement highlighted a persistent disconnect between institutional leadership and student representation. Kisker (2021) advocated for inclusive, innovative leadership that centers community needs and promotes equity. Kisker (2021) stated, “The future of community college leadership depends on its ability to reflect, understand, and respond to the diversity of its community” (p. 134).

Together, scholarship from Hines (2022), Willis (2022), and Elenes (2000) formed a comprehensive foundation for understanding systemic, cultural, and organizational barriers that Latinx women face in their leadership trajectories. Although each scholar contributed a different perspective, whether focused on racial equity, feminist resistance, institutional design, or lived experience, their collective insights emphasized the need for culturally responsive, equity-driven leadership pipelines in higher education.

Despite growing attention to leadership diversity, a significant gap remains in literature specifically addressing Latinx women in executive roles in community colleges. Although Hines (2022) offered a broad lens on women of color in leadership, the studies did not isolate the unique experiences of Latinx women as they navigated generational, racial, and institutional transitions. Similarly, although Kisker (2021) and Willis (2022) provided valuable critiques of leadership culture and identity, their work did not focus on intersectional experiences of Latinx

women. Elenes (2018) added a cultural lens to narrative methodology, but there is a clear need for empirical studies that center Latinx women's voices in leadership scholarship.

This study addressed this gap by exploring how Latinx women in community college executive roles described their leadership progression and how their intersecting identities shaped their experiences. Additionally, it examined how generational leadership styles, mentorship opportunities, and institutional policies influenced their ability to thrive in their roles. By doing so, this study may contribute to the development of more inclusive, equity-based leadership development programs tailored to the needs of Latinx women in higher education.

Research has indicated the perceived credibility and acceptance of Latinx women in leadership roles may be hindered by institutionalized bias, affecting their ability to access mentorship, sponsorship, and other critical resources for career development (Brayboy, Castagno, & Maughan (2012); Turner, 2007). Smith and Davidson (2019) noted leadership in higher education often reflects the demographic makeup and cultural expectations that have historically favored white men. This alignment provided white male leaders with pathways to leadership that often included informal networks and mentorship opportunities, thereby enhancing their career progression. Ely et al. (2011) noted women and minority leaders frequently lack access to these same networks, which can impede their professional growth.

Foreign-born women face additional obstacles, such as navigating cultural expectations, language barriers, and limited integration into established networks of influence, which can further complicate their leadership journeys (S. C. Airini et al., 2019). Leadership development programs, often designed to support career advancement, may adopt a one-size-fits-all approach that does not fully consider the intersections of gender and ethnicity. Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010) argued, "Current leadership development initiatives often overlook the specific barriers

faced by Latinx women, resulting in strategies that are ill-suited to address the compounded effects of racial and gender discrimination” (p. 172). Similarly, existing scholarship has highlighted limitations in leadership development programs in addressing the needs of diverse leaders, particularly women from underrepresented groups (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Without accounting for complex intersections of gender, race, and culture, leadership initiatives may fail to provide comprehensive support for women’s leadership development. Osei-Kofi et al. (2021a) emphasized, “Effective leadership programs must move beyond a generic approach to address the unique challenges faced by underrepresented groups” (p. 278). Developing targeted programs that reflect the diverse experiences of leaders can help create more equitable pathways for career progression. Such approaches can ensure the leadership development needs of Latinx women, foreign-born women, and other underrepresented groups are met alongside those of their white male counterparts, promoting greater inclusivity in higher education leadership.

The Glass Ceiling Theory

The glass ceiling theory describes an invisible barrier that prevents women and minorities from advancing to senior leadership despite qualifications and experience (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). This barrier has been widely documented in higher education, particularly in the underrepresentation of women in roles such as deans, provosts, and presidents (ACE, 2017, 2020, 2022). According to Powell and Butterfield (1994), “The glass ceiling reflects both structural and attitudinal barriers” (p. 70), creating challenges for women pursuing upward mobility. These barriers are compounded for Latinx women, who face additional hurdles due to intersecting identities that exacerbate the effects of both racial and gender discrimination (Bhopal, 2020a). Turner (2002) asserted, “Women of color experience a double layer of

discrimination” (p. 74), encountering both the glass ceiling associated with gender and the additional constraints tied to racial biases in predominantly white institutions.

The glass ceiling represents an invisible but breakable barrier that prevents women from reaching top leadership positions, primarily due to gender bias and exclusion from leadership networks (Bruckmüller et al., 2014; Hewlett & Rashid, 2010). Although challenging, some women break through with advocacy and institutional support. In contrast, the cement ceiling is a rigid, deeply embedded barrier affecting women of color, including Latinx women, who face both gender and racial biases (Beckwith et al., 2016). Unlike the glass ceiling, the cement ceiling is structurally reinforced by systemic exclusion, limited mentorship, and racialized leadership biases (Faniko et al., 2022; Osei-Kofi et al., 2021f).

Latinx women in community college leadership often experience the cement ceiling as institutional hiring trends favor white candidates, and traditional mentorship structures fail to address their unique barriers (S. C. Airini et al., 2019; Bhopal, 2020a). Breaking this ceiling requires systemic reforms, including intersectional mentorship, sponsorship, and leadership pipelines tailored to Latinx women’s experiences (Osei-Kofi et al., 2021a).

Higher Scrutiny and Risk in Leadership Roles: The Glass Cliff Phenomenon

Research on the “glass cliff” phenomenon has suggested women leaders, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, are more likely than men to be appointed to leadership roles during times of crisis or organizational instability (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Ryan and Haslam (2005) found, “Women are more often selected for leadership positions with high risks and low chances of success, which exposes them to higher levels of scrutiny and potential criticism” (p. 81). This tendency has positioned women in situations where their leadership was vulnerable to public and internal critique if the organization failed to improve. According to Koval et al.

(2018), such appointments can reinforce gender biases and stated, “When women in these high-risk roles are unable to turn around failing organizations, their perceived lack of success can confirm existing stereotypes about women’s leadership capabilities” (p. 919).

This trend is particularly relevant in higher education, where women leaders appointed during financial or operational difficulties may face heightened scrutiny from stakeholders, board members, and faculty (Cook & Glass, 2014). Cook and Glass (2014) noted in higher education, women leaders hired during periods of institutional crisis often face more intense evaluations and are given less room for error than their male counterparts. According to Bruckmüller et al. (2014), these leaders are frequently held to different standards, where “failures are scrutinized more harshly, and successes are less celebrated” (p. 456), creating an environment that limits the longevity and effectiveness of women’s leadership in academia.

According to Ashby et al. (2021), the high scrutiny associated with glass cliff appointments can hinder career progression for women leaders because failures in such roles are often perceived as personal shortcomings rather than contextual challenges. Ashby et al. (2021) determined, “Women leaders who experience setbacks in glass cliff roles are less likely to be considered for future leadership opportunities, as these roles are often used to assess their suitability for senior leadership positions” (p. 134). In contrast, when white male leaders face setbacks, these are more likely to be attributed to external circumstances or organizational challenges rather than individual competency (Rudman & Phelan, 2008).

These dynamics suggest a need for more equitable leadership placement strategies in higher education, in which high-risk roles are assigned based on skill alignment rather than gender or ethnic stereotypes. By implementing strategies that minimize gendered expectations in leadership appointments, institutions can create pathways that support sustained and fair

leadership opportunities, reducing barriers posed by the glass cliff for women and underrepresented groups in higher education (Ryan et al., 2011).

Societal Expectations and Work–Life Balance

Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2012) argued the concept of the ideal academic worker is rooted in the assumption that faculty members have a stay-at-home partner to manage family responsibilities. Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2012) stated, “The academic workplace continues to be structured around an outdated model that assumes faculty members have someone at home to take care of family responsibilities. This model disadvantages women who continue to shoulder the majority of family care” (p. 3). This expectation, often referred to as the “baby penalty” (Mason & Goulden, 2004, p. 89), places significant strain on women who aspire to leadership roles in academia, as they must balance these responsibilities with the demands of their careers. Research has indicated women in academic leadership are frequently expected to navigate dual roles without institutional support for family care (Mason & Goulden, 2004; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012).

In contrast, white male leaders in higher education are less likely to face these expectations, as societal norms and institutional structures often support a model of male leadership that assumes a minimal role in domestic responsibilities. Kelly and Dobbin (1998) noted, “Male academics often benefit from a cultural perception of commitment that is inherently linked to professional success, rather than balanced against family roles” (p. 964), a perception that can facilitate career progression. Moreover, Williams (2004) pointed out white male leaders in higher education may face fewer penalties for family related responsibilities, allowing them to focus on their career trajectories with fewer external pressures.

Misra et al. (2012) found this imbalance was further evident in tenure and promotion outcomes, as women often juggle extensive family responsibilities alongside academic productivity, resulting in a “second shift” that limits their ability to participate in career-advancing activities. Meanwhile, white male leaders may more freely pursue professional development opportunities that support their leadership identity progression, highlighting an institutional structure that more readily aligns with male career trajectories (Kelly & Dobbin, 1999; Williams, 2004). These differing experiences underscore the need for policies that support work–life balance for all academics, reducing the disparity in leadership development opportunities based on gender and family responsibilities.

Intersectionality of Gender and Ethnicity in Higher Education Leadership

Building on intersectionality theory, scholars have described the intersection of gender and ethnicity as a “double bind” in which women of color experience overlapping systems of sexism and racism that manifest as tokenism, stereotype threat, and cultural taxation (Crenshaw, 1989; Padilla, 1994; Wingfield, 2010). Turner (2002) explained that tokenism often results in heightened visibility, which may lead to additional scrutiny and performance pressure for Hispanic and Latinx women in leadership roles. Corlett and Mavin (2014) also noted stereotype threat and imposter syndrome are frequent issues for underrepresented women leaders, adding psychological pressures that can affect their sense of belonging and self-efficacy.

According to Smith and Davidson (2019), white male leaders are more likely to benefit from organizational cultures and networks that align with their social identities, thereby facilitating smoother career progression. Jean-Marie et al. (2009) observed women of color in academic leadership must often navigate multiple cultural contexts, balancing their professional roles with cultural expectations, a balancing act that can be particularly challenging when

institutional values do not align with personal or community identities. Turner and Myers (2000) suggested white male leaders, conversely, often find these institutional values congruent with their personal and professional identities, reducing the need for additional negotiation of identity.

Experiences of tokenism or stereotype threat may impact this stage by prompting Latinx women to reconcile societal expectations with their leadership philosophies. According to J. C. Johnson (2021), white male leaders often experience a smoother transition from being recognized as potential leaders to fully embracing differentiated leadership roles, largely because they operate in environments that validate and reinforce their leadership identity. This contrast underscores unique challenges women of color face, whose leadership development must account for the intersecting dimensions of race and gender (Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Osei-Kofi et al., 2021b).

Imposter Syndrome

Imposter syndrome, characterized by persistent self-doubt and a fear of being exposed as a fraud despite evident success, is a significant psychological barrier for women leaders in higher education (Clance & Imes, 1978). According to Clance and Imes (1978), individuals experiencing imposter syndrome often attribute their achievements to external factors, such as luck, rather than to their competence, which can undermine their confidence in leadership roles. Research has suggested women, particularly women of color, are more likely to experience imposter syndrome due to compounded pressures of gender and racial stereotypes in predominantly white, male-dominated institutions (Cokley et al., 2015). This sense of self-doubt can affect their progression through leadership roles and may also impact decision making and visibility in academic settings (Craddock et al., 2011).

Code-Switching

Code-switching, initially conceptualized in linguistics, describes the practice of alternating between languages or dialects, particularly among bilingual individuals (Gardner-Chloros, 2009). Gardner-Chloros (2009) explained, “Code-switching reflects the ability to adapt linguistically to different social contexts” (p. 11), a skill that has since been explored in other fields, including organizational and leadership studies. In higher education, code-switching often extends beyond language to encompass shifts in behavior, communication style, and self-presentation, particularly for Hispanic and Latinx women who occupy leadership roles. According to Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003), underrepresented leaders may engage in code-switching to navigate predominantly white, male-dominated institutions, adapting their communication to fit cultural expectations that differ from their own. This adaptive behavior is often used to manage perceptions, reduce bias, and gain acceptance in professional spaces that may otherwise marginalize individuals (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Mirza, 2017).

For Hispanic and Latinx women in higher education, code-switching becomes a mechanism for navigating intersections of gender and ethnicity by adapting to expectations in predominantly white, male-led institutions (Bhopal, 2020a). This phenomenon aligns with LID theory, as experiences of code-switching may impact women’s progression through stages of leadership identity formation. Komives et al. (2005) argued leadership identity is shaped by social interactions, suggesting the necessity to code-switch could complicate the development of a unified leadership identity for Latinx women, who must constantly navigate dual identities in professional spaces. Code-switching represents an additional layer of complexity in the leadership experiences of Latinx women in higher education, distinguishing their experiences

from those of white male leaders who are less likely to modify their behaviors or self-presentation to gain acceptance.

Access to Support and Resources

Mentorship and Institutional Support

G. Brown (2005) and B. Buddemeier (1998) demonstrated mentorship offers crucial career guidance and emotional support, particularly for women navigating leadership roles. However, Hispanic and Latinx women often face additional challenges accessing effective mentorship, primarily due to exclusion from informal networks of power and influence (Faniko et al., 2022). Faniko et al. (2022) stated, “Informal mentorship networks often operate based on familiarity and shared identity” (p. 45), which can limit access for those who do not match the dominant demographic profile in leadership circles. In comparison, Smith and Davidson (2019) found white male leaders frequently benefited from informal networks that provided mentorship opportunities, enhancing their visibility and integration in institutional hierarchies.

Espinosa et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of institutional support through structured mentorship programs and intentional leadership development initiatives designed to advance diverse leaders within higher education. According to Turner and Myers (2000), informal support systems in higher education “tend to favor individuals from the majority demographic, often reinforcing the existing institutional culture” (p. 13). Conversely, S. C. Airini et al. (2019) identified leadership development programs exist, but they may overlook the specific needs of Latinx women, particularly concerning the challenges related to racial discrimination and cultural bias. This observation underscores the need for mentorship programs to adopt approaches that more fully address the varied experiences of women of color and foreign-born women (Airini et al., 2019).

Osei-Kofi et al. (2021a) argued mentorship alone may not fully address the barriers that women of color face in higher education and advocated for “comprehensive institutional policies that prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion” (p. 25) as necessary for creating sustainable change. Smith (2020) observed institutional structures in higher education may inherently support white male leaders, as they often align with historically embedded norms and practices.

Exclusion From Informal Networks

Informal professional networks, often referred to as “old boys’ clubs,” play a critical role in career advancement in higher education. These networks, composed of influential leaders and decision makers, provide access to mentorship, sponsorship, and insider knowledge that can be instrumental for leadership growth (Ibarra, 1992). Ibarra (1992) remarked, “Individuals within these networks are more likely to gain visibility and opportunities for advancement” (p. 436). However, Ely et al. (2011) suggested women, particularly women of color, are less likely to be integrated into these informal networks, which limits their access to these benefits and consequently restricts their career advancement. This exclusion creates a barrier to career progression, depriving women leaders of the social capital that informal networks provide.

In contrast, white male leaders in higher education are frequently integrated into these networks, reinforcing their support and visibility in academic institutions. Smith and Davidson (2019) explained informal networks in higher education often reflect the demographic makeup of traditional leadership, resulting in limited access for women and individuals from underrepresented groups. These networks provide white male leaders with access to high-profile projects, mentorship opportunities, and insider knowledge that can accelerate their leadership trajectory (Eagly & Carli, 2007). The resulting disparity contributes to a cycle in which the

visibility and career success of white male leaders are amplified through support networks that are less readily available to women and underrepresented groups (O'Neil et al., 2018).

Moreover, research has indicated exclusion from these networks can affect women's ability to find sponsorship, a critical factor in advancing to higher level leadership roles. According to Ibarra et al. (2010), "Sponsors are instrumental in advocating for high-visibility roles and promotions" (p. 83). Nevertheless, Hispanic and Latinx women and people are significantly less likely to have sponsors who advocate for their career progression. White male leaders, on the other hand, are more likely to receive sponsorship through informal connections, leading to enhanced opportunities for career development and leadership roles (Ely et al., 2011). This disparity reflects a structural limitation in higher education, where access to informal networks and sponsorship often hinges on demographic alignment with existing leadership, disproportionately benefiting white men (Kanter, 1977).

Addressing the exclusion from informal networks is essential for fostering equitable leadership pathways in higher education. By actively working to make informal networks more inclusive, institutions can provide equitable access to the social capital and sponsorship necessary for career advancement, supporting the professional growth of all leaders, regardless of gender or ethnicity (Ely et al., 2011; Ibarra, 1992).

Workplace Harassment and Microaggressions

Cortina et al. (2013) indicated women leaders in higher education experience higher rates of workplace harassment, discrimination, and microaggressions, creating a hostile work environment that can detract from job satisfaction and impact mental health. Cortina et al. (2013) explained, "Experiences of incivility and discrimination are more frequently reported by women and are often targeted based on gendered expectations" (p. 1581). This environment can impede

professional growth and limit opportunities for women leaders, who may have to devote additional time and resources to navigating these challenges (Settles et al., 2006).

For Hispanic and Latinx women in leadership, marginalizing experiences can be further intensified by the intersection of racial and gender-based microaggressions, creating what Sue et al. (2007) described as “layered stressors” (p. 278) that compound the difficulties of leadership. Sue et al. (2007) stated, “Racial and gender microaggressions are subtle, often unconscious slights that convey demeaning messages” (p. 278), which can undermine authority and credibility. Latinx women may encounter comments questioning their qualifications or position, which can heighten feelings of isolation and impact their ability to effectively lead in predominantly white institutions (Turner, 2007). These experiences may lead to a higher turnover rate among Latinx women leaders as they navigate environments that do not fully support their professional growth (Ong et al., 2011).

Latinx Women in Leadership: Barriers, Strategies, and Representation in Business and Higher Education

Latinx women remain underrepresented in leadership roles across business and higher education, encountering systemic barriers shaped by gender and racial biases. Motta (2021) indicated diversity efforts have increased, but Latina women continue to hold disproportionately fewer executive positions than their white counterparts. Leadership studies emphasized key challenges, including limited access to mentorship and sponsorship, cultural stereotypes that influenced leadership perceptions, and exclusion from decision-making networks (Bordas, 2013; Romo Edelman, 2024). These barriers align with the cement ceiling theory, which highlights the deeply embedded and structural challenges preventing women of color from advancing in leadership (Beckwith et al., 2016).

In the corporate sector, Perez (2022) explored the strategic positioning of Latino business leaders, emphasizing the role of cultural authenticity and leadership adaptability in career progression. Similarly, industry leaders such as Freyre (2024) have championed diversity initiatives by leveraging cultural identity as a leadership asset, demonstrating how Latinx women navigate leadership spaces and foster inclusive workplace environments. However, despite these individual successes, data showed Latina women held only 4.3% of leadership roles in 2021, compared to 32.6% held by white women (Motta, 2021). This persistent disparity highlights the need for institutional change and more intentional efforts to develop leadership pathways that support Latinx women.

Business and academic literature suggested mentorship, leadership development programs, and professional visibility are critical factors in increasing Latinx women's representation in leadership (Bordas, 2013; Motta, 2021). However, leadership models in both corporate and academic settings often fail to account for intersectional experiences, reinforcing traditional leadership norms that may not fully address the barriers experienced by women of color (Osei-Kofi et al., 2021b). The absence of targeted leadership programs designed for Latinx women further limits career advancement opportunities and contributes to systemic disparities in leadership representation (Faniko et al., 2022).

The leadership experiences of Latinx women in community colleges have remained underexplored in existing literature, creating a gap in understanding how these leaders navigate institutional, cultural, and structural barriers in higher education. Although research in business leadership has identified critical challenges and success strategies, further investigation is needed to determine how these findings translate into higher education contexts, where Latinx women remain disproportionately underrepresented in executive leadership (Bordas, 2013; Motta, 2021).

This study addressed this gap by exploring the leadership journeys of Latinx women in community colleges and examined institutional policies, mentorship structures, and leadership development programs that may contribute to a more equitable leadership pipeline.

Gaps in Literature

Most literature on structural and systemic barriers focused on the “glass ceiling,” heightened scrutiny, and general obstacles to leadership. However, few studies fully explored how these barriers affected Latinx and foreign-born women differently. Although white male leaders are less likely to experience these barriers, they often benefit from institutional structures that support their professional development and alignment with traditional leadership profiles (Smith & Davidson, 2019). Bhopal (2020b) asserted, “Structural inequalities within institutions of higher education operate to exclude women of color, both subtly and overtly, from positions of power” (p. 39). Although prior research acknowledged the existence of a glass ceiling for women in general, research is limited on how racial and cultural identities compound these barriers, creating a “double bind” that is not as prevalent for their male counterparts (Turner, 2007).

Prior research showed societal expectations surrounding family and caregiving responsibilities disproportionately impact women leaders, often forcing them to navigate work–life balance challenges that white male leaders face to a lesser degree (Mason & Goulden, 2004; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). Despite the prevalence of these findings, few studies focused on how cultural expectations intersected with gender, particularly among foreign-born women with additional familial or cultural obligations (S. C. Airini et al., 2019). LID emphasizes leadership identity evolves through social interactions and experiences (Komives et al., 2005), suggesting family roles and caregiving expectations can hinder leadership progression for women. However,

literature has remained limited in exploring how societal pressures specifically impact the leadership identity development of women from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Although intersectionality theory has gained recognition as a framework for understanding unique challenges faced by women with intersecting identities, a gap remains in applying it to leadership identity development in higher education (Crenshaw, 1989). Studies have indicated women of color and foreign-born women often experience imposter syndrome and are more likely to engage in code-switching as a coping mechanism in predominantly white institutions (Cokley et al., 2015; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). However, research has often addressed these challenges in isolation without considering how the intersection of multiple identities influenced the cumulative psychological impact on leadership progression. White male leaders, in contrast, experience fewer pressures related to code-switching and self-doubt in higher education institutions, as their identities are more often aligned with the institutional norm (Smith & Davidson, 2019).

Mentorship and institutional support are critical for career advancement. The literature indicates that leadership development programs often adopt a one-size-fits-all approach that may not fully address the needs of women from diverse backgrounds (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Although white male leaders frequently access informal networks and sponsors who advocate for their career advancement, women, particularly women of color, are often excluded from these networks (Ely et al., 2011; Ibarra, 1992). According to O'Neil et al. (2018), "Gender-based differences in networking outcomes highlight that women are less likely to benefit from informal networks, which can limit their visibility within organizations" (p. 214). However, limited research examined how intersecting identities impacted access to support and resources.

Although workplace harassment and microaggressions are well-documented issues for women leaders, research has remained limited in understanding how these experiences affect women of color and foreign-born women differently. Microaggressions and harassment create a hostile work environment that can diminish job satisfaction, impact mental health, and contribute to higher turnover rates (Cortina et al., 2013; Ong et al., 2011). Sue et al. (2007) described microaggressions as “layered stressors” (p. 278), which can be especially harmful to women of color. White male leaders, however, are less likely to encounter such discriminatory interactions, as their cultural identity often aligns with institutional norms (Omi & Winant, 2015).

Although existing studies have provided valuable insight into the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity in leadership, research focusing specifically on Hispanic and Latinx women in community colleges remains limited. Further exploration of this population may provide a deeper understanding of factors influencing leadership development, career advancement, and institutional support structures. This study aimed to contribute to the broader discourse on leadership diversity in higher education.

In summary, although literature has highlighted key barriers to leadership for women, significant gaps persist, particularly in the intersectional analysis of gender and ethnicity (S. C. Airini et al., 2019; Crenshaw, 1989;). Research has indicated Latinx women face systemic challenges such as exclusion from informal networks, implicit hiring and promotion biases, and limited leadership development opportunities (Bhopal, 2020a; Osei-Kofi et al., 2021f). However, studies have yet to fully capture how these challenges uniquely affect Hispanic and Latinx women in community college leadership roles. By applying an intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 1989) and LID theory (Komives et al., 2005), this study provided an understanding of leadership experiences among this underrepresented group. Examining these dynamics

through a comprehensive lens was essential to developing equitable pathways for advancement and fostering a more inclusive leadership landscape in higher education (ACE, 2017, 2020, 2022).

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter will review the study's purpose, the research questions addressed, and the theoretical and conceptual framework that informed the study. In addition to discussing the methodology used in the study, the rationale for selection will be presented, and information about the research design, study setting, participants, and instrumentation will be provided. Lastly, this chapter details the type of data collected, sources, analysis, alignment table, limitations, ethical considerations, and study quality.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Hispanic and Latinx women in executive positions in community colleges, with a particular emphasis on how the intersection of gender and ethnicity shaped their professional journeys.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do Latinx Women who have moved into leadership roles in a community college describe their lived experiences as they progressed?
2. How do Latinx women describe the influence of their gender and ethnicity on their leadership experience and achievement?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study used the theoretical lens of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), exploring how intersecting identities of gender and ethnicity shaped and influenced the lived experiences of women in leadership roles. Intersectionality theory offers a lens for understanding how overlapping social identities create unique challenges and opportunities for women, particularly in environments that may not fully support or recognize their perspectives. According to

Crenshaw (1989), “The intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (p. 140), highlighting the need for an approach that considers the full scope of participants’ identities in analyzing their leadership journeys.

Intersectionality theory emphasizes individuals' experience discrimination and privilege not along a single axis of identity, such as race or gender, but through the complex interplay of multiple social categories.' This theory is particularly significant in its ability to uncover how systems of power (e.g., patriarchy, racism, classism) are interconnected and mutually reinforced, creating compounded challenges for individuals at the intersections of marginalized identities (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

A distinctive feature of intersectionality theory is its critique of traditional approaches to social justice and legal frameworks, which often fail to address the multidimensional nature of oppression. For instance, Crenshaw’s (1989) analysis of legal cases highlighted how Black women were frequently excluded from remedies because their experiences did not align with those of either Black men or white women. This concept underscored the inadequacy of “single-axis” approaches in addressing inequality.

In addition, intersectionality theory has evolved beyond its original focus on race and gender to encompass other identity factors, such as socioeconomic status, sexuality, disability, and immigration status (Cho et al., 2013). It has become a widely used theoretical and methodological framework across disciplines, including sociology, political science, and education. In leadership studies, this framework enabled the exploration of how overlapping identities influenced barriers individuals faced and the unique strengths they brought to their roles (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

Complementing the intersectional component was leadership identity development (LID) theory, which served as the conceptual framework by examining how leadership identity evolves through personal experiences, social interactions, and professional roles. Komives et al. (2005) described leadership identity as an evolving process shaped “through involvement experiences, reflection, and interactions with others” (p. 593). The theory identifies six developmental stages: (a) awareness, (b) exploration or engagement, (c) leader identification, (d) leadership differentiation, (e) generativity, and (f) integration or synthesis (Komives, Longerbeam et al., 2006), which informed the analysis of participants’ progression in their leadership journeys. This structure provided insight into how each participant’s leadership identity developed, was influenced by gender and ethnicity, and was shaped by the social and organizational contexts in which they worked.

The integration of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) and LID theory (Komives et al., 2005; Komives, Longerbeam et al., 2006) provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the leadership development of Hispanic or Latinx women in higher education. Intersectionality theory emphasizes the unique challenges and opportunities that arise from the interplay of multiple social identities, such as gender, ethnicity, and cultural background. Crenshaw (1989) articulated, “The intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (p. 140), emphasizing the need to analyze overlapping systems of power and privilege. This framework ensured the study remained attuned to systemic inequities, institutional barriers, and cultural misalignments that may have affected women leaders, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. It also allowed for a nuanced exploration of how participants navigated structural challenges that shaped their professional trajectories.

LID theory complemented the application of intersectionality theory by examining the iterative and relational processes through which leadership identity develops over time. Komives, Longerbeam et al. (2006) underscored the importance of relational interactions, noting, “Individuals do not develop leadership identity in isolation; instead, they construct it through interaction with others and within various contexts” (p. 404). Komives, Longerbeam et al.’s perspective highlighted the significance of mentorship, professional relationships, and contextual influences in shaping leadership development.

Together, these components enabled a holistic examination of how intersecting identities influenced leadership experiences and how relational dynamics and institutional contexts contributed to the construction of leadership identities. The combined use of intersectionality and LID theory informed all aspects of the study. The development of interview questions also reflected these theoretical underpinnings, with intersectionality theory prompting questions about participants’ experiences of overlapping identities and LID theory guiding inquiries into key relationships and formative experiences in leadership.

In the analysis phase, the framework shaped the coding and thematic organization of data. Intersectionality theory guided the identification of systemic barriers and cultural misalignments, and LID theory informed the exploration of relational and developmental processes, focusing on how women leaders navigated their leadership journey, developed their leadership identity, and engaged in professional growth. This integration of intersectionality theory and LID theory provided a theoretical foundation for examining challenges and opportunities faced by women leaders in community colleges with diverse ethnicities. It ensured that systemic and individual factors were considered, offering a comprehensive lens for

understanding how participants navigated complex professional environments and developed their leadership identities over time.

Research Design

This qualitative study employed narrative inquiry to explore Latinx women's personal and professional journeys in executive leadership positions in community colleges, focusing specifically on how the intersection of gender and ethnicity shaped their experiences. Narrative inquiry was particularly well-suited for this research as it "requires close attention to the particularities of individual lives" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). By capturing participants' stories, this approach enabled the study to illuminate the complexities of their lived experiences, providing insights into how they perceived and negotiated their intersecting identities in leadership roles.

Before choosing narrative inquiry, other qualitative approaches (e.g., case study, phenomenology) were considered. Although phenomenology helps examine the shared essence of a lived experience, narrative inquiry was selected for its ability to center each participant's unique story and provide a rich, detailed account of their leadership journeys (Creswell, 2013). Narrative inquiry was particularly well-suited for this study because it acknowledges the richness and complexity of individual experiences. Narrative inquiry assumes that individuals make meaning of their experiences through stories and that research seeks to understand those lived narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This perspective was crucial for exploring how Latinx women leaders in community colleges constructed and developed their identities, particularly considering the intersection of their gender and racial identities. Stewart (2020) indicated women of color in executive leadership roles often encounter unique challenges due to the interplay of race and gender that can influence their leadership experiences and identity formation.

Understanding intersecting identities was essential for comprehensively examining factors that shape or serve as barriers to leadership trajectories. Through narrative inquiry, this study captured layers of meaning participants attributed to their experiences, offering a deeper understanding of their professional journeys.

A qualitative narrative approach was uniquely positioned to explore the nuances of identity development, particularly for individuals whose lives are shaped by intersecting identities. As Gay and Airasian (2003) noted, the method offers a “more humanistic approach” that is invaluable when analyzing data that reflect “the human condition, perspectives, and attitudes” (p. 67). This methodology allowed participants to share their stories in their own voices, ensuring their lived experiences were presented authentically and holistically. Such an approach is essential for illustrating how women leaders interpret their professional and personal experiences, especially when shaped by the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity. By prioritizing participants’ narratives, this study examined how intersecting identities influenced the experiences and leadership roles of women in higher education.

Data were collected through in-depth, individual interviews, particularly effective for narrative inquiry, as they create a space where participants can openly share their stories. Van Manen (1990) emphasized individual interviews allow researchers to “have an everyday conversation with the participants about an experience’s meaning” and to “listen carefully so that the sense and meanings of the story” (p. 89) are authentically captured. With consent, interviews were video recorded using Zoom, ensuring a reliable record of each narrative that allowed for detailed analysis and interpretation of participants’ lived experiences. This combined approach, using intersectionality theory and LID, provided a robust framework for exploring the unique and often underrepresented experiences of Latinx leaders, contributing to a broader

understanding of diversity and inclusion in higher education leadership (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Komives et al., 2005).

Site Selection

This study's site selection was guided by specific criteria that aligned with the research focused on women in senior leadership roles in community colleges. Given the study's emphasis on exploring the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity in leadership, selected institutions included those with Hispanic or Latinx women in executive positions. Additionally, this study prioritized Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) to examine leadership experiences in institutions that served a significant Hispanic and Latinx student population. The inclusion of HSIs was particularly relevant, as they play a critical role in advancing educational opportunities for Hispanic and Latinx communities and may provide unique leadership pathways and challenges for women in executive roles.

This focus addressed the underrepresentation of women in leadership, as recent data indicated women held only 36.6% of community college presidencies nationwide (American Council on Education [ACE], 2023). Furthermore, HSIs serve a growing proportion of Hispanic and Latinx students, but leadership at these institutions does not always reflect the diversity of their student bodies (Excelencia in Education, 2022). Therefore, selecting a diverse set of institutions, including both HSIs and non-HSIs, was essential for capturing varied leadership experiences and perspectives. The selection process involved identifying sites across the United States, as Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasized the importance of varied contexts for producing rich, nuanced qualitative data. Additionally, pseudonyms were assigned to each institution to protect their identities and maintain confidentiality throughout the study, following ethical

research practices. By selecting institutions that met the following criteria, the study ensured depth in qualitative data and remained manageable for in-depth analysis.

Sites were chosen based on the presence of Hispanic or Latinx women in executive positions, such as presidents, chancellors, provosts, vice provosts, vice presidents, or vice chancellors, as these positions aligned with the study's delimitation. This ensured a focus on leaders whose experiences illuminated the intersection of gender and ethnicity. Institutions where senior leaders expressed willingness to participate were prioritized, as Rubin and Rubin (2012) highlighted the importance of securing accessible and motivated participants for qualitative research.

Community colleges were also prioritized, given their critical role in fostering access and equity in higher education, making them a fitting context for this research focus (American Association of Community Colleges, 2022).

Institutions with racially and ethnically diverse student and faculty populations are more likely to prioritize inclusive leadership. Diversity was determined by analyzing publicly available data from IPEDS, institutional research reports, and college diversity statements. Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory highlights how multiple identity factors interact in institutional settings, emphasizing the need for diverse leadership. By examining institutions with significant representation of historically marginalized groups, this study explored how diversity efforts shaped leadership opportunities for women in executive positions. Additionally, the study included HSIs and non-HSIs to compare the data and assess whether there was a potential difference in leadership experiences and opportunities across institutional types. Institutions from different regions were included to capture varied cultural, social, and institutional dynamics that influenced leadership experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This study examined how institutional characteristics, including institutional size, location, student body diversity, and HSI designation, shaped women's leadership experiences. To assess these factors, data were collected from sources such as IPEDS, institutional fact books, and equity reports. Institutional size and setting, whether urban or rural, were analyzed, as these elements influence leadership dynamics, access to resources, and administrative challenges (Bhopal, 2020a). Additionally, student body diversity was evaluated using demographic data on race, ethnicity, and gender representation to determine whether institutions with diverse student populations also prioritized inclusivity in leadership. Because research has suggested diversity impacts leadership strategies and institutional priorities (Bhopal, 2020a), this study also compared HSIs and non-HSIs to assess whether the designation influenced leadership pathways for women in executive roles. By selecting institutions with varied characteristics, this study ensured a comprehensive qualitative analysis of how institutional contexts influenced women in executive leadership positions in community colleges.

Practical considerations, such as the ability to conduct interviews and access institutional data, were factored into the facilitation of narrative inquiry, which requires detailed participant engagement (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). By adhering to these criteria, this study explored the nuanced, lived experiences of women leaders in community colleges, capturing the complexities of how intersectionality shaped their professional journeys.

Study Participants

This study examined Hispanic and Latinx women serving as chancellors, presidents, and provosts in community colleges. As senior leaders, these women offered valuable insights into how their intersecting identities shaped their leadership experiences, addressing research gaps identified by S. C. Airini et al. (2019). To ensure a rich exploration of these experiences,

recruitment involved purposeful sampling to select participants who provided detailed narratives about their career trajectories, challenges, and opportunities in community college leadership.

Population

The target sample size for this narrative inquiry study spanned five to eight participants, to obtain rich, in-depth narratives rather than aiming for broad transferability. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), narrative research benefits from focusing on a smaller number of individuals, enabling the researcher to capture nuances and complexities of each story.

Sampling Method

This study used purposive and snowball sampling to recruit participants serving in senior leadership roles, specifically chancellors, presidents, and provosts, in community colleges. The sample focused on Hispanic and Latinx women in these positions, with no minimum tenure requirement, to explore how the intersection of gender and ethnicity shaped their leadership experiences. No age limitations were applied, ensuring the inclusion of participants across various stages of their leadership journeys. This approach aligned with the study's purpose of examining the lived experiences of women leaders in higher education through narrative inquiry.

Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who met specific inclusion criteria, as this method allowed for the focus on “information-rich cases for in-depth study” (Patton, 2015, p. 264). The inclusion criteria required participants to serve in senior leadership roles and self-identify as Hispanic or Latinx women. Diversity of participants ensured a comprehensive exploration of intersecting identities, consistent with Crenshaw's (1989) framework of intersectionality. Potential participants were identified through women leadership organizations

such as ACE Women's Network, HERS, Texas Women in Higher Education, Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, and other networking organizations.

Recruitment Process

Potential participants for this study were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Invitations were sent via email to individuals identified as meeting the study's criteria: Hispanic or Latinx women who held senior leadership positions (e.g., chancellors, presidents, provosts) in community colleges. The email included a detailed explanation of the study's purpose, participant eligibility criteria, the narrative inquiry methodology, and measures in place to ensure confidentiality and ethical conduct. This practice aligned with best practices for recruitment in qualitative research, which emphasized transparency and voluntary participation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The email also provided contact information for the researcher and a brief outline of what participation entailed, including the anticipated time commitment for interviews and any follow-up communication. Participants were assured their responses would remain confidential and anonymized in all reports and publications. This transparency was intended to foster trust and encourage participation (Patton, 2015).

If additional participants were required, snowball sampling was employed. Initial participants were invited to recommend colleagues who met the study criteria and might be interested in contributing. This approach is particularly effective in qualitative research for reaching individuals in specific professional networks, such as women leaders in higher education (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Instrumentation

In qualitative research, Wa-Mbaleka (2019) explained, “The individuals who conduct interviews serve as the instrument” (p. 27) for data collection, as they play a central role in gathering and interpreting participants’ narratives. In this study, I served as the primary instrument, using expertise and awareness of the research context to navigate the interview process effectively and ensure the richness of the data collected (Creswell & Poth, 2021). This study employed open-ended, semistructured interview questions designed to explore the professional journeys of women in executive positions in community colleges, focusing on the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity in their leadership roles. These questions elicited detailed, reflective responses from participants, aligning with the overarching research questions of the study (Trigueros, 2017a).

Data Collection and Data Sources

Data were collected using semistructured interviews (see Appendix B), allowing for flexibility in question delivery and the opportunity to probe deeper based on participants’ responses. This approach aligned with narrative inquiry, as “semi-structured interviews enable participants to share their stories in their own words, guided by open-ended questions that allow for authentic and reflective responses” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 24). Depending on participants’ availability and preferences, interviews were conducted in person, via video conferencing, or by phone, providing convenience and flexibility to ensure participant comfort and engagement.

Data Collection Process

Before initiating data collection, ethical approval to conduct research was obtained from the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). A comprehensive IRB application

was submitted, detailing the study's purpose, methodology, data collection instruments, and ethical considerations, ensuring compliance with established research ethics. IRB approval is a prerequisite for contacting prospective participants.

Once IRB approval was secured, recruitment commenced by contacting community college presidents to introduce the study and request permission to contact potential participants in their institutions. This initial communication was conducted via email and included an explanation of the study's purpose and participant criteria. A sample introduction letter to site presidents can be found in Appendix C. Following approval from site presidents, participants received an invitation email outlining the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and their voluntary role in the research. The email also included an informed consent form for their review. A sample participant invitation email is included in Appendix D. However, if the participant held the position of president, the initial communication conducted via email followed a slightly different format.

Before formal interviews were conducted, participants were asked to review and sign an informed consent form (see Appendix E). This document detailed the study's procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and the right to withdraw at any time. Signed consent forms were securely stored. To refine the interview process, a pilot interview was conducted with one or two individuals who met the study criteria but were not part of the main sample. The pilot interviews helped evaluate the clarity and relevance of the semistructured interview questions, ensuring they elicit meaningful, detailed responses. Feedback from this phase was used to revise the interview guide.

After finalizing the interview guide, participants were contacted to schedule interviews at a mutually convenient time. Interviews were conducted in person, via video conferencing (e.g.,

Zoom), or by phone, depending on participant preferences. Interviews involved active listening and use of prompts to explore emerging themes and ensure depth in participants' responses.

With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions served as the primary data source for analysis and were reviewed for completeness. During the interviews, detailed field notes were written to document nonverbal cues, contextual details, and initial reflections. These notes were integrated with transcriptions to enrich the data and provide additional context and triangulation.

To ensure data security, all materials, including audio recordings, transcripts, field notes, and signed consent forms, were securely stored on a password-protected drive. Hard copies, such as field notes and consent forms, were kept in a locked cabinet accessible only to the researcher. In compliance with research guidelines, these materials will be retained for 5 years and then securely destroyed to protect confidentiality.

I engaged in reflexivity throughout the process, reflecting on potential biases to ensure participants' voices were authentically represented. This approach aligned with Wa-Mbaleka's (2019) assertion that researchers must "create spaces where participants feel comfortable and valued while sharing their experiences" (p. 63). By following this step-by-step process, the study ensured systematic, ethical, and participant-centered data collection, resulting in rich, meaningful narratives for analysis.

The primary data source were the interview transcripts, which captured comprehensive narratives detailing women's experiences in senior leadership roles in community colleges. Each transcript provided "rich, detailed accounts of participants' lived experiences" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 85), essential for analyzing how gender and ethnicity intersect to shape their leadership journeys. Field notes served as a secondary data source, capturing observations, researcher

reflections, and context-specific details that enriched understanding of each participant's narrative. Additionally, demographic information was collected to offer context on participants' backgrounds, such as ethnicity, years in leadership, and institutional setting, helping to clarify "how individual characteristics influence the leadership experience" (Gay & Airasian, 2003, p. 72).

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved a manual coding process to identify key themes and patterns that emerged from participants' narratives. This approach provided the researcher with an opportunity to delve deeper into the data by considering not only participants' verbal responses but also subtle cues, such as emotional expressions, gestures, and tone of voice conveyed during the interviews. As Creswell and Poth (2018) noted, "Qualitative research often benefits from a more immersive, manual coding approach, which helps the researcher to see the layers and subtleties of meaning embedded in participants' responses" (p. 185). The thematic analysis process enabled the careful examination of each story to gain insights into how the intersecting identities of gender and ethnicity shaped leadership experiences.

Manual Coding Process

An initial, open coding process by carefully reading each transcript and identifying relevant words, phrases, and ideas followed transcription. Saldaña (2016) described open coding as "breaking down qualitative data into distinct parts" to examine and compare "concepts, ideas, and meanings" (p. 73) in participants' narratives. This process involved manually highlighting text segments and taking detailed notes on emerging codes, capturing initial themes related to participants' lived experiences in leadership roles.

Following open coding, axial coding was applied manually to explore relationships among the initial codes. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained axial coding “brings data back together by connecting categories and subcategories” (p. 189). During this stage, codes were organized into broader categories and subcategories, focusing on identifying recurring themes related to the intersection of gender and ethnicity in participants’ leadership experiences.

Once the data were coded, a thematic analysis was conducted to develop overarching themes. Themes were refined by examining connections, contradictions, and patterns in the data, leading to a coherent set of findings that addressed the research questions. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), “Thematic analysis involves searching across a data set to find repeated patterns of meaning” (p. 79). Through a manual review of the coded segments, themes were organized into a final structure that reflected participants’ experiences.

As the primary analyst, the researcher plays an essential role in interpreting the data, making sense of the narratives shared, and ensuring the analysis remains faithful to participants’ experiences. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained in qualitative research, “The researcher is an active participant in the data analysis process” (p. 182), engaging in reflexivity to account for personal biases and ensure that findings accurately reflect participants’ perspectives. Throughout the analysis, I wrote memos and journaled to document reflections, initial impressions, and any evolving understanding of the data.

Creswell and Poth (2018) explained, “Ethical issues need to be anticipated in advance and must include a focus on informed consent, the protection of subjects, and measures to ensure confidentiality” (p. 55). This study ensured participant confidentiality was safeguarded, sensitive topics were handled carefully, and transparency was maintained throughout the research process. Reflexivity also played a critical role, as I continuously examined my positionality, potential

biases, and influence on the research process. This reflective practice ensured that participants' narratives were authentically represented and the analysis remained grounded in their lived experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010).

To further enhance the trustworthiness and accuracy of the findings, this study incorporated member checking, where participants had the opportunity to review and provide feedback on the researcher's interpretations of their responses. Member checking serves as a validity-enhancing strategy in qualitative research, helping to confirm accuracy, ensure faithful representation of participants' perspectives, and serves as an additional form of triangulation by verifying themes across different data sources (Birt et al., 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Alignment Table

In Appendix A, Table A.1, the alignment table consists of the problem based on literature findings, research questions, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and methodology.

Limitations

Despite this study's rigorous design, certain limitations are beyond control and could affect internal validity. Recognizing these limitations supports transparency and allows readers to understand potential constraints on the study's transferability. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), "All qualitative research faces inherent limitations tied to the interpretive nature of the data and the bounded scope of participant perspectives" (p. 152). This study encompassed several potential limitations, including a limited pool of participants, geographical constraints, potential self-reporting bias, and challenges in verifying self-reported data.

Pool of Participants

One limitation was the restricted pool of participants, which may have affected the study's ability to capture a full range of perspectives. Given that the study was delimited to

women leaders in higher education serving as chancellors, presidents, or provosts, “the narrowed participant pool may limit diversity within the data” (Patton, 2015, p. 107). This limited scope could impact the study’s transferability, as findings may not fully represent the broader population of higher education women leaders. Although qualitative research does not seek to generalize findings, this limitation may still constrain the study’s relevance to other settings or institutions.

Self-Reporting Bias

Self-reporting was another limitation of this study, as participants were asked to share personal narratives and experiences. Self-reported data can introduce bias, as participants may “offer responses they believe are socially desirable or aligned with perceived expectations” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 23). This bias could influence how participants describe their experiences with gender and ethnicity in leadership roles, potentially affecting the authenticity of the data. According to Patton (2015), “Self-reporting bias is inherent in any qualitative study that relies on personal narratives” (p. 64). Although every effort will be made to create a supportive environment that encourages honest responses, the potential for self-reporting bias remains a limitation.

Difficulty Verifying Data

A further limitation involved the inherent difficulty in verifying the qualitative data collected. Because participants share personal stories, the study relied on their accuracy and honesty in recounting past experiences. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated, “Qualitative research cannot often verify data independently, as it depends on subjective interpretations and recollections” (p. 102). Given this reliance on participants’ memories and perspectives, specific details may be unintentionally omitted or skewed, limiting the objectivity of the data. This

limitation was compounded by the impossibility of corroborating personal experiences that could introduce subjective bias into the findings.

Although common in qualitative research, these limitations highlight the importance of reflexivity and careful interpretation of results. To address these challenges, I engaged in reflexivity, which Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described as “critically reflecting on the researcher’s assumptions, biases, and relationship to the study” (p. 16). The study also prioritized transparency by documenting the research process and presenting findings in the context of these limitations. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted, “Recognizing and addressing limitations strengthens the integrity of qualitative research and enhances the credibility of findings” (p. 90). These measures ensured a rigorous and balanced exploration of the leadership experiences of women in community colleges.

Ethical Considerations

Rigorous ethical standards were followed to protect human subjects, mitigate potential conflicts of interest and biases, and ensure transparency. IRB approval was obtained from Kansas State University before initiating data collection. Although KSU does not require IRB approval from other institutions, the researcher complied with the policies of participating institutions to address any additional ethical or procedural requirements.

As Creswell and Poth (2018) explained, “Ethical issues need to be anticipated in advance and must include a focus on informed consent, the protection of subjects, and measures to ensure confidentiality” (p. 55). This study ensured participant confidentiality was safeguarded, sensitive topics were handled with care, and transparency was maintained throughout the research process. Reflexivity also played a critical role in this study, as I continuously examined my own positionality, potential biases, and influence on the research process. This reflective practice

helped ensure that participants' narratives were authentically represented and that the analysis remained grounded in their lived experiences.

Adherence to IRB Requirements

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), ethical compliance in research mandates securing "all required IRB approvals to protect participants' rights and well-being" (p. 54). All participants received the informed consent form, which they reviewed and signed to demonstrate understanding and agreement. Anonymizing identifiers, such as names and specific titles, protected participants' confidentiality and institutional affiliations.

Protection of Human Subjects

Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality measures in place. According to Kansas State University IRB guidelines, informed consent is crucial to ethical research as it "empowers participants by providing them with the information needed to make a voluntary decision" (Kansas State University, 2023, Informed Consent section).

The informed consent form (see Appendix E) included a clear, concise explanation of the study's goals, specifically addressing how the data contributed to understanding leadership in higher education. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without consequence, as "voluntariness is the cornerstone of ethical research participation" (American Psychological Association [APA], 2020, p. 45). Anonymizing data ensured confidentiality and protected personal information. Participants' identities and institutional identifiers will not be disclosed in any publication or presentation.

Confidentiality and Data Storage

To protect participants' privacy and ensure data security, all data were handled according to IRB and APA (2020) guidelines. Data storage followed Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendation that "data should be stored securely to protect participants' information" (p. 56). All study documentation anonymized personal and institutional identifiers. Data were stored on a secure, password-protected server or locked physical location and were only accessible to the researcher. Following Kansas State University IRB protocols, data will be securely stored for at least 5 years after the study concludes, after which it will be destroyed.

Sensitive Topics and Power Dynamics

Discussing sensitive experiences related to gender and ethnicity in leadership may have elicited emotional responses. APA (2020) emphasized the need for researchers to be sensitive to "potential psychological and emotional impacts when discussing personal challenges" (p. 48). In response, interviews were conducted in an environment that allowed participants to engage comfortably. To mitigate power dynamics, Rossman and Rallis (2017) recommended an interview approach focused on "building rapport and trust to ensure participants feel empowered to share their stories openly" (p. 78). Participants retained the right to pause or skip any questions.

Minimizing Harm and Ensuring Emotional Well-Being

Protecting participants from harm was a priority. As highlighted by Creswell and Poth (2018), minimizing harm is essential, particularly when exploring sensitive issues. The researcher ensured a supportive interview environment, allowing participants to freely discuss their experiences without pressure, promoting emotional well-being. This approach is consistent

with the APA's (2020) ethics code, which underscores the importance of maintaining participants' mental health.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Researcher reflexivity is vital to reducing personal biases. Patton (2015) noted, "Reflexivity requires researchers to engage in critical self-reflection about their biases, positionality, and possible influences on the research process" (p. 70). Reflexive journaling and regular self-assessment allowed for awareness of how participants' backgrounds and perspectives may impact data collection and interpretation. The study adhered strictly to IRB requirements by securing informed consent, anonymizing data, and safeguarding participants' confidentiality and emotional well-being. By following the principles outlined by Kansas State University's IRB, APA (2020) ethical guidelines, and best practices in qualitative research, this study maintained the highest standards of ethical integrity.

Study Quality

Multiple steps were implemented to ensure credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability to enhance the quality and trustworthiness of this dissertation. Trustworthiness is a cornerstone of qualitative research, designed to establish rigor and ensure that findings accurately reflect participants' experiences and perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Methodology authors widely endorse these measures to increase rigor, minimize bias, and enhance the study's credibility in qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Shenton, 2004).

Credibility

Credibility refers to the accuracy and believability of the findings. To strengthen credibility, I used member checking, a widely endorsed technique in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking involves sharing the findings with participants to

verify their perspectives are accurately represented. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), “Member checks are the single most important provision that can be made to bolster a study’s credibility” (p. 314). This process helped confirm that participants’ experiences were interpreted accurately and allowed them to clarify or correct any misinterpretations.

Additionally, triangulation was used to further enhance credibility. Incorporation of multiple data sources, such as interviews and institutional documents, allows one to “corroborate findings and reduce the impact of investigator bias” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 257). Combining data from diverse sources enhanced the study’s richness and strengthened the findings’ validity.

Dependability

Dependability, similar to reliability in quantitative studies, refers to the consistency of the research process. I used a detailed audit trail to establish dependability, including data collection records, data analysis decisions, and reflective notes. Shenton (2004) explained, “An audit trail enables readers to trace the course of the research step-by-step via the decisions made and procedures described” (p. 72). This transparency can allow other researchers to follow and potentially replicate the study’s processes.

Interview questions for this study were designed to explore how women in leadership roles in community colleges described the intersection of gender and ethnicity in shaping their leadership roles. To ensure clarity and relevance, the questions were piloted with one or two individuals who met the study criteria but were not part of the main sample. This piloting process allowed for refining the questions to ensure each elicited rich, meaningful narratives aligned with the research focus.

Additionally, peer debriefing was used to further enhance the study’s dependability. Peer debriefing involves discussing the research process and findings with colleagues or advisors

knowledgeable about the methodology but not directly involved in the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted peer debriefing serves as “an external check on the inquiry process” (p. 301), providing opportunities for feedback and helping to identify potential biases. This approach strengthened the study’s rigor by ensuring the research design and analysis remained consistent and credible. Incorporating piloting and peer debriefing ensured the interview questions were well calibrated and the findings were dependable and grounded in participants’ lived experiences.

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which findings can be applied to other contexts. Although qualitative studies are not intended to be generalized, the use of thick descriptions enhances transferability. Detailed descriptions of the participants, their contexts, and their experiences allow readers to “determine how closely their situations match the research context, and hence, whether findings can be transferred” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 257). Through careful documentation, the findings may resonate with similar institutions and leadership roles in higher education, though transferability ultimately remains at the reader’s discretion.

Confirmability

Confirmability ensures the findings are shaped by participants’ experiences and not a researcher’s biases or preconceptions. Reflexive journaling throughout the research process enhanced confirmability. As the study progressed, this practice allowed critical reflection on assumptions, motivations, and reactions. According to Patton (2015), reflexivity “requires self-awareness and a deliberate effort to monitor and manage personal values, biases, and

assumptions” (p. 70). These reflections checked personal bias and ensured interpretations remained grounded in the data.

Another technique for increasing confirmability is data triangulation. Using different data sources (e.g., interviews, institutional reports), the researcher can cross-verify information, enhancing the study’s objectivity. As Creswell and Poth (2018) stated, “Triangulation strengthens a study by combining multiple sources of information, reducing the likelihood that researcher biases shape the findings” (p. 259). The use of member checking, triangulation, an audit trail, peer debriefing, thick description, and reflexive journaling reflected recommended practices of methodology authors (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Shenton, 2004). Use of these measures minimized potential limitations, increased trustworthiness, and upheld high-quality standards.

Summary

This narrative inquiry study explored the lived experiences of women in leadership positions in community colleges, focusing on the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity. This chapter reviewed the purpose of the study, its theoretical framework and conceptual lens, the research design, study setting, participants, protection of human subjects, instrumentation, data collection and sources, data analysis, measures to enhance the quality of the study, ethical considerations, and limitations. Chapter 4 explores the research findings and analysis, and Chapter 5 provides conclusions and implications.

Chapter 4 - Research Results and Analysis

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of this narrative inquiry based on participants' stories. This chapter is organized into five sections. It begins by restating the research questions that guided the study and briefly describing the data collection process used to gather narratives from Latina women serving in executive leadership roles within community colleges. Participant demographics are summarized to provide context for the findings. The findings are then presented through narrative and thematic discussion. Finally, overarching themes are synthesized to illuminate both shared and unique dimensions of the women's leadership experiences.

The central focus of this chapter is the presentation of participants' lived experiences as they navigated their leadership journeys. Their narratives illustrated how the intersection of gender and ethnicity influenced their pathways into leadership, their experiences in executive roles, and the development of their leadership identities. To honor the narrative inquiry framework, participant voices are embedded directly in the thematic findings, keeping their lived experiences central and highlighting shared patterns and emergent insights.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do Latinx Women who have moved into leadership roles in a community college describe their lived experiences as they progressed?
2. How do Latinx women describe the influence of their gender and ethnicity on their leadership experience and achievement?

Data Collection Process

Data for this study were collected through in-depth, semistructured narrative interviews with eight Latina women serving in executive leadership roles in community colleges across

Texas and Arizona. Narrative inquiry served as the methodological approach, allowing participants to tell their leadership stories in their own words and reflect on key moments, turning points, challenges, and sources of strength throughout their leadership journeys.

Interviews were conducted in virtual and in-person settings and lasted 1–2 hours. Each conversation followed a narrative protocol designed to invite storytelling rather than short responses, encouraging participants to describe experiences, emotions, and reflections connected to their gendered and racialized identities in leadership. A virtual transcription tool was used to support accuracy, and field notes were taken throughout the interviews to capture contextual details, nonverbal cues, and researcher reflections. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality, and institutional identities were anonymized. Transcripts were repeatedly reviewed, coded, and analyzed to identify narrative patterns, meaning units, and emerging themes that reflected both individual experiences and shared dimensions across stories.

Participant Demographics and Context

Eight Latina women serving in senior leadership roles participated in this study. Participants represented positions such as president, chancellor, provost, and vice chancellor. Their years of leadership experience ranged from 5 to over 25 years, with ages spanning mid-30s to 65 and over. Participants served at institutions varying in size and scope, including single college institutions, multicampus colleges, and community college systems. All participants held advanced academic credentials, including completed doctoral degrees or doctoral study in progress. Their narratives reflected a strong commitment to equity, student access, and the mission of community colleges. Collectively, participants brought rich histories shaped by culture, family, community, education, and professional advancement, offering powerful insight into the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and executive leadership.

Findings

The findings of this study are organized around six major themes that emerged across participant narratives. Leadership Journeys Were Shaped by Purpose, Opportunity, and Preparation reflects how participants described advancement as guided by intentionality, readiness, and opportunity recognition. Identity, Authenticity, and Belonging in Leadership Spaces captures participants' experiences navigating credibility and inclusion within executive contexts. The Weight and Strength of Intersectionality highlights how intersecting identities shaped both challenges and leadership perspectives. Mentorship and Leadership Development as Catalysts emphasizes the role of mentors, sponsors, and developmental experiences in leadership progression. Resilient, Student-Centered, and Community-Oriented Leadership Identity illustrates how participants framed leadership through persistence, relationality, and mission commitment. Finally, Responsibility to Inspire and Open Doors for Others reflects participants' views of representation and responsibility. Collectively, these themes illuminate how participants interpreted leadership, constructed identity, and navigated executive roles as Latinx leaders.

Leadership Journeys Were Shaped by Purpose, Opportunity, and Preparation

Participants described their leadership journeys as unfolding through a series of pivotal moments in which purpose, opportunity, and preparation intersected. Rather than following linear or predetermined paths, participants recounted experiences in which mentors, supervisors, or senior leaders recognized their potential and named leadership possibilities they had not yet fully envisioned for themselves. These moments often served as catalysts, prompting participants to pursue advanced education, accept stretch assignments, or consider executive roles they had not previously imagined.

One participant offered a detailed account of how her leadership trajectory began when others recognized her potential before she did. She described entering higher education after working in other sectors and immediately feeling aligned with the mission of community colleges. Despite her growing confidence in the work, she did not initially envision herself in executive leadership. Participant P55 stated:

I came into the community college and I found home. It felt different from anywhere else I had worked. I loved the students, I loved the mission, and I felt like I belonged. But leadership? That wasn't something I thought was for me. I was first-generation, English was not my first language, and graduate school felt like something other people did, not people like me.

Participant P55 also explained her trajectory shifted when a senior leader began to consistently affirm her potential and challenge her assumptions about what leadership could look like. She elaborated:

She kept asking me, "Have you ever thought about getting your master's degree?" And every time I said no, she would ask me why. I would tell her, "I can't do that. Writing is hard for me. I don't belong in those spaces." And she would just look at me and say, "Yes, you do." She was relentless, in the best way.

Over time, this encouragement led the participant to pursue graduate education and later accept increasingly senior roles. Participant P55 reflected that her preparation was not just academic but deeply personal and stated:

What she really did was help me see myself differently. Every step I took, going back to school, applying for a new role, saying yes to something that scared me, I was preparing myself, even when I didn't call it that at the time.

Participant P22 shared a similarly formative narrative, describing how exposure to leaders who reflected her own identity transformed her understanding of what leadership could look like. She recalled attending a leadership program where she encountered executive leaders whose authenticity challenged traditional leadership norms and said:

We had all these leaders come in and speak about their journeys. And then there was this chancellor who walked in, she had an accent, she was Latina, she was openly gay, and she was completely herself. She wasn't trying to fit into some mold. She was confident, she was brilliant, and she owned who she was. I remember sitting there thinking, "She sounds like me. She looks like me." And that moment changed everything.

For this participant, representation served as a turning point that reframed leadership from something she felt she had to assimilate into, to something she could authentically inhabit.

Participant P22 explained:

Up until that point, I thought leadership meant acting like the presidents and chancellors I had always seen mostly white men, very formal, very polished in a certain way. But watching her, I realized I didn't have to become someone else to lead. I could be myself, and that could be enough.

This realization prompted her to pursue doctoral education and intentionally prepare for executive leadership. Participant P22 shared:

I walked away from that program knowing I needed to do my doctorate, not because someone told me I had to, but because I finally believed I belonged in those spaces. From that point on, every decision I made was about being ready when the opportunity came.

Participant P22 later described how preparation and opportunity converged across her career, "People sometimes say it all happened so fast, but it didn't. It was years of saying yes to hard

things, years of being uncomfortable, years of learning. When the door opened, it wasn't luck, it was preparation meeting opportunity."

Across participants' narratives, leadership journeys were described as processes of becoming, shaped by affirmation, representation, and deliberate preparation. Extended mentorship, exposure to diverse leadership models, and intentional skill-building allowed participants to move from self-doubt to readiness. These stories revealed leadership not as a sudden achievement, but as a gradual unfolding rooted in purpose, opportunity, and sustained preparation.

Across all eight narratives, participants described leadership journeys shaped by the interplay of purpose, opportunity, and preparation. Although specific contexts and catalysts varied, each participant recounted moments in which someone else, often a mentor, supervisor, or senior leader, recognized leadership potential before they did. These affirmations prompted participants to reconsider their self-perceptions, pursue advanced education, accept stretch assignments, or position themselves for future leadership opportunities. Participants consistently emphasized that leadership did not emerge from a single defining moment, but from cumulative experiences that built confidence, skills, and readiness over time. Taken together, these accounts illustrated leadership development as an iterative and relational process in which preparation and opportunity converged gradually, reinforcing leadership as a process of becoming rather than a linear ascent or sudden achievement.

Identity, Authenticity, and Belonging in Leadership Spaces

Participants consistently described authenticity as a defining feature of their leadership identities. Rather than perceiving leadership as requiring conformity to a prescribed style, participants emphasized the importance of leading as their full self. For many, authenticity was

not immediate but developed over time through reflection, challenge, and resistance to expectations that conflicted with their identities.

One participant described how she came to understand authenticity as central to her leadership journey. Early in her career, Participant P11 believed advancement required adherence to dominant leadership norms that did not reflect her identity or lived experience. She remarked,

For a long time, I thought leadership had a look and a sound, and neither of those things were me. I watched how leaders spoke, how they dressed, how they carried themselves, and I tried to mirror that. But the more I tried to fit into that version of leadership, the more disconnected I felt from myself.

She explained that this dissonance became unsustainable as she moved into more visible leadership roles. Participant P11 added:

There came a point where I realized I couldn't keep performing. It was exhausting. I remember thinking, if I'm going to get there, I'm going to get there being who I am and not pretending to be anyone else. That decision changed how I showed up in every space.

Participant P22 offered a reflective narrative describing how authenticity became essential to her sense of belonging in leadership spaces where she was often one of the few women of color present. She explained:

I would walk into those rooms and immediately feel it. I learned quickly that I didn't look like most of the people there, and I didn't come from the same background. At first, I thought I needed to minimize that, to blend in as much as possible.

Over time, Participant P22 described a shift in her understanding of belonging. She added:

What I realized was that shrinking myself didn't help me belong, it just made me invisible. The moment I decided to take up space as myself was the moment I actually started to feel like I belonged, even if the space wasn't built with me in mind.

A third participant reflected on authenticity as both a personal and relational responsibility. Participant P66 described early leadership experiences marked by constant self-monitoring and concern over how her leadership style would be perceived. She shared:

I remember sitting in meetings and second-guessing everything: my tone, my questions, even my facial expressions. I worried that being too direct would label me one way, and being too quiet would make me invisible. For a long time, I felt like I was walking a tightrope.

As she gained confidence and positional authority, her understanding of authenticity shifted. Participant P66 expanded:

Eventually, I realized that constantly editing myself was pulling focus away from the work. Once I stopped trying to manage how I was perceived and started leading from who I actually am, things became clearer for me and for others.

For Participant P66, authenticity became closely linked to leadership effectiveness and ethical clarity. She described, "When I lead as myself, my decisions feel grounded. Even when there's pushback, I know I'm acting with integrity. That sense of alignment matters, especially in spaces where you might already feel like you have to prove you belong."

Other participants articulated these tensions more explicitly, naming internalized doubt, imposter syndrome, and conditional belonging as central challenges to leading authentically in senior leadership spaces. Participant P33 described imposter syndrome as a persistent undercurrent throughout her leadership journey, particularly as she advanced into executive roles

where she was often one of the few women of color present. She stated, “Even when I had the title, even when I had the experience, there was this voice in my head telling me I didn’t really belong there, that eventually someone would realize I wasn’t supposed to be in that room.” She explained that these doubts were reinforced by the absence of leaders who reflected her identity and said, “I didn’t see myself reflected in leadership, so it was easy to believe I was an exception, or worse, a mistake. I felt like I had to keep proving I deserved my seat, even after I had earned it.”

Over time, Participant P33 described authenticity as a grounding response to these feelings. She explained, “What helped was realizing that the discomfort wasn’t about my ability, it was about the space. Once I stopped trying to prove myself and focused on leading from my values, that voice started to quiet down.” Another participant described belonging in leadership spaces as initially conditional, something she believed had to be earned through overperformance and constant self-monitoring. Participant P58 disclosed:

I felt like I was always one mistake away from confirming whatever doubts people already had about me. So, I worked harder, prepared more, and said yes to everything because I thought that’s what it took to stay in the room.

She reflected on the personal toll of this approach and said, “I was leading, but I wasn’t present. I was so focused on not messing up that I wasn’t fully myself.” Her understanding of belonging shifted as she embraced authenticity as a leadership stance. Participant P55 expanded, “Belonging stopped being about permission. It became about claiming space. Once I started leading as myself, leadership felt more honest and less exhausting.”

Across narratives, participants described authenticity as both empowering and demanding, particularly in leadership spaces that were not designed with their identities in mind.

Experiences of self-editing, imposter syndrome, and conditional belonging were common, especially during early leadership transitions and periods of increased visibility. Participants consistently described authenticity as a means of reconciling internal identity with external expectations and sustaining integrity in challenging environments. Collectively, these accounts illustrated leadership as an ongoing negotiation between identity and space where authenticity functioned as both an anchor for decision making and a pathway toward belonging.

The Weight and Strength of Intersectionality

Participants described the intersection of gender and ethnicity as shaping their leadership experiences in complex and often contradictory ways. Their narratives reflected both the weight of navigating leadership spaces where they were underrepresented and the strength drawn from identities forged through lived experience. Participants spoke candidly about moments of isolation, heightened visibility, and scrutiny, and emphasized how their intersecting identities informed their resilience, perspective, and leadership approach.

Several participants recalled entering executive leadership spaces acutely aware of their differences. Participant P88 described the experience of being the only woman of color in a room of senior leaders, stating:

I remember walking into a room full of leaders, and I was the only person of color there.

You notice it immediately. It's not something anyone has to say out loud. You just feel it.

You become very aware of how visible you are and how everything you say or do might be interpreted.

She explained that these moments carried an emotional weight that required constant self-monitoring and preparation. She stated, "I felt like I had to be more prepared than everyone else

in the room. I couldn't afford to make a mistake because I knew it wouldn't just reflect on me, it would reflect on people like me."

Participant P66 offered a more emotionally layered account of navigating leadership spaces shaped by intersecting identities. She described the persistent vigilance that accompanied her leadership roles and specified:

There's a kind of awareness that never really turns off. You're constantly reading the room, how people respond to you, what tone you're allowed to take, how much space you're permitted to occupy. It's exhausting, but it becomes second nature.

Participant P66 reflected on how this vigilance shaped both her confidence and her leadership style over time. She expanded:

Early on, I questioned myself constantly. I would replay meetings in my head, wondering if I said too much or not enough. Was I too direct? Too quiet? Too emotional? Over time, I realized that this wasn't just about me, it was about navigating a space that wasn't designed with someone like me in mind.

This participant described how acknowledging the emotional labor associated with intersectionality allowed her to reframe her experience. Participant P66 said, "Once I understood that the pressure I felt wasn't a personal failing, but a product of the space I was in, something shifted. I stopped internalizing every reaction and started trusting my own leadership instincts."

Another participant described the duality of being simultaneously hyper visible and overlooked within leadership contexts. Participant P22 detailed:

There were times when I felt like I was representing more than just myself. I was the Latina woman in the room, whether I wanted to be or not. At the same time, I could offer

ideas and watch them get ignored, only to hear the same thing repeated later by someone else.

She explained how these experiences shaped her sense of responsibility and resolve and stated:

Those moments were frustrating, but they also clarified why I needed to be there. If I left, the room would be even less diverse. So, I stayed, I spoke up, and I learned how to advocate for myself and for others.

Participants also reframed their intersecting identities as sources of leadership strength. Participant P77 reflected on how lived experience informed her empathy and decision-making and described, “Because I know what it feels like to navigate systems that weren’t built for you, I lead differently. I notice who’s quiet, who’s uncomfortable, who’s being left out. That awareness didn’t come from training, it came from lived experience.”

Across narratives, participants described intersectionality as both a burden and a source of strength. When navigating leadership as women of color required emotional labor, vigilance, and resilience, participants consistently framed their identities as integral to how they led, for whom they advocated, and how they understood leadership responsibility. Their stories revealed intersectionality not as a limitation, but as a powerful lens through which leadership was enacted, sustained, and given meaning.

Mentorship and Leadership Development as Catalysts

Participants consistently identified mentorship and formal leadership development experiences as critical catalysts in their leadership journeys. Nearly every participant described mentors as individuals who provided encouragement, affirmed leadership potential, and opened pathways to opportunities that might otherwise have remained inaccessible. Mentorship was not

described as incidental, but as a formative and often decisive force in participants' progression into senior leadership roles.

Across narratives, participants described mentors as individuals occupying a range of formal leadership roles, including supervisors, department chairs, deans, vice presidents, chancellors, and senior executives in or adjacent to their institutions. Mentors were often individuals with positional authority who had direct knowledge of institutional structures and leadership pathways. Participants emphasized mentorship relationships typically emerged in professional contexts through workplace supervision, leadership programs, committee service, or institutional initiatives rather than through informal or social connections.

Participants also described mentorship relationships as developing in varied ways. In some cases, participants actively sought guidance after identifying leaders whose leadership styles or values aligned with their own. In other cases, mentorship emerged when senior leaders initiated relationships by offering encouragement, feedback, or invitations to leadership opportunities. Several participants noted mentorship often began informally through professional interactions and evolved over time into more intentional and sustained relationships as trust and mutual respect developed.

For example, Participant P11 emphasized the foundational role mentors played in shaping her confidence and sense of readiness. She stated:

Mentors were everything for me. They saw in me what I could not yet see in myself.

Before that, I didn't necessarily think of myself as a leader at that level, but they kept pushing me to see bigger possibilities.

She explained mentorship extended beyond encouragement to active advocacy and added:

It wasn't just someone telling me I was doing a good job. My mentors put my name forward, recommended me for programs, and made sure I was in rooms where decisions were being made. That kind of support changes everything.

Participant P55 shared how mentorship provided both reassurance and strategic guidance. She divulged, "There were moments when I questioned whether I belonged in leadership spaces at all. My mentors were the ones who reminded me that I had earned my place and that I didn't need to wait for permission to lead."

Participants also described formal leadership development programs as pivotal spaces where mentoring relationships were initiated or strengthened. Several participants reported participation in these programs facilitated access to senior leaders and peer networks that extended beyond their home institutions. For example, Participant P88 reflected, "Leadership programs opened doors for me. Being selected felt like validation; that someone outside my institution believed I belonged in these spaces. It shifted how I saw myself and how others saw me." She further explained, "Being in a room with other women who were presidents, provosts, and vice chancellors made leadership feel real and attainable. I wasn't imagining myself into those roles anymore; I was preparing for them."

A deeper layer of mentorship emerged through participants' descriptions of sponsorship and access to leadership networks. Participants distinguished sponsorship from mentorship by emphasizing advocacy, protection, and access to decision-making spaces. For example, Participant P66 offered a detailed account of how sponsorship functioned as a gateway to executive leadership. She said, "There were opportunities I would have never known about if someone hadn't told me, 'You should apply for this,' or 'Your name is already being discussed.'"

I wasn't in those circles yet. Someone had to intentionally bring me in." Participant P66 described sponsorship as both protective and empowering. She disclosed:

My sponsor didn't just open doors, he prepared me for what was on the other side. He would say, "This room isn't always welcoming, but you belong there, and I'll stand behind you." Knowing someone had my back made it easier to step into spaces that felt intimidating.

Participant P22 reflected on how sponsorship disrupted informal gatekeeping that often limits access for women of color. She said, "A lot of leadership decisions happen in spaces you're not invited into, hallway conversations, dinners, informal networks. Having a sponsor meant my name was still in those conversations, even when I wasn't physically in the room." She explained how this access shaped her leadership trajectory and shared, "Once my name started circulating differently, opportunities followed. Not because I suddenly became more capable, but because people finally saw me as a leader. That visibility changed everything."

Across narratives, mentorship relationships were described as evolving over time from initial encouragement and guidance to deeper advocacy and sponsorship as participants advanced in their careers. Participants emphasized that these relationships were built on trust, mutual investment, and shared commitment to leadership development rather than formal titles alone. Collectively, participants' stories illustrated mentorship and leadership development as powerful catalysts operating through affirmation, advocacy, and access to networks. These experiences not only supported individual advancement but also reshaped participants' understanding of leadership as a relational and collective process made possible through intentional investment, sponsorship, and sustained support by others.

Resilient, Student-Centered, and Community-Oriented Leadership Identity

Participants consistently described their leadership identities as grounded in service, compassion, and a deep sense of responsibility to students and the communities their institutions serve. Leadership was framed not as positional authority but as relational and moral work anchored in care, advocacy, and institutional mission. Participants emphasized their leadership approaches were shaped by close proximity to students' lived experiences and by a commitment to sustaining community colleges as places of opportunity and belonging.

For example, Participant P33 articulated her leadership identity as inseparable from service to students and the community and added, "My leadership comes from service. I'm driven by community, by students, by purpose. I don't see leadership as being above anyone. I see it as being accountable to the people we serve." She explained that this sense of accountability guided her daily decision-making. She remarked, "Whenever I'm making a decision, I ask myself who this is really for. If it doesn't center students or strengthen the community, then it doesn't align with how I understand leadership." Similarly, Participant P66 described leadership as an extension of empathy and relational responsibility. She stated, "Everything I do is grounded in care. In empathy. In making sure people, students, staff, faculty, feel like they belong here. That sense of belonging matters just as much as any policy we put in place."

Participant P66 reflected on how listening and relationship building shaped her leadership practice. She said, "You can't lead effectively if you don't understand what people are carrying with them. Listening, really listening, has been one of the most important leadership skills I've developed." Participant P11 emphasized student-centered leadership as a moral obligation rooted in lived proximity to students' challenges. She described how direct engagement with students

shaped both her leadership priorities and her sense of responsibility. Participant P11 explained, “When you know students personally, when you hear their stories about housing insecurity, working two jobs, caring for family, you can’t lead in abstract ways. Every decision has weight because you know exactly who it will impact.” She also explained remaining student-centered required intentional resistance to bureaucratic distance and remarked, “It’s easy in leadership to get pulled into policies and numbers. I make a conscious effort to stay close to students because that’s what keeps my leadership grounded and honest.”

A third participant offered an extended reflection that highlighted resilience as a response to both personal history and community responsibility. Participant P77 described how her leadership identity was shaped by navigating hardship and remaining committed to the institutional mission. She exclaimed,

There were moments in my life and career when walking away would have been easier. I faced personal challenges, institutional resistance, and times when the work felt overwhelming. But I stayed because I knew what this institution meant to the community. For many students, this is their only pathway forward.

She explained resilience was not about individual endurance alone but about sustaining commitment to others and added:

Resilience, for me, is about showing up even when you’re tired. It’s about continuing to advocate when progress feels slow. I think about students who are balancing work, family, and school, and I remind myself that if they can persist, so can I.

Participant P77 further described community engagement as a core motivator that sustained her leadership over time. She divulged, “When I’m in the community talking with

families, meeting with local partners, listening to what people need it reminds me why this work matters. Leadership isn't abstract. It's lived, and it's accountable to real people."

Another participant framed resilience as an ethical responsibility tied to representation and institutional presence. Participant P55 reflected on the importance of remaining visible and committed despite fatigue or challenge and said:

Some days are heavy. But I stay because I know my presence matters, to students who need to see someone like them in leadership, and to communities that have been historically underserved. Walking away would feel like abandoning that responsibility.

Participants also framed resilience as something cultivated through collaboration and shared purpose rather than individual endurance alone. For example, Participant P22 noted resilience was strengthened through collective leadership. She shared, "I don't carry the work alone. Resilience comes from working alongside people who believe in the mission and are willing to support one another. That collective commitment is what keeps institutions moving forward."

Across narratives, participants described leadership identities shaped by service, resilience, and deep connection to community. Their stories revealed leadership as sustained work, requiring emotional endurance, relational investment, and a clear sense of purpose. Collectively, participants articulated a leadership identity rooted in care for students, responsiveness to community needs, and the resilience necessary to persist through challenge while remaining grounded in institutional mission.

Responsibility to Inspire and Open Doors for Others

Participants consistently described leadership not as an individual achievement but as a collective responsibility rooted in representation, legacy, and intentional support for future

leaders, particularly Latinas and other women of color. Many participants framed their presence in executive leadership as meaningful only if it created pathways for others to follow.

Leadership, in this sense, was described as an obligation to reach back, mentor, and expand access for those historically excluded from senior leadership spaces. Participant P22 articulated this sense of responsibility clearly, reflecting on the visibility and significance of representation. She stated, “I feel responsible to reach back and lift others. I don’t want to be the last one in the room who looks like me. If I’m here, it has to mean something beyond my own success.”

Participant P22 also explained her leadership identity was deeply tied to what her presence symbolized for others, stating:

I think about the women who are watching, students, staff, early-career professionals. If they don’t see anyone like them in leadership, it’s easy to assume those roles aren’t meant for them. I don’t want to be the exception; I want to be part of a pathway.

Another participant reflected on how the mentorship she received earlier in her career shaped her commitment to supporting others. Participant P77 shared, “Someone invested in me when I didn’t fully believe in myself yet. They took the time to mentor me, to prepare me, and to open doors. Now it’s my turn to do the same for the next generation.” She described this commitment as both personal and intentional and expanded:

I don’t wait for people to ask. If I see potential, I name it. I encourage people to apply for programs, to consider leadership roles, to take themselves seriously as leaders. I know how much it mattered when someone did that for me.

Participant P33 offered a reflective narrative underscoring the emotional weight and moral urgency of lifting others. She described moments when she became acutely aware her leadership carried symbolic significance beyond her own role. She described:

There are times when a student or a staff member will pull me aside and say, “I didn’t know someone like you could be in this position.” And every time I hear that, it hits me. It reminds me that my presence matters in ways I didn’t fully understand when I first stepped into leadership.

She explained these moments strengthened her sense of obligation to remain visible and accessible. Participant P33 stated:

It’s not always easy to carry that responsibility. Some days it feels heavy. But I think about how many doors were closed before someone finally opened one for me. I can’t be comfortable walking through a door without holding it open for the person behind me.

Participant P33 described legacy not in terms of titles or accolades but through relational impact. She detailed:

When I think about my leadership, I don’t think about what position I held. I think about who felt more confident because I encouraged them, who applied for something they wouldn’t have otherwise, who believed they belonged because they saw me leading.

Participants emphasized lifting others was embedded in their everyday leadership practices rather than reserved for formal mentoring relationships. Participant P55 noted, “Leadership isn’t just about what you accomplish while you’re in the role. It’s about who you bring with you and who comes after you. That’s how you know the work mattered.” Several participants echoed this commitment in concise but powerful ways, reinforcing the theme of paying leadership forward. For example, Participant P11 said, “If I don’t use my position to open doors for others, then I’m missing the point of why I’m here.” Participant P66 disclosed, “My goal is never to be the first or the only. It’s to make sure I’m not the last.” Finally, Participant

P22 explained, “Leadership, to me, is about creating space so that the next generation doesn’t have to fight as hard just to be seen.”

Across narratives, participants described a shared belief that leadership carried an ethical responsibility to expand access and representation. Their stories revealed leadership as an intergenerational commitment grounded in care, accountability, and intentional investment in others. Collectively, participants framed leadership not as an endpoint but as a bridge connecting opportunity, representation, and possibility for those who follow.

Summary

This chapter presented an analysis of the research questions and a summary of findings derived from eight narrative interviews with Latina executive leaders in community colleges. The findings were organized and presented through key themes that emerged from participants’ lived experiences. Using a narrative inquiry approach, the study examined how women in executive leadership roles in community colleges described their lived leadership journeys, the development of their leadership identities, and the ways the intersection of gender and ethnicity shaped their experiences navigating senior leadership.

The findings illustrated leadership experiences shaped by purpose, opportunity, intentional preparation, authenticity, mentorship and sponsorship, intersectional identity, resilience, and a strong commitment to supporting future leaders. Participants’ narratives revealed leadership identities grounded in service, care for students and community, and a collective responsibility to expand access and representation for Latinas and other women of color. Data indicated the intersection of gender and ethnicity influenced how participants navigated leadership spaces, experienced belonging and scrutiny, and developed resilience and leadership perspective.

These findings were interpreted through the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) and leadership identity development (LID) theory (Komives, Longerbeam et al., 2005; Komives, 2006) to illuminate how participants' identities and lived experiences shaped leadership identity formation, access to opportunity, and sustained leadership practice. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the findings organized by research question and offers conclusions and implications derived from narrative analysis and interpretive synthesis.

Chapter 5 - Summary, Discussion, and Recommendations

Chapter 5 presents an overview of the study, a discussion of the findings organized by each research question, recommendations for practice, connections to the existing literature, implications for future research, a concluding summary, and researcher reflections.

Overview of the Study

This qualitative narrative inquiry explored the lived experiences of Latina women who had advanced to executive leadership roles in community colleges, with particular attention to how the intersection of gender and ethnicity shaped their leadership journeys and professional achievement. Grounded in intersectionality theory and leadership identity development theory, the study centered the voices of Latina leaders to examine how institutional structures, organizational cultures, and relational experiences influenced leadership development and advancement.

Through in-depth, semistructured interviews, participants shared narratives that illuminated their pathways into executive leadership, barriers and biases they encountered, and sources of support that sustained their leadership over time. Analysis revealed Latina women's intersecting identities influenced perceptions of credibility, access to opportunity, and expectations in senior leadership spaces and shaped their leadership advancement. Although participants described moments of professional validation and institutional progress, they also identified persistent challenges, including gendered and racialized bias, exclusion from informal power networks, heightened scrutiny, and the emotional labor required to navigate male-dominated leadership environments.

Participants consistently described leadership as a relational and values-driven practice rather than solely a positional achievement. Mentorship, sponsorship, and professional

relationships emerged as critical supports in leadership identity development. Many participants articulated a strong sense of responsibility to mentor others, expand access to leadership, and create pathways for future Latina women and women of color. Leadership, in this context, was framed as both an individual accomplishment and a collective responsibility.

Building upon the findings presented in Chapter 4, this chapter interprets participants' narratives through the lenses of intersectionality theory and leadership identity development theory and organizes the discussion in alignment with the following research questions:

1. How do Latinx women who have moved into leadership roles in community colleges describe their lived experiences as they progressed into executive leadership?
2. How do Latinx women describe the influence their gender and ethnicity have had on their leadership experiences and achievement?

Participants' experiences are situated in existing leadership and higher education scholarship to deepen understanding of how intersecting identities shaped their leadership development and professional achievement. The chapter further examines implications for practice, policy, and leadership development in community colleges, identifies directions for future research, and concludes with researcher reflections and a summary of the study's contributions.

Discussion of the Findings

This section presents a discussion of the study's findings organized around the two research questions that guided the inquiry. Although findings were presented thematically in Chapter 4, this discussion synthesizes those themes to interpret how Latinx women described their leadership journeys and how gender and ethnicity influenced their leadership experiences and achievement. Findings are examined through the lenses of intersectionality theory and

leadership identity development theory to situate participants' narratives in broader leadership and higher education scholarship.

Research Question 1: How Do Latinx Women Who Have Moved Into Leadership Roles in Community Colleges Describe Their Lived Experiences as They Progressed Into Executive Leadership?

Across participants' narratives, individuals frequently described assuming leadership responsibilities prior to fully internalizing a leadership identity. In the early phases of their professional journeys, many framed their contributions primarily through lenses of problem solving, service, and operational responsibility and perceived "leader" as an identity associated with others rather than themselves. Over time, participants' self-perceptions and identity constructions evolved toward a more integrated leadership identity, characterized by greater confidence, strengthened clarity of purpose, and deliberate alignment between personal values and leadership practice.

This developmental shift was theoretically significant because it highlighted a central tension in leadership identity development: Participants did not become leaders solely upon formal appointment. Rather, leadership identity emerged as individuals began to interpret their own actions as leadership and as others increasingly recognized and responded to them as leaders. Therefore, leadership identity appeared to be coconstructed through reciprocal processes of internal meaning making and external validation, reinforcing the relational foundations of advancement described throughout participants' experiences.

Mentorship as Identity Affirmation and Access, Not Just Advice

Participants' narratives positioned mentorship and sponsorship as pivotal elements in their leadership journeys, functioning not merely as sources of advice but as relational

experiences that shaped how participants understood themselves as leaders and navigated institutional contexts. Mentors were frequently described as interpreters of organizational culture; validators of readiness; and, importantly, facilitators of access to roles, networks, and decision-making spaces. Rather than emphasizing mentorship as generalized encouragement, participants characterized these relationships as mechanisms through which they gained confidence, clarity, and visibility in environments where Latinx women were often underrepresented in executive leadership.

Across participants' accounts, mentorship carried particular developmental significance when mentors affirmed participants' competence and leadership potential, at times preceding participants' own self-recognition. Participants described experiences in which mentors' belief in their abilities reduced self-doubt, normalized ambition, and encouraged engagement with the risks associated with advancement. In this way, mentorship functioned as an experience of identity affirmation, enabling participants to reinterpret prior contributions, responsibilities, and successes as legitimate expressions of leadership. These patterns reinforced the relational and socially mediated dimensions of leadership identity development, suggesting leadership identity was strengthened not only through individual reflection but also through trusted others' recognition, validation, and reinforcement.

Participants further distinguished between mentorship and sponsorship, highlighting mentorship was experienced as most influential when it extended beyond private guidance to visible advocacy and external positioning. Mentors who nominated participants for opportunities, recommended them for roles, or intentionally increased their exposure to strategic conversations were perceived as instrumental in transforming developmental support into tangible career mobility. Participants' narratives highlighted an important distinction: Mentorship was

experienced as particularly consequential when it supported both internal development and external positioning. In contrast, participants indicated the absence of such positioning often rendered advancement more difficult and, at times, more isolating, requiring navigation of executive pathways without the benefit of institutional translation, sponsorship, or protective advocacy. Therefore, participants experienced sponsorship not as a supplemental feature of mentorship but as a critical bridge between perceived readiness and organizational opportunity.

Importantly, participants' narratives also revealed that mentorship was not experienced as a passive resource but as a relational dynamic requiring agency, trust, and intentional engagement. Participants described learning to seek guidance aligned with leadership progression, request visibility enhancing opportunities, and cultivate relationships that supported both professional growth and institutional navigation. These experiences underscored mentorship's dual developmental function: supporting internal identity construction while facilitating external access and positioning. In contexts characterized by limited representation and uneven access to informal power structures, such mentorship experiences appeared to mitigate feelings of isolation, accelerate confidence development, and influence participants' progression toward executive leadership.

The Power of Developing Resilience

Participants' narratives positioned resilience as a central component of their leadership trajectories. Resilience was not described simply as an individual disposition, but as a capacity developed through navigating professional challenges, institutional barriers, and evolving leadership responsibilities. Participants frequently discussed persistence, adaptation, and recalibration as necessary aspects of progression into executive roles.

Several participants described encountering obstacles that required sustained effort and strategic adjustment. One leader, Participant 3, emphasized the necessity of continued movement and adaptability, explaining, “You really have to be willing to be mobile and go where the opportunity is. . . . If you just stay in one role forever, you’re not going to get there.” Statements such as this reflected how resilience operated as an adaptive process rather than a fixed trait. Participants framed setbacks and constraints as conditions requiring recalibration, preparation, and ongoing engagement.

Resilience also closely tied to meaning-making processes. Participants consistently suggested they sustained persistence through purpose and long-term orientation rather than the absence of difficulty. Participant 3 noted, “Preparation meets opportunity. . . . Have everything prepared and when the opportunity comes up you’ll be ready for it.” This perspective illustrated how participants interpreted challenges as part of a developmental pathway, reinforcing persistence through intentional preparation and future-oriented thinking.

Importantly, participants’ accounts further indicated resilience was rarely constructed in isolation. Sponsorship and mentorship emerged as critical mechanisms supporting both advancement and sustained engagement. Participants described sponsors as individuals who expanded access to opportunities, reinforced credibility, and facilitated professional visibility. Participant 3 reflected, “Mentors knew that early on that was my ultimate goal. So they would give me the neatest opportunities . . . things that would be a good experience.” Such narratives suggested resilience was relationally supported and structurally mediated. Participants did not attribute persistence only to personal determination but also to relationships that buffered adversity and created pathways for advancement.

Additionally, participants connected resilience to responsibility and representation. As leaders advanced, many described heightened awareness of their visibility and influence. This sense of responsibility contributed to persistence by reinforcing the perceived significance of their roles. Therefore, resilience functioned not only as endurance, but as a mechanism enabling continued leadership engagement and contribution.

Professional development experiences also played a meaningful role in cultivating resilience. Participants described leadership programs, expanded assignments, and skill-building opportunities as strengthening confidence and preparedness. These developmental experiences enhanced participants' capacity to navigate complex institutional environments and leadership demands.

Taken together, participants' narratives portrayed resilience as dynamic, relational, and contextually mediated. Participants sustained resilience through the interaction of purpose, preparation, sponsorship, and developmental experiences. Their stories suggested leadership persistence involved not only enduring challenges but also accessing the relational and professional conditions that made sustained advancement possible.

Research Question 2: How Do Latinx Women Describe the Influence Their Gender and Ethnicity Has Had on Their Leadership Experience and Achievement?

Participants consistently described gender and ethnicity as inseparable and mutually reinforcing influences shaping their leadership experiences and professional achievement. Through an intersectional lens, participants articulated how occupying executive leadership spaces as Latina women influenced how others evaluated their credibility, authority, and belonging. Participants described heightened scrutiny, implicit bias, and ongoing pressure to demonstrate competence, conditions they perceived as unevenly applied when compared to white

colleagues or male peers. These narratives illustrated Latinx women often pursued leadership achievement in systems that require overperformance for legitimacy, revealing how power and identity intersect to shape executive leadership realities.

Intersecting Identities as Leadership Assets

Despite systemic challenges, participants consistently described their identities as Latinx women not solely as sources of constraint, but as meaningful contributors to their leadership effectiveness. Participants frequently connected their lived experiences to how they understood leadership, built relationships, and exercised influence in their institutions. Leadership was often framed in relational and community-centered terms rather than purely positional ones. For example, Participant 2 explicitly linked identity and leadership responsibility, explaining, “Being a first-generation college graduate, being a Hispanic woman, I always felt that I had the responsibility of being a voice for those who usually don’t feel comfortable culturally to speak up.” Statements such as this illustrated how participants viewed identity as shaping leadership purpose, particularly in relation to advocacy, representation, and attentiveness to marginalized voices. Leadership effectiveness was therefore defined not only through advancement or authority but also through influence, institutional impact, and the capacity to improve conditions for students and historically underrepresented communities.

Participants’ narratives also revealed a critical awareness of dominant leadership norms. Several participants questioned traditional models that emphasize hierarchy, authority, and culturally narrow expectations of executive presence. Participant 5 reflected on this shift in understanding, stating, “I realized also at that moment. . . . I didn’t have to be a college president following the traditional white male chancellor or college president that we’ve all seen for a long time.” Rather than adopting these dominant frameworks uncritically, participants described their

leadership as purpose-driven, relationally grounded, and informed by cultural and community awareness. Their accounts suggested leadership cannot be fully understood without considering how identity, lived experience, and professional practice interact.

Importantly, participants' narratives further indicated identity expression functioned as a source of leadership coherence and consistency. Participants did not typically describe identity as something to be minimized for legitimacy; instead, they frequently portrayed identity as central to leadership philosophy and decision making. Participant 5 explained: "If I'm going to get there, I'm going to get there being who I am and not pretending to be anyone else." Viewed analytically, these accounts suggested embracing identity may strengthen leadership practice and expand institutional understandings of credibility, effectiveness, and success in executive roles.

Responsibility, Representation, and Collective Leadership Achievement

Participants further articulated a strong sense of responsibility to inspire and open doors for others, framing leadership success as inherently collective. They described representation as both symbolic and consequential; they understood their presence in executive leadership as an opportunity to disrupt exclusionary norms and expand access for future Latina women and women of color. Therefore, leadership achievement was not viewed as an individual milestone, but as a platform for mentorship, advocacy, and intentional pathway-building.

This finding carried important implications for easing leadership pathways. Participants' narratives suggested representation alone is insufficient; it must be paired with deliberate action. By mentoring, sponsoring, and creating transparent pathways, participants actively worked to reduce the barriers they encountered. For aspiring Latina leaders, this finding highlighted the importance of seeking environments and mentors who valued collective advancement and of using leadership positions to institutionalize support structures rather than relying solely on

individual resilience. For institutions, these findings underscore the need to move beyond symbolic diversity toward systems that recognize, support, and sustain intersectional leadership.

Participants' emphasis on responsibility and representation also informed how they pursued and sustained leadership achievement. Viewing leadership success as collective rather than individual influenced not only participants' interpretations of their roles but also strategies they employed to navigate advancement. Participants' narratives suggested commitments to representation and collective impact shaped decisions about institutional contexts, professional relationships, and opportunity selection. In this way, meanings attached to leadership success intertwine closely with processes of achieving leadership success.

Identity, Opportunity Selection, and Leadership Achievement

Although participants described gender and ethnicity as shaping their leadership experiences, these identities also influenced how participants navigated, pursued, and ultimately achieved leadership success. Participants' narratives suggested advancement was not experienced as a passive outcome of resilience or mentorship alone, but as a process requiring strategic decision making regarding institutional contexts and opportunities. Several participants emphasized the importance of selecting or remaining in organizational environments perceived as supportive of their growth, leadership development, and authenticity.

Gendered and racialized dynamics in institutional settings were described as simultaneously constraining and motivating. Participants recounted encountering heightened scrutiny, credibility challenges, and implicit biases linked to their identities as Latina women. However, these same experiences often contributed to the development of adaptive strategies, political awareness, and relational approaches participants associated with their effectiveness and

persistence. Therefore, barriers shaped leadership achievement through participants' capacity to interpret, navigate, and respond to identity-mediated challenges.

Participants' accounts further indicated contexts and relationships, validating their leadership potential and providing access to developmental opportunities, facilitated success. Professional development experiences, sponsorship, and identity-affirming networks were described as critical mechanisms through which participants strengthened leadership capacity and expanded advancement possibilities. These findings suggested leadership achievement for Latina women was deeply relational and contextual, influenced by both structural constraints and the availability of environments that recognize, cultivate, and support diverse leadership trajectories.

Participants' narratives collectively suggested leadership achievement was shaped by a combination of individual agency and contextual conditions. Advancement associated with persistence and competence, in addition to access to sponsorship, developmental opportunities, and institutional environments, affirmed participants' leadership potential. These accounts indicated leadership success for Latina women was neither exclusively individual nor entirely structural; rather, it emerged through the dynamic interaction of identity, relationships, opportunity structures, and organizational context.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Findings of this study underscore the need for intentional, equity-centered leadership practices within community colleges. Participants' narratives revealed leadership advancement for Latinx women was often shaped by informal processes rather than structured institutional pathways, highlighting the importance of redesigning leadership development systems to promote equity, access, and inclusion.

Intentional Leadership Development Pathways

Community colleges should establish intentional leadership development pipelines that recognize nontraditional and nonlinear leadership trajectories. Participants did not describe their advancement into executive roles as the outcome of formal succession planning; rather, leadership progression occurred through the convergence of opportunity, accumulated preparation, and sustained service to students and institutions. In response, colleges can proactively identify high-potential leaders and offer structured development opportunities, particularly for women of color, that prepare individuals for executive-level responsibilities.

Leadership development initiatives should intentionally integrate intersectional perspectives by explicitly addressing how gender and ethnicity influence leadership development and advancement within community college contexts. Incorporating individualized coaching, leadership identity reflection, and experiential learning opportunities (e.g., stretch assignments, executive shadowing, mentoring) can strengthen executive readiness and affirm leadership practices grounded in relational, inclusive, and equity-minded approaches.

Mentorship and Sponsorship as Institutional Practices

Mentorship and sponsorship emerged as critical mechanisms for leadership advancement. Institutions should move beyond informal mentorship models and implement structured, accountable mentorship and sponsorship programs that intentionally support Latinx women. Senior leaders should be positioned not only to mentor but also to sponsor emerging leaders by advocating for their visibility, recommending them for leadership opportunities, and facilitating access to executive-level spaces.

Recognizing sponsorship as distinct from mentorship is essential, as participants emphasized that advancement into executive leadership often depended on active advocacy

rather than guidance alone. In addition to institutional efforts, national associations such as the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities can play a complementary role in expanding mentorship and sponsorship beyond individual campuses. Organizations such as this are uniquely positioned to develop cross-institutional mentorship networks; to connect emerging Latinx leaders with senior executives across the country; and to provide structured sponsorship opportunities through leadership institutes, fellowships, and national convenings. Such field-level initiatives can broaden access to social capital, reduce reliance on institution-specific networks, and create sustained leadership pipelines for Latinx women in community college executive roles.

Cultivating Inclusive Leadership Cultures

Participants' experiences underscored the need for leadership cultures that move beyond neutrality and actively support, develop, and sustain women and Hispanic professionals in executive leadership. Rather than focusing solely on dismantling exclusionary norms, community colleges should intentionally build cultures that affirm authenticity, belonging, and culturally grounded leadership practices. Participants' narratives illustrated leadership environments that value relational, service-oriented, and community-centered approaches, not only align with Latina leadership identities but also enhance institutional effectiveness and student success.

Developing such cultures requires a deliberate shift in leadership expectations, evaluation practices, and professional norms. Institutions should invest in ongoing professional development focused on bias awareness, culturally responsive leadership, and equitable decision making and embed accountability measures that assess how leadership practices support or hinder women and Hispanic professionals. Leadership teams can engage in structured reflection

and data-informed assessment to examine representation, promotion patterns, and climate perceptions, ensuring inclusion is not symbolic but operationalized.

Beyond individual institutions, participants' experiences highlighted the importance of advancing a national agenda that supports women, particularly Latinx women, in higher education leadership. National organizations, policy initiatives, and leadership networks can elevate inclusive leadership as a sector-wide priority by setting standards, sharing evidence-based practices, and expanding leadership development opportunities across regions. Framing inclusive leadership as a national imperative rather than a regional concern can reinforce the legitimacy of Latinx leadership and contribute to sustainable, system-level change in community college executive leadership.

Supporting Authentic Leadership and Reducing Emotional Labor

Participants described engaging in persistent self-monitoring and impression management as part of their experiences navigating executive leadership. Rather than characterizing these dynamics in abstract terms, participants frequently explained how they consciously managed communication, behavior, and self-presentation in professional contexts. These descriptions reflected an ongoing awareness of how leadership behaviors might be interpreted by others and how credibility or professionalism might be evaluated within leadership spaces. For example, Participant 5 explicitly referenced dominant leadership schemas, stating, "I realized also at that moment, A, I didn't have to be a college president following the traditional white male chancellor or college president that we've all seen for a long time." This statement illustrated participants' recognition of prevailing leadership norms and the implicit standards shaping expectations of executive presence. Participants' narratives suggested leadership environments

were not experienced as neutral, but as structured by historically dominant models of authority, communication, and demeanor.

Closely connected to this awareness were participants' descriptions of authenticity and self-presentation. Several participants discussed tensions surrounding the need to remain genuine while navigating professional expectations. Participant 5 explained, "If I'm going to get there, I'm going to get there being who I am and not pretending to be anyone else." References to "pretending" or to modifying oneself for professional acceptance reflected the identity management processes associated with emotional labor. Participants framed these adjustments not as isolated events, but as recurring considerations embedded in their leadership experiences.

Participants also described how culturally grounded behaviors could be perceived as misaligned with dominant workplace norms. One leader, Participant 6, reflected on this tension, noting, "We can be loud and we like to be together with a lot of people. . . . Being virtual all the time . . . to me, it's just counterintuitive." Such statements highlighted how participants understood their relational, expressive, or community-oriented orientations as shaped by cultural identity and recognized that professional environments often privileged different behavioral expectations.

Taken together, these narratives suggested pressures toward behavioral adjustment were less reflective of formal institutional mandates and more indicative of institutional culture. Participants' accounts consistently emphasized implicit norms, perception management, and the need to anticipate how one's communication or emotional expression might be judged. Therefore, emotional labor emerged not simply as an individual characteristic of leadership but as a response to leadership contexts in which credibility and legitimacy were perceived to be filtered through dominant cultural expectations.

Implications of these findings were not that Latinx leaders should abandon adaptability, but that institutional cultures played a significant role in shaping the extent to which such adaptations became necessary. When leadership environments privilege narrow models of professionalism or authority, leaders from historically marginalized backgrounds may bear disproportionate burdens of adjustment. Institutions can mitigate these pressures by modeling inclusive leadership practices, affirming multiple expressions of leadership effectiveness, and addressing cultural norms that equate credibility with assimilation.

Aligning Leadership Development and Evaluation With Student and Community Impact

Participants consistently framed leadership success in terms of student outcomes and community impact rather than positional authority. These findings suggested community colleges should align leadership development and evaluation practices with institutional missions that prioritize equity, access, and community engagement. When leadership effectiveness is assessed through contributions to student success and community partnership, institutions more accurately reflect the values participants identified as central to their leadership identities.

Recognizing and rewarding leadership practices that advance student-centered and community-oriented outcomes reinforce institutional commitments and affirm leadership approaches frequently enacted by Latinx leaders. Aligning evaluation and development systems in this way not only legitimizes diverse leadership practices but also expands leadership pathways by signaling the institution's executive level values and supports impact-driven leadership.

Representation and Responsibility in Leadership

Finally, the findings underscored the significance of representation in executive leadership. Participants consistently described their presence as both symbolic and consequential, emphasizing a perceived responsibility to serve as visible examples for others and to expand opportunities for future leaders. Representation was framed not merely as demographic diversity, but as a mechanism through which institutions could better understand, support, and advocate for historically underrepresented communities. In light of these findings, community colleges should intentionally diversify executive leadership teams, establish transparent and accessible advancement pathways, and hold leadership accountable for fostering inclusive institutional cultures and equitable access to leadership opportunities.

Findings Related to Literature

Findings of this study both affirmed and extended existing scholarship on women's leadership in higher education, particularly research examining leadership through an intersectional lens. By centering the lived experiences of Latinx women in executive leadership roles in community colleges, this study provided empirical support for prior research and offered nuanced insight into how intersecting identities shaped leadership development, access, and practice.

Consistent with existing literature, participants described nonlinear leadership pathways shaped by opportunity, relational support, and institutional context rather than formal succession planning (S. C. Airini et al., 2019). These findings aligned with leadership identity development theory, which conceptualizes leadership as an evolving process shaped through experience, reflection, and social interaction (Komives et al., 2005; Komives, Longerbeam et al., 2006). This study extended the literature by demonstrating how leadership identity development for Latinx

women is uniquely influenced by intersecting gendered and racialized expectations in executive leadership spaces.

Findings strongly supported intersectionality theory, which emphasizes that gender and ethnicity operate simultaneously to shape lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). Participants' narratives reflected compounded bias, heightened scrutiny, and exclusion from informal power networks, echoing prior research on the “double bind” faced by women of color in leadership (Bhopal, 2020a; Turner, 2007). At the same time, this study contributed to the literature by highlighting how intersectionality also functioned as a source of leadership strength, informing inclusive, relational, and equity-minded leadership practices.

The importance of mentorship and sponsorship identified in this study aligned with extensive research emphasizing relational support as a key mechanism for leadership advancement (T. M. Brown, 2005; Faniko et al., 2022). This study extended existing scholarship by clearly distinguishing mentorship from sponsorship and demonstrating that advancement into executive leadership often depended on active advocacy, visibility, and access to decision-making spaces. Participants' experiences with authenticity, code-switching, and emotional labor further aligned with literature on identity management among women of color in leadership (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Mirza, 2017). This study contributed to the literature by illustrating how sustained emotional labor affects leadership sustainability and underscores the importance of institutional environments that affirm authenticity and belonging. Finally, participants framed leadership as a collective and generative practice, consistent with scholarship emphasizing generativity and legacy in leadership identity development (Komives, Longerbeam et al., 2006). This study extended the literature by centering Latinx women's leadership as

community-oriented, justice-driven, and deeply connected to institutional mission and student success.

Implications for Future Research

Findings of this qualitative narrative inquiry highlighted several important directions for future research on leadership development and equity in higher education. By centering the lived experiences of Latinx women in executive leadership roles in community colleges, this study contributed to an emerging body of scholarship and revealed gaps that warrant further investigation. Future research should continue to focus specifically on Latinx women in executive leadership roles, particularly in community colleges, where this population remains significantly underrepresented despite serving increasingly diverse student populations. Although existing literature has often examined women of color as a collective group (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Turner et al., 2011), disaggregating research by ethnicity can provide deeper insight into the distinct cultural, structural, and institutional factors shaping leadership experiences. Studies that focus exclusively on Latinx women may illuminate variation across geographic regions, institutional contexts, and executive leadership roles, further clarifying how context influences leadership identity development and advancement.

At the same time, future research should examine the lived experiences of Latinx men in executive leadership roles to explore how gender intersects differently with ethnicity in shaping leadership advancement and identity development. Comparative studies between Latina and Latino leaders may reveal both shared structural barriers and gender-specific dynamics in community college executive leadership. Additionally, research focusing on leaders from other racial and ethnic minority groups with foreign-born or immigrant backgrounds, across both men

and women, may further deepen understanding of how migration history, cultural identity, and institutional context influence leadership experiences in senior community college roles.

Additional research could build on these findings by examining leadership trajectories across different institutional types, including 4-year institutions, Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), and predominantly white institutions. Comparative studies may help determine whether experiences described in this study are consistent across settings or shaped by institutional mission, governance, or organizational culture. Such inquiry could extend understanding of how institutional environments support or constrain Latinx leadership pathways.

Future studies might also explore experiences of Latinx leaders at varying career stages, including midlevel administrators and aspiring executives. Longitudinal research designs may provide insight into how leadership identity, mentorship, sponsorship, and resilience evolve over time, particularly as individuals transition into senior leadership roles. Identifying developmental patterns may help pinpoint critical moments where institutional interventions are most effective.

Methodologically, future research might employ mixed methods or quantitative approaches to examine themes identified in this study at a broader scale. Survey-based research may assess the prevalence of mentorship, sponsorship, emotional labor, or code-switching among Latinx leaders across institutions, and qualitative follow-up studies could deepen understanding of how these experiences influence leadership outcomes. Together, these approaches may strengthen the generalizability of findings and preserve the depth central to narrative inquiry. Finally, continued intersectional research examining leadership through the interplay of gender, ethnicity, immigration status, and first-generation identity may reveal further complexity in Latinx leadership experiences. Expanding intersectional inquiry can deepen

understanding of how systems of power and inequality shape executive leadership pathways in community colleges and beyond.

Comparative and Intersectional Studies

Future studies may benefit from comparative designs that examine leadership experiences across different identity groups, including comparisons between Latinx women, other women of color, white women, and men in executive leadership roles. Such research might further clarify how intersecting identities influence leadership identity development, access to opportunity, and perceptions of credibility. Comparative studies grounded in intersectionality theory may help identify both shared and divergent leadership experiences and inform more equitable leadership development practices. Research that further explores intersecting identities (e.g., immigration status, language, socioeconomic background, generational status) holds potential to extend understanding of how leadership experiences are shaped in complex social and institutional systems.

Longitudinal Research on Leadership Identity Development

Given that leadership identity development is an evolving process, longitudinal research designs would provide valuable insight into how Latinx women's leadership identities change over time. Future studies might follow leaders across career stages to examine how mentorship, institutional culture, and professional transitions influence leadership identity development and sustainability. Longitudinal approaches may also allow researchers to examine how leaders navigate shifts in institutional context, policy, and leadership expectations throughout their careers.

Methodological Considerations and Mixed Methods Approaches

Although narrative inquiry provided rich, in-depth insight into participants' lived experiences, future research might incorporate mixed methods approaches to complement qualitative findings with quantitative data. Surveys examining leadership climate, mentorship access, or perceptions of inclusion across institutions may help contextualize narrative findings and enhance generalizability. Mixed methods studies may also support institutional assessment efforts by providing data-driven insights alongside lived experiences. Additionally, future qualitative studies could explore alternative methodologies such as phenomenology, case studies, or participatory action research to examine leadership experiences from different epistemological perspectives. Participatory approaches, in particular, may empower leaders as coresearchers and support action-oriented institutional change.

Institutional Contexts and Leadership Structures

Future research should examine how specific institutional contexts, such as HSIs versus non-HSIs, influence leadership opportunities and experiences for Latinx women. Comparative institutional studies may explore how organizational mission, governance structures, diversity initiatives, and leadership evaluation practices shape executive pathways and leadership identity development. Additionally, research should evaluate the effectiveness of leadership development programs, mentorship initiatives, and institutional policies designed to support women of color in leadership. Empirical studies assessing program outcomes may help determine which practices most effectively promote leadership readiness, advancement, retention, and institutional accountability for diversity and equity outcomes. Examining the role of governing boards and senior leadership teams may further illuminate systemic factors that facilitate or constrain leadership advancement.

Conclusion

This qualitative narrative inquiry examined the lived experiences of Latinx women who had progressed into executive leadership roles in community colleges. By centering participants' narratives, the study illuminated how intersecting identities, institutional contexts, and relational support shaped leadership journeys. Findings affirmed progress toward leadership diversity has occurred, but systemic inequities and identity-based barriers have persisted in executive leadership spaces.

The study contributed to leadership scholarship by integrating intersectionality theory and leadership identity development theory to offer a nuanced understanding of executive leadership in community colleges. Practically, findings highlighted the need for intentional leadership pipelines, inclusive institutional cultures, and sustained mentorship and sponsorship structures. As community colleges continue to serve increasingly diverse student populations, leadership that reflects and advocates for those communities is essential for advancing equity and institutional effectiveness.

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Appendix A- Tables

Table A.1

Alignment Table

Problem Based on Literature Findings	Research Questions	Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks	Interview Questions
As of 2023, women held approximately 40% of senior leadership roles in higher education institutions, a notable increase from previous decades but still below parity (American Council on Education, 2023)	RQ1: How do women in leadership roles in community colleges describe how the intersection of gender and ethnicity influences their lived experiences?	Theoretical framework: Intersectionality theory, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) Conceptual framework: The leadership identity development (LID) theory, developed by Komives et al. (2005)	RQ1: Interview Questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10.
Research has demonstrated that gender and ethnicity intersect to influence career trajectories, with ethnic and cultural differences sometimes amplifying the barriers faced by women in leadership roles (Bhopal, 2020).	RQ2: How do women in leadership roles in community colleges describe how the intersection of gender and ethnicity shapes their leadership roles?	----- Theoretical framework: Intersectionality theory, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) Conceptual framework: The leadership identity development (LID) theory, developed by Komives et al. (2005)	RQ2: Interview Questions 6, 7, 8, 9, 11.
The representation of women of color in leadership positions is even lower. Women of color make up only about 5% of college and university presidents (ACE, 2020). Black women represent just 2.3% of all U.S. higher education presidents, and Latina women represent 1.5%, and Asian American women hold less than 1% of these positions.			

Appendix B- Interview Questions

Interview Questions	Framework
What is your current role/title?	N/A
What city and state is your community college located in?	N/A
How many years have you served in leadership?	LID Theory
What is your highest level of education?	N/A
Which of the following best represents your age range? - 25–34 years - 35–44 years - 45–54 years - 55–64 years - 65 years or older	N/A

Research Question 1: How do women in leadership roles in community colleges describe how the intersection of gender and ethnicity influences their lived experiences?

Interview Questions	Framework
1. Can you share your current role and briefly describe your journey into leadership within community colleges?	LID
2. What aspects of your cultural, racial, or gender identity have shaped how you see yourself as a leader?	LID
3. What were some key turning points or transitions in your leadership journey?	LID
4. How has your understanding of leadership changed over time?	LID
5. Can you describe a moment when your leadership style or approach shifted significantly?	LID
6. How do race and gender intersect in your leadership experience in higher education?	LID

Research Question 2: How do women in leadership roles in community colleges describe how the intersection of gender and ethnicity shapes their leadership roles?

Interview Questions	Framework
7. How has being a Latinx woman shaped your leadership experience?	LID
8. Have there been times when your identity created unique challenges—or opened opportunities—in your career?	LID
9. How would you describe your leadership identity today?	LID
10. Is there anything else you'd like to share that you think is important to understanding your leadership story?	LID
11. What advice would you give to other Latinx women aspiring to leadership in higher education?	LID

Appendix C- Sample Introduction Letter

Dear _____,

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Vasiliki Arca, and I am a doctoral candidate in the John E. Roueche Community College Leadership Program at Kansas State University. I would love the opportunity to interview you and hear your story as part of my dissertation, which explores the lived experiences of women serving in senior executive leadership roles within community colleges.

According to the American Council on Education (2022), women, particularly women of color, remain significantly underrepresented in the highest ranks of community college leadership. My study seeks to better understand how the intersection of gender and ethnicity shapes the professional journeys of Latinx women serving as Chancellors, Presidents, or Provosts. Through qualitative research and narrative inquiry, I aim to highlight the stories, strengths, and strategies that have contributed to your success and advancement.

Your voice and experience are invaluable to this work. Participation involves a single virtual interview via TEAMS, lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes, scheduled at your convenience. The interview will be recorded and professionally transcribed. All information shared will be kept confidential, and your identity will be anonymized in all published findings. Participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time.

If you are open to participating, I will provide you with a formal consent form and additional study details. Please don't hesitate to reach out with any questions. I can be reached at xxxxx@gmail.com or XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Thank you for considering this invitation. I deeply appreciate your time and the leadership you provide to your institution and the broader community college landscape.

Warm regards,

Vasiliki Martinez Arca
Doctoral Candidate, Kansas State University
John E. Roueche Community College Leadership Program

Dr. Sandy Robinson
Email: xxxxx@ksu.edu
Dissertation Committee Chair, Kansas State University
John E. Roueche Community College Leadership Program

Dr. Terry Calaway
Email: xxxxx@ksu.edu
Dissertation Committee Chair, Kansas State University
John E. Roueche Community College Leadership Program

Appendix D- Sample Participant Invitation Email

Dear [Potential Study Participant],

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Vasiliki Martinez, and I am a doctoral candidate in the John E. Roueche Community College Leadership Program at Kansas State University. I am writing to invite you to participate in my dissertation research focused on the lived experiences of women in senior executive leadership roles within community colleges.

According to the American Council on Education (2022), women, particularly women of color, remain significantly underrepresented in the highest ranks of community college leadership. My study seeks to better understand how the intersection of gender and ethnicity shapes the professional journeys of Latina women serving as Chancellors, Presidents, or Provosts. Through qualitative research and narrative inquiry, I aim to highlight the stories, strengths, and strategies that have contributed to your success and advancement.

Your voice and experience are invaluable to this work. Participation involves a single virtual interview via TEAMS, lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes, scheduled at your convenience. The interview will be recorded and professionally transcribed. All information shared will be kept confidential, and your identity will be anonymized in all published findings. Participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time.

If you are open to participating, I will provide you with a formal consent form and additional study details. Please don't hesitate to reach out with any questions. I can be reached at xxxxx@gmail.com or XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Thank you for considering this invitation. I deeply appreciate your time and the leadership you provide to your institution and the broader community college landscape.

Warm regards,

Vasiliki Martinez
Doctoral Candidate, Kansas State University
John E. Roueche Community College Leadership Program

Appendix E- Consent Form

PROJECT TITLE:

Exploring the journeys of Hispanic and Latinx women leaders in community colleges: A focus on the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity in leadership.

PROJECT
APPROVAL DATE:

PROJECT
EXPIRATION DATE:

LENGTH OF
STUDY:

PRINCIPAL
INVESTIGATOR:

DR. SANDY ROBINSON

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):

VASILIKI MARTINEZ

CONTACT DETAILS FOR
PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:

DR. SANDY ROBINSON xxxxx@ksu.edu
VASILIKI MARTINEZ xxxxx@gmail.com

IRB CHAIR CONTACT
INFORMATION:

Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving
Human
xxxxx@ksu.edu
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:

N/A

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of Hispanic and Latinx women in executive positions in community colleges, with a particular emphasis on how the intersection of gender and ethnicity shapes their professional journeys.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:

The proposed methodology for this study is a qualitative narrative inquiry design. The participants will be female executive leaders, such as Chancellors, Presidents, and Provosts, serving in public community colleges across the United States. This study aims to explore how the intersection of gender and ethnicity has shaped their professional leadership journeys. Data

will be collected through semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. These interviews will consist of open-ended questions and follow-up prompts designed to elicit rich, detailed narratives about each participant's experiences. All interviews will be conducted virtually via TEAMS or Zoom and will be audio recorded with the participants' consent.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:

This study presents minimal risk to you. However, you may experience emotional discomfort as you reflect on and discuss personal and professional experiences, including challenges related to gender, ethnicity, discrimination, or bias in leadership roles.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:

The focus of this study is to explore how the intersection of gender and ethnicity has shaped your professional journey as a female executive leader in a community college. By centering your voice and lived experiences, this research seeks to deepen the understanding of the barriers you've faced, the supports you've received, and the ways in which your leadership identity has developed over time. Your insights will help inform future policy, practice, and leadership development efforts aimed at encouraging and supporting more diverse women in higher education leadership.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

Your identity, as well as the identity of your institution, will be kept strictly confidential. You will be assigned a unique identifier using a combination of letters and numbers to protect your anonymity. All interview recordings and transcripts will be stored on a password-protected and encrypted external drive, which will be kept in a secure location accessible only to me as the principal investigator. Your data will be retained for three years following the completion of the study and then permanently deleted. Any information you share during this study, even with identifying details removed, will not be used or shared for any future research studies.

The information or biospecimens collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

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

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

(Remember that it is a requirement for the P.I. to maintain a signed and dated copy of the same consent form signed and kept by the participant).

PARTICIPANT NAME:

**PARTICIPANT
SIGNATURE:**

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

DATE:

DATE: