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RE-DEFINING LEADERSHIP: EXPLORING WOMEN'S ROLES AS SUCCESSFUL
LEADERS IN ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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A DISSERTATION

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For the Degree of Doctor of Education

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RE-DEFINING LEADERSHIP: EXPLORING WOMEN'S ROLES AS SUCCESSFUL
LEADERS IN ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the professional experiences and opportunities of female leaders in the field of higher education as they sought professional advancement, examining specifically contemporary, online college and universities, where women have achieved career advancement at exponentially higher rates than in traditional college and university settings. The study also examined participants' experiences of leadership and their perspectives regarding their experience of how leadership skills are defined and measured in the context of contemporary higher education institutions. The Literature Review includes environmental elements and ideologies related to successful leadership currently existing higher education as a field, in order to shift its definition of effective leadership and redefine the role that female leaders play within this context, along with how their leadership development is effectively supported, within the context of contemporary, online educational settings.

Four themes were identified in this study that impact female leaders' career advancement opportunities, definitions of successful leadership, and the impact of professional development and growth supported by educational institutions, they included: career trajectories and opportunities, higher education's impact on career advancement opportunities, and observations and experiences of leadership advancement, characteristics that define successful leadership in higher education, environment or culture's impact on defining successful leadership, and supporting career advancement; impact of mentoring on career advancement opportunities, and professional development opportunities for women at

online colleges and universities. This research study identified existing gaps in the literature and highlighted opportunities for further research regarding examining career advancement opportunities for female leaders within the context of online higher education, and how effective leadership principles are defined and influenced by online education. This research study added to the body of knowledge regarding gaps in the current literature.

Keywords: Equity, higher education, marginal, contemporary colleges and universities, online colleges and universities, traditional colleges and universities, career advancement, leadership, professional development, mentoring, coaching

University of New England

Doctor of Education
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1800s, professional women have been present in institutions of higher education, as women obtained positions as teachers. While the role of women in the business sector does mirror their counterparts in higher education, women in the latter professional field experienced more career opportunities as the respect and esteem associated with their positions could be attributed to the high levels of education they had achieved (Parker, 2015, p. 3). Over a period of twenty-four years, beginning in 1836, seven women's colleges were founded in the United States that were similar to men's Ivy League schools of that period. These schools included Barnard, Smith, Mount Holyoke, Vassar, Bryn Mawr, Wellesley, and Radcliffe. By the end of 1875, fifty women's colleges would be founded, most of which employed a high percentage of female faculty members. While women would be excluded from faculty positions at male colleges, they held leadership positions at women's colleges, and excelled at improving both curriculum and student life.

By 1890, women were employed as "Deans of Women" who responded to the need for female leadership as the female college student population expanded to 47% of the total number of college students in the United States. College and university leaders began hiring women to fill key leadership positions, acting as advisors and counsellors to the growing number of female students, resulting in the title Deans of Women (Parker, 2015). The National Association of Deans of Women (NADW) was founded in 1903 and was comprised of 17 Deans of Women. Deans discussed issues of housing, self-government, leadership opportunities for women, athletics and student activities. WWII provided women in higher education with the opportunity to fill vacant faculty and leadership positions previously held by men, proving their leadership strengths and academic attributes in the process.

Prior to WWII, the position of Dean of Women had evolved into the position of Dean of Students, with male leaders in the primary role with females in secondary roles advising female students. This reduced the authority and responsibility previously held by Deans of Women, and for the next decade, they would continue to work in subordinate leadership positions, or lose positions, as men entered the higher education work force again. While the 1960s and 1970s brought the lack of equality to the forefront, with legislative and social movements, the function of candidates and their qualifications for leadership positions began to be considered over their gender. Even with these advancements, since the 1950s, men have held the majority of roles as presidents, vice-presidents, deans, and other high-ranking positions on college and university campuses. According to Parker (2015), although more than half of the bachelor's degrees and master's degrees, along with a third of doctorate degrees, awarded since 1979 have been earned by women, in 2012, 86% of the presidents, provosts, and chancellors were male, and 75% of full professors were males (American Association of University Professors, 2012; Stripling, 2012). These data also reflect the fact that women tend to advance in their careers at slower rates than their male counterparts in higher education, while having higher teaching loads and lower salaries.

Statement of the Problem

Although the number of women in leadership positions in higher education has risen over the past six decades, access to these positions is still not on the same level as their male counterparts. Women are still under-represented as university presidents, provosts, and in other high-ranking administrator positions. Eddy and Ward (2015) indicate that an imperative step on the leadership ladder is the position of Chief Academic Officer (CAO), and that male CAOs are more likely to indicate interest in a presidency (33%), than female CAOs (25%). While half of the CAOs at U.S. community colleges are women, only 25% of presidents at four-year colleges are female. Do contemporary college/universities support

women's progression into leadership positions in higher education and how are opportunities for professional advancement fostered within the contemporary academic institutions' organizational culture in the United States?

Purpose of the Study

This study explored the professional experiences and opportunities of women in the field of higher education as they seek professional advancement, examining specifically contemporary college and universities, where women have achieved career advancement at exponentially higher rates than in traditional college and university settings. The study also examined participants' experiences of leadership and their perspectives regarding their experience of how leadership skills are defined and measured in the context of contemporary higher education institutions. The literature review included environmental elements and ideologies related to successful leadership currently exist in higher education as a field, in order to shift its definition of effective leadership and redefine the role that female leaders play within this context, along with how their leadership development is effectively supported, beyond the scope of contemporary educational settings. The study also identified educational environments existing at contemporary institutions within higher education that have provided advanced leadership opportunities and professional leadership development for women that reflect equity with their male counterparts, to examine why these contemporary academic institutions foster female career advancement with comparatively greater success.

Research Questions

1. How do women in advanced leadership positions at contemporary higher education institutions describe their leadership development and opportunities?
2. What factors do women in advanced leadership positions believe created career opportunities and accelerated their career trajectories?

3. How do participants characterize the culture/norms of their contemporary academic institution relative to their opportunities for advancement?

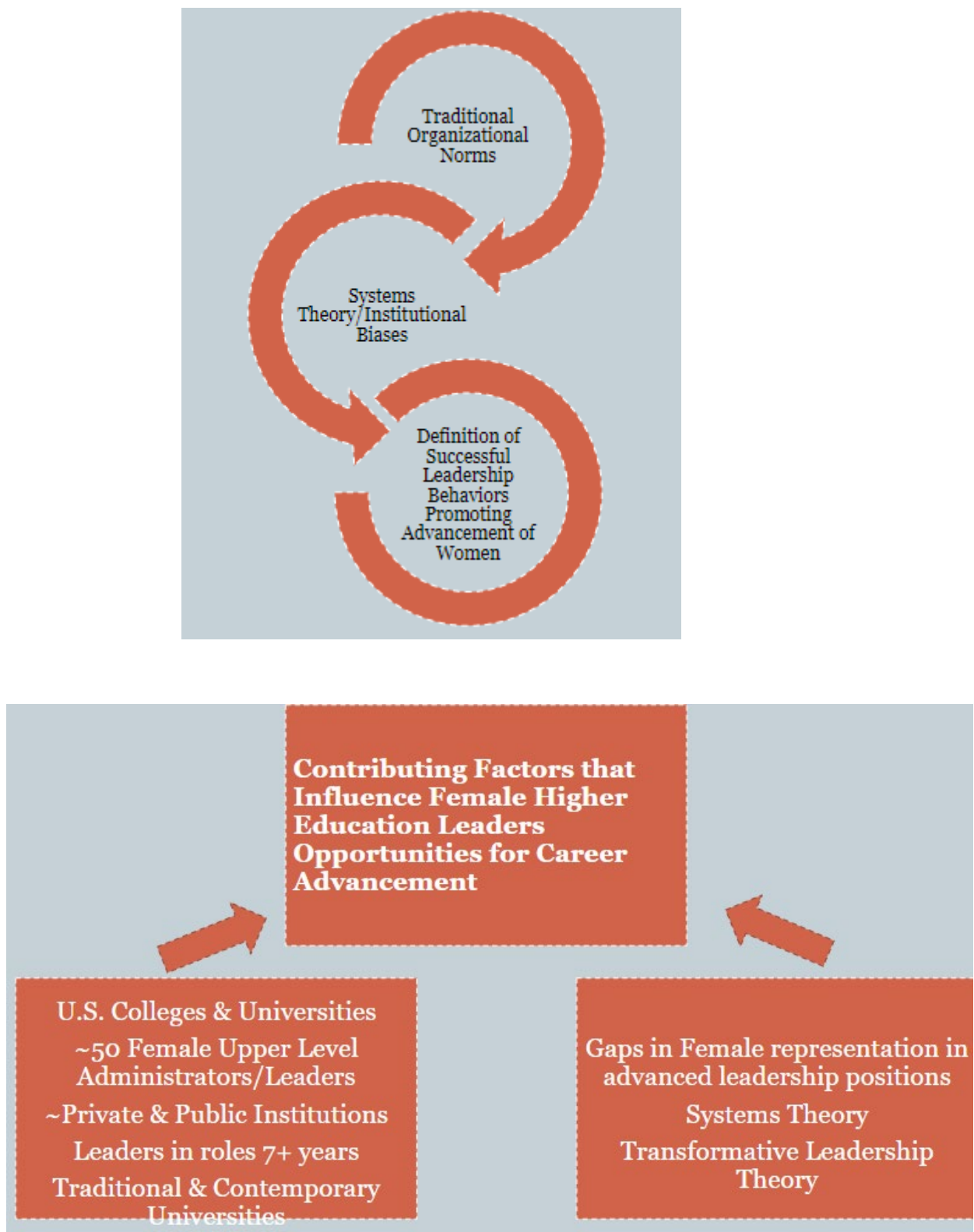
Theoretical Frameworks

The process of narrowing my research topic of interest moved from exploring the barriers faced by female leaders in the higher education profession when attempting to obtain advanced leadership positions to a focused examination of the role of the professional environment. Specifically, the focus was how the contemporary college/university setting as compared to traditional higher education environment impacts women's professional leadership opportunities. This research topic was influenced not only by my own professional experiences and observations as a female higher education administrator over the past seventeen years, but also through the research compiled during the preliminary literature review. Originally, I believed that this research study would focus specifically on leadership characteristics that when employed and utilized by female higher education leaders would result in career advancement and success. However, as I defined my research topic, narrowed it, and compiled resources for research and analysis, I have discovered that the definition of successful leadership is an intricate, complex, multi-faceted subject matter that is influenced, defined and projected on female leaders depending on several internal and external factors and variables. I faced challenges when trying to determine which viewpoint would define and narrow the focus of the study, because it truly involved examining the topic within the context of the professional environment. The work environment impacts how leadership aspects are defined and are deemed as successful within that environment.

The preliminary literature review for the original research topic highlighted the importance of the influence of professional environments when defining respected leadership styles and behaviours. Traditionally, higher education's structured, rigid, and highly bureaucratic system of assigning professional roles and norms, is authoritarian and extremely

transactional. This system is defined by specified protocols, powerful authority figures, and its focus on operations and outcomes, rather than professional development and collaboration amongst faculty and staff members (Burns, 1978). Many female leaders adopt collaborative, transformative approaches to leadership that are an extension of their work as faculty members and educators. This evolved approach to educational, developmental leadership runs contrary to a defined operational system where policies, practices and professional roles are enforced and valued. While Dominici, Fried and Zeger (2013) emphasize the importance of cultivating female leaders in higher education in order to increase gender equity, prevailing gender stereotypes and cultural biases regarding successful leadership behaviors decrease women's access to professional development and mentoring necessary to achieve career advancement in higher education environments.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Significance of the Study

This study was based on literature that addressed the importance of diversifying higher education leadership to include female higher education professionals in upper-level leadership positions. The literature suggests multiple reasons for diversifying leadership, including incorporating equity when adequately reflecting the number of female students that are currently enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities (57% of all college students are female, while women only currently occupy 26% of leadership positions). The ratio of female to male college presidents has remained stagnant over the past decade, and over the next two decades, the half of the current college and university presidents will retire, leaving key leadership positions in higher education vacant. While women currently in leadership roles contribute significantly to enhancing scholarship, creating resources, and leading academic departments, they tend to do so without the full support of their faculty or deans, and are not always recognized for their contributions (Dominici, Fried & Zeger, 2013). Many senior female leaders strive to incorporate highly effective, collaborative transformative leadership styles as defined by Marion and Gonzales (2014), in their university environments. Some find that these techniques, when applied to the traditional, transactional, hierarchical modes of leadership in higher education settings, do not promote collaboration or communication, and they are then unsuccessful when attempting to lead academic departments or implement strategic operational initiatives (Dominici, Fried & Zeger, 2013).

Higher education's traditional professional environment is highly structured, rigid and based on a bureaucratic system of roles, purposes, and norms (Dominici, Fried & Zeger, 2013). The authoritarian, transactional leadership style that is most effective in this context includes, as illustrated by Burns (1978), highly specified protocols, the view of authority figures as all powerful, and an operational system where collaboration and professional

development is not respected. Policies, practices, and defined positions are concrete and highly enforced. Female leadership's practice of applying collaborative, transformational leadership styles in this environment, while perhaps successful in other organizational atmospheres, does not produce collegiality or engender the respect, loyalty, and admiration of their male counterparts.

Definition of Terms

Equity – the quality of being fair and impartial

Higher Education - education at a college or university where subjects are studied at an advanced level. The professional field of working at a college or university.

Lean In – A phrase coined by Sheryl Sandberg in 2013 to describe women in higher education's need to be more assertive at work and not allow biases keep them from moving forward. By leaning in, female professionals would obtain more authority.

Marginal – relating to, or situated at a margin or border

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 – Legislative Act in 1972 providing protection for employees and students in educational institutions

1964 Civil Rights Act – Enacted on July 2, 1964, is a landmark piece of civil rights and US labor law legislation in the United States that outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

Contemporary Colleges/Universities – Higher education institutions established over the past thirty years, and may include primarily on-line delivery models and a variety of undergraduate, graduate, and professional certification programs.

Traditional Colleges/Universities - Higher educational institutions over thirty years old, which may include primarily campus-based delivery modes, and undergraduate programs.

Conclusion

An exploration of female leaders that currently hold key leadership positions provided insight regarding the current college, university leadership landscape as women are securing presidency positions at colleges and universities across the United States, although the transition to a more gender balanced leadership has been slow. In 2006, women held 23% of the presidency positions in the field of higher education, while their male counterparts accounted for 77% of these leadership roles. These data reflect a dramatic shift in the number of female college and university presidents, as in 1986, only 10% of the presidency positions were occupied by women. In a study including 700 universities in the U.S., with 136 of the universities being led by female presidents, presidents who were women tended to be greater risk takers and illustrate more of an entrepreneurial spirit when compared to male presidents (Webb, 2010). Statistics reflect the fact that female presidents tend to have more experience in leadership positions within the field of academia than their male counterparts, with 46% percent of female presidents having previously occupied the roles of provost or chief financial officer, compared to only 28.5% of male presidents having occupied these leadership roles prior to assuming their presidency positions. Female presidents may have held more advanced higher education leadership positions than their counterparts, however, male leaders are more likely to obtain presidency positions, with higher salaries, than women with equal or more professional leadership experiences.

Many higher education institutions currently have competent, successful female leaders in senior leadership positions at both private and public educational institutions. While the representation of female leaders has expanded in higher education over the past six decades, there are still significant deficits in their representation in advanced leadership roles when compared to their male counterparts. Further research and assessment pertaining to the causes of these discrepancies is needed in order to define the value placed on particular

leadership characteristic, styles, and traits in higher education environments. Illustrating what steps may be taken at an institutional level, to redefine or reinterpret the definition of highly effective leadership skills, with the goal of developing a more equitable process for obtaining senior leadership roles for both women and men in higher education, will also be explored. Assumptions regarding the value that women in leadership positions bring to their positions, along with an examination of existing cultural biases, is crucial, for higher education institutions to begin the process of re-developing the roles qualities, traits, and expectations of leadership, while also transforming the organizational culture that has existed within this institutional setting for over a century.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter provides an integrative overview of the literature on the professional barriers experienced by women in leadership roles as they attempt to pursue more advanced leadership positions at United States colleges and universities. The literature highlights five themes related to women's leadership opportunities in higher education; the historic evolution of women's leadership opportunities in higher education, the traditional definition of successful leadership in the higher education profession, women's leadership opportunities as related to organizational culture, a lack of professional development and mentoring programs in the traditional setting, and women's leadership opportunities within the context of contemporary academic institutions.

Organization of the Literature

The compilation of literature reflected in this review consists of resources generated over the past fifteen years and represents a historic culmination of works that explore leadership, the historic role of women in leadership positions in the higher education profession, along with corporate and higher education studies that examine leadership trajectories for women, exploring the traditional attributes of leaders in the context of higher education. It also explores generational and culture components that influence women's definition of successful leadership, challenges facing female leaders in higher education, current leadership trends in the higher education field, career advancement opportunities for women in the context of contemporary academic institutions, and organizational theory, (including defining cultural norms), and its impact on how leaders are selected and obtain career advancement within higher education organizations.

Quality of the Literature

The resources highlighted in this review are drawn from contemporary books, articles, and higher education leadership dissertations, created by researchers, historians, social-psychologists, businessmen, and leadership scholars. It included field-based surveys, first-hand accounts in the form of interviews, leadership and social systems theory, and historic and demographic data related to the field of higher education and women's leadership roles in this field over the past century. The literature was gathered initially with a primary focus on the historic elements of women's roles in higher education, and then was expanded to include sociological, comparative, and contemporary works that directly both highlighted and addressed inequities, historically and recently, in the leadership positions held by women in the professional field of higher education. The literature review was constructed utilizing a themes-based approach to organizing resources and findings, as this subject involves multiple disciplines, and a diverse array of content areas of possible research and exploration. While the literature included in this review offers a comprehensive, holistic approach to examining this subject matter, further resources must be included for further study that illustrate assessment methods for thoroughly approaching and attempting to resolve the challenges posed by the subject of this review.

Historical Context

By 1890, women were employed at "Deans of Women" who responded to the need for female leadership as the female college student population expanded to 47% of the total number of college students in the United States. College and university leaders began hiring women to fill key leadership positions, acting as advisors and counsellors to the growing number of female students, resulting in the title Deans of Women (Parker, 2015). The National Association of Deans of Women (NADW) was founded in 1903 and was comprised of 17 Deans of Women. They discussed issues of housing, self-government, leadership

opportunities for women, athletics and student activities. WWII provided women in higher education with the opportunity to fill vacant faculty and leadership positions previously held by men, proving their leadership strengths and academic attributes in the process.

Prior to WWII, the position of Dean of Women had evolved into the position of Dean of Students, with male leaders in the primary role with females in secondary roles advising female students. The evolution of the traditional Dean of Students role reduced the authority and responsibility previously held by Deans of Women, and for the next decade, they would continue to work in subordinate leadership positions, or lose positions, as men entered the higher education work place again. While the 1960s and 1970s brought equality to the forefront, with legislative and social movements, the function of candidates and their qualifications for leadership positions began to be considered over their gender. Even with these advancements, since the 1950s, men have held the majority of the roles as presidents, vice-presidents, deans, and other high-ranking positions on college and university campuses. According to Parker (2015), although more than half of the bachelor's degrees and master's degrees, along with a third of doctorate degrees, awarded since 1979 have been earned by women, in 2012, 86% of the presidents, provosts, and chancellors were male, and 75% of full professors were males (American Association of University Professors, 2012; Stripling, 2012). These data also reflect the fact that women tend to advance in their careers at slower rates than their male counterparts in higher education, while having higher teaching loads and lower salaries.

Contradictory theoretical approaches related to the elements that contribute to women's inability historically to obtain the advanced leadership positions held by their often less qualified male counterparts in this professional field is illustrated in previous research conducted. The findings generated from prior research regarding this subject matter suggest there are opportunities for further investigation and a thorough analysis of how these

elements contribute to creating professional barriers for women in higher education. Research indicates these factors may be identified, addressed and altered to create an equitable professional environment in the higher education arena.

The preliminary literature review for the original research topic for this study highlighted the importance of the impact that professional environments, contexts have when defining respected leadership styles and behaviours. Traditionally, higher education's structured, rigid, and highly bureaucratic system of assigning professional roles and norms, is authoritarian and extremely transactional. This system is defined by specified protocols, powerful authority figures, and is focus on operations and outcomes, rather than professional development and collaboration amongst faculty and staff members (Burns, 1978). Many female leaders adopt collaborative, transformative approaches to leadership that are an extension of their work as faculty members and educators. This evolved approach to educational, developmental leadership runs contrary to a defined operational system where policies, practices and professional roles are enforced and valued. While Dominici, Fried and Zeger (2013) emphasize the importance of cultivating female leaders in higher education in order to increase gender equity, prevailing gender stereotypes and cultural biases regarding successful leadership behaviours, decreases women's access to professional development and mentoring necessary to achieve career advancement in higher education environments.

Pursing a narrowed topic of interest that focuses specifically on how environmental aspects impact female leaders' opportunities for advancement in the higher education profession, emphasizes the importance of incorporating complex leadership systems theory, rather than focusing specifically on leadership behavior theories as the primary theoretical framework for this study. This would make it necessary to collect more resources that highlight how leadership is defined and valued in higher education settings, and an in depth analysis of how respected and rewarded leadership traits and behaviors in this context

compare to valued leadership characteristics in alternate professional environments (such as the corporate and non-profit sectors, as well as international, global organizations). A shift in the identified research topic would influence the resources compiled for the study, and also would directly shift the conceptual framework for the study (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). The focus is less on exploring and defining successful leadership behaviors that may be employed by female leaders, and more on emphasizing how the environment in which females are utilizing their leadership skills and behaviours impacts and assigns value to their success as leaders and ultimately their career opportunities in that professional field.

Application of Frameworks Within Historical Context

Pursuing a narrowed topic of interest that focuses specifically on how environmental aspects impact female leaders' opportunities for advancement in the higher education profession led to recognition of the importance of incorporating complex leadership systems theory, rather than focusing specifically on leadership behaviour theories as the primary theoretical framework for this study. This would make it necessary to collect more resources that highlight how leadership is defined and valued in higher education settings, and an in depth analysis of how respected and rewarded leadership traits and behaviors in this context compare to valued leadership characteristics in alternate professional environments, such as the corporate and non-profit sectors, as well as international, global organizations (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016).

The two theoretical frameworks that are applied in this research study are leadership behavior theories as outlined by Northouse (2015), specifically the behavioral and situational approaches, and a complex (organizational) systems leadership approach, as highlighted by Maki (2015). The behavioral approach may be directly applied to this study when examining the leadership styles, skills, and strategies, that are utilized successfully by female higher education leaders, and which leadership behaviors, when displayed by female leaders are not.

This approach also allows for an exploration of the leadership behaviours that produce opportunities for career growth and development in the higher education environment, and whether or not task, achievement related behaviors, (that have traditionally been associated with male leadership traits), and are valued more than relational, collaborative leadership traits (that are historically aligned with female leadership styles). Determining which of these leadership behaviors is highly valued and respected in the context of higher education, whether it is effective or not, provides insight into leadership behavior biases that may influence or impact the advanced leadership opportunities available and attainable for female leaders (Northouse, 2015).

The highly recognized situational approach, developed by Hershey and Blanchard, (1969), examines leadership based on a situational context, implying that different organizational situations require diverse forms of leadership. It is essential that leaders adapt their leadership styles to meet the needs and demands of their organization and challenges existing within a given context. The crucial component of this approach is that leaders adjust their leadership styles to meet the developmental levels, or continuum, relative to where followers' developmental levels are located. The high level of flexibility and fluidity associated with this leadership approach, means that leaders must constantly balance their inherent leadership traits, with those skills needed to best accommodate their followers. Within the context of this research study, this framework is directly applicable to the fluidity with which female leaders in higher education are expected to acclimate and adjust their inherent leadership styles, as detailed by Sandberg (2013), in order to lean-in to expected leadership characteristics and styles that are not only expected by their followers, in order to accommodate their needs as followers, but also to meet the pre-determined leadership traits and skills as traditionally defined by the institution itself.

In a research study similar to previously conducted studies of Hersey & Blanchard (1993), 332 university employees and 32 supervisors were surveyed regarding effective leadership behaviors. This data was then compiled to predict employee performance, job satisfaction, and successful leadership behaviors, while also identifying optimal leadership style. While situational leadership theory did not appear to have utility within this study, deeper analysis revealed that it was applicable specifically to the relationships developed between leaders and team members when the focus was on enhancing and influencing performance outcomes. Some aspects of situational leadership theory were found to be accurate when applied to specific relationships and aspects of the dynamic of influence between leaders and followers (Fernandez & Vecchio, 1997).

When applied to this research study, this theoretical approach illustrates the important role that traditionally accepted leadership norms play within higher education and how they are reinforced within the context of expecting that all leaders exhibit specific characteristics or communication styles in order to mirror the accepted leadership styles as defined by the organization. Social interactions with peers, supervisors, and followers also must adhere to traditionally pre-determined organizational norms and standards, and historically, in the field of higher education, the leadership and communication styles that are valued and rewarded include elements of authoritarianism, competitiveness, and goal-oriented interactions. Female leaders who do not incorporate those leadership traits and behaviours when leading their departments, are often overlooked for advancement opportunities, and are not as valued as their equally qualified male counterparts who do conform to organizational leadership style norms, and exhibit the skills and traits valued and approved of by higher education institutions (Maki, 2015).

Strengths & Weaknesses of Identified Theoretical Approaches

The strength of applying the behavioral leadership approach to this research study is that it incorporates a review of specific leadership behaviors that are valued and unacceptable within the context of higher education. Historically, this approach is respected and viable in the field of leadership research, and it provides this study with a framework through which leadership traits may be examined and their assigned value and effectiveness understood (Northouse, 2015). It also offers us a broad leadership context, with which we may begin to define the complex leadership traits and behaviors that are attributed to female higher education leaders, to examine their effective application of specific leadership styles when applied to their work as educational leaders. A weakness of the behavioral approach when applied to this research study is that while it is effective when identifying leadership behaviours, it does not measure the success of those outcomes, in particular when applied to a situational (or environmental context), therefore, the behavioural approach may address the first defined research study question, but it will not provide insight regarding the second research study question. This limits the scope or depth in which this approach may be applied to this particular study, as the context of this study and the complex influences that the field of higher education has on distinguishing and defining successful leadership behaviors, is a primary focus of the research and informs both the findings of the study as well as its significance.

Both the situational leadership approach and the complex systems leadership approach are highly applicable to this research study (and in particular addressing the second identified research study question), as they are highly prescriptive, and identify the most effective leadership styles and behaviors within a specific situational context or systematic context (Northouse, 2015). Another strength of these approaches is that they emphasize the importance of leadership flexibility and evolution. The situational leadership approach

emphasizes the importance of incorporating leadership skills based on the development of your followers, and the complex systems leadership approach prescribes a specific set of pre-determined leadership behavior norms and standards that leaders must adopt in order to be successful in their professional environments. When applied to this research study, these approaches provide insight regarding how environmental influences and constructs may define who will be a successful, highly effective leader within a specific context. They also provide a framework through which greater clarity may be generated regarding the origins of accepted leadership models and characteristics, within highly complex organizational structures and systems (Northouse, 2015).

The weakness of both theoretical leadership frameworks is that they do not provide concrete, detailed structures for identifying effective leadership behavior and styles, as they are based on prescriptive, conceptual models. It is unclear which leadership behaviour, through the lens of these frameworks, provides the most successful, measurable outcomes, as neither framework is based on a structured analysis of leadership behavior, and is instead dependent on variables, both situational and organizational, that influence definitions of leader effectiveness.

There are limitations when conducting research when there are limited resources and applicable theoretical frameworks that will explore the multiple, complex elements that illuminate the challenges that female leaders in higher education grapple with, in order to obtain advanced leadership roles. Many previously conducted research studies cite the inequalities that currently exist related to the number of men when compared to women who hold advanced leadership positions in higher education, however, developing a specific, theoretically supported, comprehensive list of the factors that create and perpetuate the professional barriers confronted by female leaders in higher education, has not yet been developed. Research regarding the leadership styles and behavior, in this organizational

context, that have been successfully utilized by women in order to obtain advanced leadership roles, has also not been conducted in a manner that would provide a cohesive list of the most successful leadership traits and communication styles that may produce successful career outcomes for female leaders (Northouse, 2015).

There is a need to emphasize the use of theoretical frameworks in this study; including behavioral, situational and complex systems leadership theories, in order to highlight and emphasize, the purpose and findings aspects of the study, and also to bridge the gaps that currently exist between the literature regarding the leadership skills and characteristics that enable women in higher education to obtain career advancement, and an examination of the organizational system that currently defines and values leadership based on models that may not be highly effective, even if they have been accepted as standard leadership behaviour for centuries. Combining focused research and these theoretical frameworks, will contribute to the creation of a research study that significantly contributes to this field of study by offering new insights regarding how traditional higher education leadership models may be de-constructed in order to create a modern, relevant, and effective leadership model that may be utilized by both female and male higher education leaders.

Location of the Research Study (Context)

This literature review highlights the challenges faced by female leaders within the context of the professional field of higher education in the United States over the past thirty years. While the context for this study also references historic leadership roles of women at United States colleges and universities, (both public and private), over the past century and a half, it focuses on current literature and resources generated in this area of study over the past fifteen years, with an emphasis on exploring theoretical aspects within the following disciplines; historical, sociological, developmental and cultural.

Findings Based on Themes

Organizational Systems Theory & Cultural Landscape of U.S. College/Universities Outlined

To achieve advanced leadership positions in higher education, women illustrate politically savvy, assertive, and strategic skills, along with the political, directed approaches to leadership that are traditionally valued by upper level administration, and are necessary for career advancement in college and universities' administrative environments (Tiao, 2006). The gap that currently exists both culturally and among higher education institutions, regarding the traditionally valued leadership qualities attributed to male leaders, may be attributed not only to socialization, but also to educational experiences. Most male students in the 20th century tended to select majors such as law, political science, business, medicine, while their female counterparts were studying traditional fields such as education, psychology, sociology and the humanities. It wasn't until the 1940s, during WWII when women began to emerge as participants in not only studying but also as participants in disciplines, and professional fields previously occupied by men (Tiao, 2006).

Dominici, Fried and Zeger (2013) describe the work of the University Committee on the Status of Women was developed in 2002, that agreed that it was crucial to cultivate women leaders in higher education in order to promote gender equity at universities. The Committee recognized that there was a need to determine the causes of why women were underrepresented in leadership positions across U.S. colleges and universities. Two of the causes identified by the Committee were gender stereotypes based on and informing cultural assumptions regarding effective leadership qualities and traits, and decreased access to leadership and mentoring, along with inadequate recognition of women's leadership contributions. While the Committee formed several focus groups consisting of twenty-seven female leaders representing several divisions and leadership positions at John Hopkins

University, their findings were not conclusive, and required a much broader population and representation of female leaders representing a wider section of colleges and universities.

In contrast to women who occupy advanced leadership roles in higher education currently, women who were born in the 1970s and early 1980s, (deemed Generation X), exhibit leadership characteristics, beliefs, practices, and motivations that have traditionally been defined as masculine, and are highly adaptive, innovative, politically savvy, strategic, and possess a mastery of advanced technology (Alapo, 2016). Along with these leadership traits, women from Generation X also possess collaborative, goals driven approaches to leadership and understand the importance of operating successfully in a global market. This new generation of female leaders are currently assuming advanced leadership roles across all organizational fields, including higher education, which will generate advanced leadership data over next two decades, resulting in insightful comparative analyses regarding the advancement rates of their female predecessors compared to the career trajectories of this new generation of advanced higher education leaders.

Over the past two decades, women of color also are assuming increasing numbers leadership roles in higher education, and while the majority of advanced leadership roles are still occupied by men, there is a clear need for a re-defining of traditional leadership definitions, a comprehensive understanding of how successful leadership characteristics and practices have been defined in the past, and how they may enhance and diversify acceptable leadership traits and standards (Mainah & Perkins, 2015). The cultural impact that an increased number of women of color has on culturally accepted leadership practices in higher education, will create an opportunity for exploring diverse contributions that female leaders bring to their positions, by sharing diverse traits and global experiences and creating a more inclusive professional leadership environment in the field.

Leadership Behaviors & Traditional Contextual Norms

Leadership itself may be defined by specific behaviors that are deemed within an organizational context to exhibit specific characteristics or attributes. While leadership is typically assigned to a role or position, it is also determined by social interactions amongst peers, supervisors, and followers. The traditional models of leadership in the field of higher education encompass elements of authoritarianism, competitiveness, strategy, and achievement, and therefore, create a model of leadership that both female and male leaders, in the context of higher education, must emulate or exhibit, to meet previously defined definitions of successful leadership. Historically, females, due to gender roles and stereotypes, have been excluded from advanced leadership positions, and they have also not been included in many of the career development opportunities that would have gained them access to upper level leaders as mentors and colleagues, as well as exposing them to the skills needed to advance into advanced leadership roles (Maki, 2015).

Historic employment data collected at United States colleges and universities, (both public and private educational institutions), over the past sixty years indicates that there is a correlation between the slow rate in which female leaders are obtaining advanced leadership roles, and the lack of women that currently hold these positions when compared to their equally qualified male counterparts. This is illustrated by the fact that male leaders advance to prime leadership roles on a significantly swifter career trajectory than women with the same or more leadership qualifications and professional experiences (Webb, 2010). This finding supports the need for further research and data collection regarding this topic and the factors that contribute to continued discrepancies between male and female leaders in higher education regarding career advancement and leadership opportunities.

Sandberg (2013) believes that traditionally, throughout history, females in professional roles have “leaned back” from career success and have failed to assert and

promote themselves to leadership positions. Others, such as Eddy and Ward (2015), describe women's attempts to "lean in", or aggressively pursue career advancement and leadership roles, as insufficient attempts to obtain desired leadership positions, as their organizational environment stifles, and withholds access to key leadership roles. They believe that past and present policies, practices, organizational structures, and prejudices diminish female professionals' ability to pursue these roles, and act as barriers with foundations in environmental complexities and societal patterns, that ultimately distinguish female administrators' ability to reach their full professional potential.

Developmental Leadership Theory & Impact of Professional Mentoring

According to James M. Burns (1978), there is a significant relationship between leaders and followers, and it is this collaborative relationship that provides the foundation for successful organizational leadership. Leaders take in to account the needs and goals of their followers and use their power for a positive, shared goal-oriented purpose. Within the context of higher education, female leaders typically illustrate highly relevant theories of organizational leadership by utilizing a highly direct, cohesive, and often collaborative approach. Organizational systems theories spanning the past century, emphasize the importance of evolved transformational leadership techniques that are currently effectively being used in contemporary leadership roles in a diverse array of organizational contexts (Marion & Gonzalez, 2014).

There are very few mentors and professional leadership development opportunities for women in higher education (Tiao, 2006). This may be attributed to several factors, including the fact that many advanced male leaders are hesitant and sceptical when working with and mentoring female leaders, the nature of competition amongst the few advanced women in leadership positions, a lack of women occupying roles that would enable them to be effective mentors, and a lack of interest in mentoring upper level women in leadership positions

throughout the higher education field. Another factor that contributes to the lack of mentors readily available to females occupying leadership positions in higher education is the fact that many women are socialized to exhibit nurturing cooperative characteristics, rather than aggressive, direct communication styles, and therefore, they do not necessarily exemplify the traditional leadership attributes that are valued and respected by their male counterparts in the higher education leadership arena. The skills and strategies needed to play the political game and present oneself professionally as a strong contender for leadership positions, are not traditionally attributed to females as they proceed through the process of developing into women, (Tiao, 2006).

Women as Leaders in Higher Education

Another important factor to consider when striving to cultivate an equitably representative number of female advanced leaders in higher education is the creation of greater gender equality in the context of leadership positions at United States colleges and universities. According to leadership study conducted in 2002 at Johns Hopkins University, consisting of twenty-seven female higher education leaders participating in focus groups, there are two identified causes for gender leadership stereotypes in higher education; cultural assumptions related to respected, expected leadership characteristics, traits, and decreased access to leadership opportunities and mentoring (Dominici, Fried & Zeger, 2013). While this research was inconclusive, it does illustrate a need for further exploration of the factors that contribute to equalities related to the career advancement of female leaders in higher education when compared to their male counterparts, in the form of alternative research methods, and including a larger, more diverse subject/participant pool in future leadership studies.

The challenges and barriers experienced by female leaders as they travel the leadership pipeline in the world of academia, requires advanced, specific mentoring strategies

for the next generation of successful female higher education leaders to achieve professional advancement and success. While limited research and guidelines have been developed regarding effective mentoring methods and techniques for female leaders in higher education, due to a shift in cultural norms, increased retirements in the field, and the alternative leadership styles currently being utilized by the next generation of higher education administrators, an increased number of leadership opportunities in the field over the next two decades, may also alter the definition of leadership in the context of higher education, as more women assume advanced leadership positions (Longman & Madsen, 2014).

Transformational Leadership as a Framework for Redefining Higher Education Leadership

Leadership's defining traits have been attributed to the male-centric nature of the study of leadership and therefore it has been traditionally defined by the masculine characteristics of its researchers. Female leaders, in the field of higher education, are assessed and evaluated as leaders based on traditional male attributes, resulting in limitations when attempting to achieve leadership advancement. While many female leaders exhibit collaborative, nurturing, educational leadership styles, which are highly transformative, and emphasize team building, effective communications, and working to achieve common goals, these are not valued or respected traits within the context of advanced higher education leadership, although they are accepted as positive and successful leadership characteristics within the context of the corporate and global market places (Dunn, Gerlach & Hyle, 2014).

The attributes illustrated by strategic leaders in the professional field of higher education administration, including assertiveness, authoritarian leadership styles, and direct, strategic communication, are only one of the challenges facing female leaders as they attempt to conform to the social and cultural leadership norms and traits required to obtain career advancement. They also strive to balance both personal and professional responsibilities, while competing with their male counterparts to achieve leadership positions. Cultural

influences within the higher education environment and external societal expectations regarding balancing both personal and professional responsibilities, mould and impact women's ability to focus on leading and maintaining a clear, concise trajectory when attempting to obtain leadership positions. The acculturation of female leaders, the strategies, practices and characteristics that they must assume to conform to the leadership script of their profession, reflects issues of gender inequity, the need policy transitions, and leadership mentoring, diversity, and evolution within the higher education profession (Fitzgerald, 2013).

Researcher Margaret Grogan (2011), illustrates an alternative perspective regarding how women in advanced higher education leadership positions may successfully incorporate successful leadership practices, while utilizing a combination of traditional masculine leadership traits with transformative leadership characteristics to create new, advanced leadership techniques that emphasize a balanced lifestyle, collaborative approaches to leadership, emphasis on reaching mission driven organizational goals, while focusing on community involvement and equity in educational environments. Grogan highlights examples, through interviews and case studies, of females currently holding advanced leadership roles in higher education who have successfully incorporated alternative leadership techniques and traits in their professional leadership roles. A combination of both transformative and authoritative leadership styles may be successfully utilized, to meet the traditional leadership expectations and norms of academia, while also incorporating highly effective transformative, collaborative leadership techniques and strategies, would create a balanced, highly effective leadership style that may be embraced and emulated by both female and male advanced educational leaders.

Women as Advanced Leaders in Corporate & Global Environments

Within the context of corporate and global environments, women's professional career trajectories have moved at a swifter pace than their counterparts in higher education

leadership roles, as empirical and historic research illustrate that leadership development initiatives for women in fields outside of academia have been highly successful. An increasing number of women with credentials and professional experiences similar to their female colleagues in higher education, are assuming upper level, advanced leadership roles, while incorporating a balance of transformative, collaborative, and authoritative leadership styles in their professional roles (Ngunjiri & Madsen, 2015). The re-defining of successful leadership in the context of the global marketplace, provides an opportunity for examining new definitions of leadership that have successfully evolved to meet the needs of the highly competitive, innovative, and diverse global market environment.

A Context for Female Leadership in Academia

Over the past fifty years, women have risen significantly in their roles within U.S. Higher Education as faculty members and administrators as college/university culture has started to shift its mindset towards inclusion and equity in the context of the profession. By 2000, women had surpassed men in attendance at higher education institutions globally, and after many years of unequal representation among professional roles within Higher Education, by 2019, women are dominating positions as college/university faculty members. In recent years, women have obtained an increased number of president and leadership positions, however discrepancies are still present regarding compensation, yet there is a trend towards an increased number of women holding advanced leadership positions in the future (Berg, 2020).

Although women are represented among student populations at U.S. Higher Education institutions, there are still disparities in their representation at community colleges and less prestigious four-year institutions. This impacts the tenure track and advancement opportunities for female faculty members within those settings, reflecting a rigid system of standards that does not take into consideration family responsibilities, or an increase in

standards when reviewing their academic work (Berg, 2020). Transforming and influencing this mindset required the open, vigorous participation of both faculty and administrators involved in decision making and impacting curriculum and culture. Impacting cultural norms within the context of Higher Education, requires reflection, education and a training of faculty that encounters and challenges how they act and think about their academic careers. As academic and administrative leaders are developed through faculty roles, values and expectations regarding the culture and norms of their academic institutions are deeply woven into their perspectives regarding qualifications and expectations regarding who is eligible to hold advanced leadership positions. Public colleges and universities have historically clung to traditional norms, are risk adverse regarding shifts in leadership models and institutional objectives, illustrating the cycle that advanced leaders play in creating and reinforcing existing cultural norms and beliefs regarding qualifications and characteristics that are acceptable for obtaining and holding their positions (Esterberg & Wooding, 2012).

According to Tanya Fitzgerald (2013), within the more inclusive landscape of higher education, regarding women occupying advanced leadership positions, there are two myths still exist. The first myth is that women have achieved true equal opportunity regarding their status in the workplace, and the other is that the definition of leadership within the context of higher education has not shifted, and women's role in leadership according to those traditional guidelines is still evolving. As women encounter challenges when creating their leadership style within the context of traditional norms, they may experience pressure to conform to those norms, to meet the expectations of their environments' cultural beliefs regarding successful leadership behavior. Female leaders may be required occupy new spaces, and re-invent leadership attributes, while also changing definitions of leadership by incorporating their own experiences, perspectives and understandings, as effective advanced

leadership characteristics continue to evolve to reflect the individuals occupying leadership positions as well as the changing contexts, environments in which they are leading.

Discrepancies found in the Literature Review

The primary discrepancy found within the literature review consists of a lack of understanding regarding which theoretical approaches are most applicable to exploring the challenges facing women in higher education as they attempt to obtain advanced leadership positions. While Sandberg (2013) describes the gap between female leaders and their male counterparts as the result of professional women's lack of motivation, goal setting, gumption, risk taking, and historically "leaning back" from career success, and not asserting themselves in order to achieve promotions and advanced positions, Eddy and Ward (2015), fundamentally disagree with her approach to placing the responsibility for stalled career advancement on female leaders. They illustrate the challenges that women in higher education leadership position encounter when attempting to "lean in" and assertively promote themselves in to leadership positions, as these attempts are also met with cultural norms and an organizational environment that stifles their attempts for leadership advancement, while withholding access to prime leadership positions and opportunities for advanced leadership development.

Eddy and Ward theorize, contrary to Sandberg, that it is a culmination of historic organizational practices, structures, prejudices and inequalities that hinder and deplete female leaders' ability and motivation to pursue advance leadership roles, and therefore achieving their full potential professionally is stifled and halted in the context of the higher education environment. The discrepancy regarding factors that contribute to the challenges facing women when striving to obtain advanced leadership positions provides an opportunity for further exploration regarding both diverging theories and further research in order to

conclude which factor is prevalent when female leaders attempt to pursue career advancement.

Gaps found in the Literature

One of the elements that contributes to gaps both in research and the literature is the historical lack of representation of women in leadership roles over the past century, resulting in a lack of research regarding definitions of leadership, and the experiences and successes of women in leadership positions in higher education. The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in higher education, indicates that the masculine traits and practices that have become the norm, or standard, for successfully defining leadership, currently function to exclude women from occupying advanced leadership positions. As female leaders and faculty members in academia continues to increase, while they are still underrepresented in advanced leadership positions, less and less is known regarding the characteristics and experiences that define successful female leaders.

A lack of empirical and conclusive data driven research regarding women's roles as advanced leaders in higher education, as well as a limited and inconclusive number of research studies, (lacking a diverse and large number of participants), creates gaps regarding solid data, research findings, and conclusions to explore and reference when conducting research in the emerging area of women as advanced leaders in higher education. The variations when conducting research regarding this subject also poses challenges, as some studies indicate that women are advancing in the higher education field, while other data suggests that nearly seventy-five percent of senior level leadership positions in higher education are currently occupied by men (Maki, 2015). Another issue that arises is that the majority of research conducted to date focuses on the underrepresentation of women in advanced leadership positions and does not focus on a lack of diversity, pathways to leadership, or methods for developing successful leadership skills and characteristics in the

context of higher education. The lack of empirical data, findings and theories regarding and understanding of both a women's advancement in to leadership roles, and how their leadership style and characteristics were developed and influenced, and a lack of attention and research regarding the societal and organizational influences that impacted their success as advanced leaders in higher education, it proves challenging to identify the issues, challenges, and influences that allowed them to achieve career advancement in the context of higher education.

Conclusion

There are limited resources currently available regarding the multiple, complex factors that contribute to the challenges and opportunities that women in higher education leadership position encounter when attempting to obtain advanced leadership positions. While many studies acknowledge the discrepancies and inequalities regarding the number of males currently occupying leadership positions compared to the leadership positions occupied by their female counterparts, very few studies have attempted to identify a comprehensive list of factors that contribute to professional barriers faced by female leaders, and more importantly, there are even fewer studies that highlight the leadership styles, traits and skills that have been successfully utilized by advance female leaders who have overcome stereotypes, challenges, and organizational barriers in order to occupy upper level leadership roles.

Another limitation when conducting research regarding successful leadership models in higher education is limited access to a comprehensive, extensive participant pool. Obtaining the participation through focus groups, interviews, and surveys, is challenging when researchers have limited access to a diverse, extensive pool of study participants in advanced leadership positions at educational institutions across the United States, who are

willing to disclose their experiences in their professional roles and describe the challenges they have encountered.

The research highlighted in the literature illustrates a need for further examination of the factors that both contribute to and hinder women's advancement to upper level leadership positions in higher education. While many theories are currently highlighted regarding the factors that contribute to the professional barriers faced by women in higher education as they strive to obtain advanced leadership positions, there are still gaps in existing literature regarding which leadership skills and leadership characteristics enable women to achieve career advancement in higher education. The literature also currently does not explore the leadership styles that may be incorporated within the higher education environment to better diversify, balance and create successful transformative leadership models for both female and male advanced higher education leaders. Further research, analysis, and assessment regarding these two factors will result in the presentation of leadership theories and insights that will contribute to the evolution of traditional higher education leadership definitions, and a modern and relevant advanced leadership model that attainable for both female and male educational leaders.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The literature review explored what elements, factors, and influences, within the field of higher education in the United States, hinder or support female leadership opportunities. It addressed leadership concepts that focused on leadership development, while also identifying contemporary educational contexts in which they excel swiftly and obtain key leadership roles. This study focused on a sample of women leaders who currently occupy advanced leadership positions at contemporary higher education institutions and documented their perceptions of leadership opportunities within their contemporary educational context. The sample was selected partially based on their beliefs that they excelled swiftly and obtained key leadership roles because of the organizational culture at their institutions.

Research Questions & Design

While the number of women holding advanced leadership positions at U.S. colleges and universities has increased over the past sixty years, many of these positions are still currently held by their male counterparts. Participants were asked to describe their current contemporary college and university settings where they perceive female leaders advance to key leadership roles at high rates; and their leadership development and career advancement is supported. It also examined participant perceptions of how contemporary settings foster and promote advanced leadership opportunities for experienced, qualified female administrators, and what environmental ideologies contribute to increased female career advancement at high rates.

Phenomenological research is a qualitative research approach that focuses on common elements of an experience of a specific group. The goal of this research design is to reach a description or illustration of the nature of a distinct phenomenon (Creswell, 2017). This

research provides in depth understanding and a description of the essence of participants' experiences of an event or phenomenon:

The goal of phenomenological research is to “describe”. The researcher must describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from a pre-given framework, but remaining true to facts. The key to providing an accurate, factual representation is to illustrate an understanding of the social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of the people involved, (Groenewald, 2004).

Utilizing this qualitative research approach allows an exploration of subjective experiences and perspectives, that then provides new interpretations and meaning to inform our understanding of the experience and the context in which it takes place.

The phenomenological research approach was utilized during this research study in order to provide insight regarding the common and divergent experiences of the participants related to their professional experiences as leaders in online higher education. It provided the opportunity to examine common and divergent experiences, elements that contributed to those experiences and shared beliefs, and also created a method with which to analyse and assign meaning and definition to those shared experiences, while addressing the research questions outlined in this study.

The following research questions were explored during this research study:

1. How do women in advanced leadership positions at contemporary higher education institutions describe their leadership development and career opportunities?
2. What factors do women in advanced leadership positions believe created career opportunities and accelerated their career trajectories?
3. How do participants characterize the culture/norms of their contemporary academic institution relative to their opportunities for advancement?

Site Information

Interviews were conducted with deans, associate deans, academic program chairs, and directors that are currently holding leadership positions at contemporary, (solely offering an online delivery model, or have been established in the past thirty years), higher education institutions located in multiple geographic regions throughout the United States. Four contemporary, online colleges and universities are represented in this research study.

Participants/Sample

Individual interviews were included this study, including college and university deans, associate deans, academic program chairs and directors, at contemporary, public and private, colleges and universities, that currently hold middle to upper level leadership positions. Participants were identified through initial research that highlighted potential female leaders at contemporary, online colleges and universities. Interviews were conducted in multiple regions of the United States, (interviews will be conducted online, remotely), and included a diverse representation of contemporary college and universities, (public and private), female leaders currently holding the position of dean, associate dean, program chair or director. Potential participants were contacted via e-mail in order to identify participants' interest in participating in interviews. Interviews included questions regarding mentoring, coaching, career advancement opportunities, the current number of women in advanced leadership positions at their current educational institution, in order assess the national scope of this issue and its significance, (Appendix A).

Instrumentation

Research study participants were contacted via e-mail initially with a description of the research study and a brief questionnaire to determine their eligibility and confirm interest regarding participation in the research study. After 16 interview participants were identified, and consent received, interviews were scheduled, and the research questions were sent to

participants two days prior to the scheduled interview. Interviews were conducted via Zoom (30 minutes – 40 minutes in length), and recorded, with participant permission and all information collected remained confidential, the content of the interviews was transcribed and coded.

Data & Analysis

This qualitative research study utilized an interview approach to addressing its research questions and the problem of practice. The study incorporated the following qualitative research method; individual recorded interviews with 16 female leaders. This research method was selected to illustrate the prevalence of a leadership opportunities for women across multiple contemporary higher education environments across the United States.

Research questions were answered through the culmination and analysis of the data collected through the transcription and coding of narrative accounts compiled through interviews conducted individually with women holding mid to upper level leadership roles, and generated data sets included in the research study for analysis; through transcription, coding - based on the creation of an applicable coding system, its application, and interpretation.

The phenomenological qualitative research design, incorporated various perspectives that may be applied directly towards answering the study's interview questions and providing insight regarding the evolution of the problem of practice, while also including a diverse selection of participants that include similar professional leadership levels within the higher education field, while also representing multiple geographic regions, and multiple higher education environments, (contemporary colleges and universities, that are public and private, for profit and not for profit). This research design also addressed the research questions through participant narratives emerging from responses to the research questions, and the

culmination and interpretation of data and responses, generating comprehensive macro and micro level findings regarding the barriers and opportunities women experience when attempting to obtain advanced leadership positions. Interview transcripts were reviewed and coded in order to analyse participant responses and identify common themes and environmental characteristics reflected in participants' responses.

The benefits regarding utilizing this research design are highlighted above, but another way in which this research study was enhanced was by incorporating this approach, is that it will offer, through multi-tiered coding of data generated, multiple, divergent perspectives, (and perhaps a bit of discord), and produced a comprehensive set of findings that further support the significance of this study while highlighting contemporary higher education institutions' alternative practices, policies, and institutional structures, that if initiated and adopted, may eventually create and support many more advanced leadership carrier trajectories for female administrators.

Setting

Qualitative research data, through the process of transcript coding and analysis, was collected in the form of individual interviews with female deans, associate deans, program chairs and directors, at four contemporary colleges and universities in the United States representing a range of institutions. Contemporary colleges and universities are defined as institutions that have been founded over the past thirty years, and offer either online degrees, and are either public or private.

Participant Rights

All participants involved in this research study were required to sign a consent forms prior to participating in individual interviews. The name of the college/university where they are currently employed were required to be disclosed during the interviews, however, in the reported findings section of the research study, the names of identified higher education

institutions were not identified, however, the type of institution, and size of the institution was revealed, as it may directly pertain to the significance of the research study's findings or directly provide opportunities for further exploration and analysis. All research study interview responses were recorded and transcribed and coded, and participants received a copy of the interview transcript for review.

Research Study Limitations

There were two limitations to be considered regarding the outlined research design for this study. The first limitation reflects the fact that there were challenges when identifying a diverse selection of female administrator participants to participate in interviews. This limitation was overcome by an effective form of outreach, recruitment of perspective respondents. The second limitation was a lack of ethnic, gender, socio-economic diversity that was represented by research participants, along with only having access to a limited number of female advanced leaders within this field, which limited both the diversity and sample size of interview participants, and resulted in limited variations in the content of their responses.

Validity

To obtain internal validity, research study participants were asked questions that apply to their own experiences as leaders in higher education, and the researcher ensured participants' responses are accurate by checking responses from the interview recordings and responses to questions. To maintain external validity, the researcher ensured that the research will be generalizable and may be applied to other similar educational settings, and the field of higher education, therefore readers may transfer the research findings to educational contexts. The researcher comprehensively illustrated the context of the research to empower the reader to generalize the findings and find them applicable to multiple academic institutions.

Confirmability

The researcher incorporated a conscious awareness regarding confirmability, reliability by confirming that the narratives collected from participants is reliable, truthful and consistent. For findings to be legitimate, qualitative research must be thoroughly documented, and any variables, or unexpected responses, factors be accurately recorded and documented. Documentation is also crucial in order to provide opportunity for future study. Focusing on validity and accuracy of participants' responses ensured that data collection and findings were valid and provided a clear illustration of their leadership experiences. The researcher also ensured that all data and information was stored in a secure location, and that documentation, and notes remain confidential, and were an accurate reflection of participants' narratives.

Ethical Considerations

As a female higher education professional over the past twenty years, with leadership experiences in both traditional and contemporary college and university settings, it was imperative that the authenticity of the study and collection of data and analysis reflected the experiences of participants through utilizing third person voice and limiting the incorporation of my biases and narrative. The consent of participants was obtained prior conducting interviews and the option to withdraw from the study was discussed. Avoiding deceptive practices, and managing researcher biases during the interviews, and the coding and analysis of transcripts, was intentionally addressed both during the research process and the compilation of findings, by the researcher and advisors, through ongoing objective review and dialogue.

Recordings, transcriptions, coding notes, and participants' information were kept confidential on a password protected computer. The researcher used language that is understandable and clear to participants, and the researcher provided each participant with an

overview of the purpose for the study. Participation in the study was voluntary and signed consent forms from all participants were acquired prior to conducting interviews. The study was conducted in an individual survey-interview format with audio-recording. Participants were notified of their right to opt out of the survey or the interview at any point and no questions will required a forced response to proceed. An informed consent form was developed, stating participants' rights, agreement to be involved in the study, and an acknowledgement that their rights are protected. The researcher informed participants about the study, and all people involved were protected from any harm that might ensue from the study. Individual participants were notified they will receive no direct benefit from the study.

Conclusion

This qualitative research study provided participants with the opportunity to describe their experiences related to leadership development and career advancement opportunities within the context of the contemporary, online college or university. During recorded interviews, participants responded to eleven research questions, (Appendix A), and described their beliefs and perceptions regarding how the culture at their contemporary educational institution fostered the advancement of their leadership careers in higher education. A multi-tiered coding process was utilized to analyse individual responses, and to identify both common and divergent themes that emerged. The following chapter describes the research findings and the seven themes that emerged will be highlighted and explored.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This research study explored the following research questions when examining influences on the advancement of female leaders in the U.S. higher education field, (with a specific focus on the setting of online, contemporary educational settings):

RQ1: How do women in advanced leadership positions at contemporary higher education institutions describe their leadership development and career opportunities?

RQ2: What factors do women in advanced leadership positions believe created career opportunities and accelerated their career trajectories?

RQ3: How do participants characterize the culture/norms of their contemporary academic institution relative to their opportunities for advancement?

Participants

During this research study, 16 female higher education administrators were interviewed and recorded via Zoom, during a two-month period, in late fall 2020. Participants were identified through research that involved initially identifying contemporary, online colleges and universities, and then identifying and selecting possible female participants that held advanced leadership positions. Participants' currently hold various leadership positions, including Dean, Associate Dean, Assistant Dean, Department Chair, and Associate Department Chair, and represent four online U.S. colleges and universities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually via Zoom, ranging in length, and consisted of 11 pre-designed research questions (Appendix A) that were provided to participants for review prior to the recorded interviews. Interview recordings were then transcribed by Rev.com, and then analysed and coded based on common and divergent themes and trends by the researcher during winter 2021.

Ten participants were selected for this research study based on their effective representation of the four colleges and universities included in this study, their representation of the themes that emerged through analysis, the completeness of their transcripts, and the convenience of focusing on ten participants that represented the themes and purpose of the study. Participants' names were excluded from this research study and pseudonyms have been created, as multiple participants requested that their names and colleges and universities not be identified, however, their experiences will be heard throughout this chapter through direct quotations illustrating or challenging emerging themes and concepts.

Table 4.1: Participant characteristics

Pseudonym	Role	Setting	Years of Higher Education Experience
Holly	Academic Chair	Large, National Online University	20+
Anna	Campus Director	Regional Online University	20+
Donna	Senior Associate Dean	Large, National Online University	20+
Katie	Associate Dean	Regional Online University	10+
Sara	Associate Dean	Regional Online University	5+
Lauren	Program Dept Chair	Large, National Online University	15+
Pamala	Associate Dean	Large, National Online University	10+

Michelle	Senior Associate Dean	Large, National Online University	15+
Charlotte	Associate Dean	Large, National Online University	15+
Vanessa	Academic Chair	Large, National Online University	15+

Analysis Methods

Using purposeful sampling the researcher identified eight U.S. colleges and universities that currently deliver their academic programs in online or hybrid models and identified female leaders that held leadership positions, including deans, associate deans, program chairs and directors. These potential participants, (103 candidates), were sent an invitation to participate in the study via e-mail by the researcher. The participant invitation e-mail briefly described the purpose of the research study and explained their potential role and the time commitment involved. Sixteen interested participants responded via e-mail within 1-2 weeks of the distribution of the original research study invitation, and eleven interviews were selected as part of this research study. Individual interviews were scheduled with participants via Zoom, and then they were forwarded via e-mail the consent form and the research study questions, (two to three days prior to the scheduled interview). Potential participants were sent a link to the Zoom meeting which included a password to protect access and privacy. Interviews were conducted on Zoom and at the beginning of each interview, participants were notified that the interview recording had started utilizing the Zoom recording feature.

Interviews ranged from 30-40 minutes in length and began with brief introductions, and the researcher then began the interview which focused solely on the research questions (Appendix A). The interviews were semi-structured during the beginning and end of

interviews, however, the researcher adhered to a structured format when delivering the interview questions to participants. Hand-written notes were also taken during the interviews. Participants were notified that this was done to ensure that if the recordings via Zoom were unsuccessful, that there would be a brief record of the content of the interview and could be used to verify the content of transcriptions. All interviewer notes taken during the interviews will be destroyed for confidentiality purposes at the conclusion of this research study. All audio recordings of the interviews were downloaded to Rev.com within a week of the interview and were then professionally transcribed, saved and accessed via the Rev platform. Interview recordings and transcriptions were saved via two passcodes in a protected file on the researcher's system. Participants were provided with a copy of their interview transcripts for verification.

The interview transcripts for the ten participants were manually coded by the researcher by utilizing a spreadsheet process, (that involved color-coding for defined themes, responses, and experiences), and divided responses in to three tiers that highlighted four themes, and identified correlations and divergence between participants responses and experiences, and the themes that were specific to individual online colleges and universities where they hold leadership roles. In order to protect the anonymity of participants, pseudonyms have been created for this research study, and their individual responses and experiences will be identified by their assigned pseudonyms throughout this chapter.

Presentation of Results

The next section describes four foundational areas of focus that were identified within the transcripts based on research question concentrations for tier one spreadsheet coding:

- 1.) participants career trajectory patterns, including higher education's impact on career advancement opportunities, and observations and experiences of advancement opportunities,

- 2.) characteristics identified regarding successful higher education leadership,
- 3.) environment/organizational culture's impact on defining effective leadership,
- 4.) elements supporting career advancement: the impact of mentoring and professional development opportunities at online colleges and universities.

Two other tiers of coding also emerged: tier two coding based on the participants' similar responses based on the online institution they represent, and tier three coding highlights sub-themes that developed through analysis of individual's divergent responses regarding experiences.

During this study, individual participant responses gathered from interviews were coded and analysed to identify both similarities and divergences in their individual career trajectories, advancement opportunities, experiences with professional development and the impact of a mentor within higher education, and their experiences related to organizational culture and bias. Three participants with diverse career trajectories, experiences, and responses will be highlighted through vignettes, narratives, and the impact of environment and setting on their experiences will be individually explored. The seven other participants' experiences will be reflected as this chapter explores the four themes that emerged during this study. The other area of focus presented in this chapter will illustrate four themes that emerged during the coding process that highlight concepts and shared experiences that contribute to the career opportunities and advancement of female leaders at online higher education institutions, while also exploring the influence and impact that setting, culture and mentoring relationships have on perceptions regarding characteristics that define effective leadership and an individual's ability to lead others successfully.

Participant Vignettes

The vignettes presented in the next section highlight the leadership advancement and professional development experiences of three research study participants that did not start

their careers in higher education, (their career foundations include nursing, industry foreman, and a chemist and researcher). All three participants advanced as leaders over the past two decades, however they each had individualized, unique responses to the interview questions, and represent diverse beliefs and concepts related to professional development and defining successful leadership. There are two limitations presented when focusing on the experiences of these three higher education leaders, 1.) They have advanced into their current leadership positions over the past two decades, reflecting experiences that are unique to the expansion of online education and opportunities for advancement, and 2.) Each of these participants is represents similar demographics, (Caucasian, within a similar age range). It is important to note that the vignettes, narratives highlighted below do not holistically represent the beliefs and experiences of all of the study participants, and may be viewed as a lens through which to garner how individual's unique career and personal experiences, the timeline and time period in which their career trajectories occurred, and their college or university cultures impact their beliefs regarding effective leadership and the development of their leadership behaviours within the field of higher education.

Holly, Academic Chair

Holly is currently an Academic Chair at a large online national university, and she will complete her doctoral degree in 2021. She did not have a traditional route to her career in higher education, and her previous undergraduate education focused on psychology, which lead her to her career in nursing. She eventually earned her bachelor's in nursing degree, with a focus on behavioural health, and knew that she eventually wanted to teach at the college level. She worked as a nurse for two years before pursuing a master's degree in nursing and then became a full-time faculty member. She stated, "I had been in the right place at the right time, I had manager experience, and I had been a supervisor for several restaurants in my area, so I had pretty strong leadership experience." After many years as a

faculty member, she was offered the Director of Nursing position at a large traditional university due to her previous management experience.

In her leadership role, she learned a lot about curriculum, and really develop as a leader. In that role, she had several leadership role-models, and focused on her professional development working with them. She was able to move into her current leadership position, as a Program Chair at an online university, because she was recognized as a leader who, “did a lot with the program, and had strong leadership skills.” She believes that it is crucial for leaders in higher education to be, “willing to accept change in order to grow”. Mentoring and developing people are also important elements of leaders, and she focuses on effective communication, approaching each of her 21 full-time faculty members individually, and really hearing what they are saying to her. She also emphasized that fairness and equity along with consistency are important when growing a university.

If Holly had pursued a career outside of higher education, she does not believe that pursuing advanced degrees, or focusing on teaching and curriculum would have been areas of focus for her, as they would not have been required for career advancement. When reflecting on female leaders, Holly believes that female leaders are:

more prone to listen, truly listen to what you are saying, and are much more supportive, but I know I could be stereotyping right now. I have definitely seen female leaders try to take on what they think a man would do versus, you know, adjusting it to their own leadership style.

She does not believe that she has adjusted her leadership style based on her college or university’s ideas of effective leadership. Although she does express that at her university, she has observed that effective leadership has been defined by retention of staff and students, good pass rates, solid budgets, and meeting student enrollment goals. She also describes

effective leadership as job satisfaction of employees, a productive department, and the support of the professional development of staff members.

The online university that Holly works at is currently supporting her pursuit of her doctoral degree and they are willing to work with her to ensure that she has the time that she needs to complete it. Her supervisor also makes her aware of any upcoming professional opportunities in the future so that she may continue to advance in her career. She states, “Even if I wanted to move to a different university, she’s supportive of that as long as, for that upward movement, if there are not opportunities here. So, I definitely feel very supported, where I’m at right now.”

Holly had a mentor assigned to her by the university when she started her Program Chair position. She utilized meetings with him to ask questions regarding her position, explore different ways of leading her staff, and reflect on what was and was not going well in her role. She also worked closely with another mentor within her university that helped support her and gave her permission to “say that I’m human and that’s okay”. Interactions with mentors gave her time to reflect, encouraged the development of her leadership style, and provided her with on-going support, feedback, and encouragement. Holly believes that:

it is important for female leaders in higher education to be tenacious, to not give up, and to not sit by meekly and wait for something, it’s not going to probably come to you. You need to get in there with boxing gloves and show them what you can do.

Don’t give up! Listen to whoever you oversee and be willing to take in new ideas and be innovative.

Holly has expressed a belief that was represented by most of the study participants related to the crucial role that timing played in her opportunities for career advancement in higher education. She also stated a common theme expressed by participants, that successful leaders in higher education must be adaptable and willing to change, innovate, in order to

grow. Mentoring also emerged as a contributor to Holly's career advancement and feeling supported in her leadership role, and she indicated, (as did a few of the study participants), that her University assigned a Mentor to train and advise her in her new leadership position.

There were two areas in which Holly expressed a different experience than most of the study participants. The first was that she has not experienced biases as she advanced in her career, although she did observe the gender biases experienced by her female colleagues as they tried to obtain leadership opportunities. The other experience that she expressed that was diverse, within the context of the findings of this study, was that she does not believe that her leadership style has been affected by her environment, setting or culture's definition of effective leader behavior. It is interesting to note that Holly has worked as a nurse and in the field of nursing education for most of her career, and she explained that her leadership has been authentic, natural, and was impacted by the leadership norms of the university setting in which she leads.

Anna, Campus Director

Anna is currently a Campus Director at a college that offers both online and campus based academic programs. She got married when she was in her early twenties and had three children by her mid-twenties. Supporting her family was her focus during the early part of her career and she began work as an overnight dock foreman, so she would be at home during the day with her children. She was the only female in a leadership role and during her time in the position of foreman, she experienced gender bias because she believed her employees did not want a female supervisor. She states that it was challenging for the first couple of months, but over time, it the position worked out well for her. She stayed in that role for eleven years, and she learned as much as she could from the role, and focused on developing her confidence, not letting others "see her sweat". She believes that experiences in that work

environment really impacted her for the rest of her future career. She describes her perspective following that work experience as, “If you can do that, you can do anything.”

When her children were in school, she obtained another position working at a technical instruments company, where she worked for three years, and she explained that her male supervisor in that role asked her each day before she left work, “What are you making for dinner tonight for your family?” She was required to describe in detail what she was preparing for her family for dinner that night, because her supervisor wanted to ensure that she was supporting her family, or else he didn’t want her to be working. She states, “Obviously you couldn’t do that today. But again, that taught me a lot too.” Reflecting on the experience she also says, “I remember it didn’t feel right, because he is not asking the other men here what their dinner preps have been for their families. It was a great job and it was fine, but in the back of mind, I’m thinking this is really not this is not fair.”

A friend told her about open positions at a local university and she applied for several positions in order to obtain tuition remission for her children. Eventually she was hired as an Assistant to a Dean. Both her mother and daughter believed that due to her bachelor’s degree and her professional experience that the position was below her and felt she could, “excel in any role”. However, she remained in the administrative position, and her three children completed their bachelor’s degrees and Anna earned her MBA and they sent to obtain her doctorate, with all the tuition covered by the university. For one of her MBA projects she interviewed the university’s Information Technology Director, and she gave him feedback on his department, and he hired her. She describes the experience as “sort of a lucky thing”, but she eventually became an Associate Dean, completed her doctorate and became a full-time faculty member. She was an Associate Dean for three years, and couldn’t get promoted, “not because I was a woman, but because of my degree, they just didn’t like that my degree was from a specific university”. She left her position at that University and became a Campus

Director at her current college, “really a President of a campus”, as she describes her current role. She states that she finally “got her dream job, and it’s cool because since I’ve been here, I’ve been able to start a bachelor’s degree completion program with a school I used to be a leader at.”

Anna believes that in order to be an effective leader in higher education you must be a doer, and delegating to your team is key, but it is also important for leaders to actually get things done. She believes that effective higher education leaders must inspire others and, “really be a hard worker so that your team sees, if there is a hard job that you are in there with your sleeves rolled up, there is nothing you would ask them to do that you wouldn’t do yourself.” She also emphasized the importance of innovation, creativity, developing partnerships, and truly believing in what you are doing, and the mission and values of your university.

Anna has worked in both industry and the corporate world and believes that a difference in the field of higher education is that there are so many “entrenched systems of how we have done things and that is why is so hard to innovate”. In higher education as a leader it is imperative to have faculty behind you, supporting you, so it is crucial to make them happy, and to also focus on making our students, our customers happy. Within higher education, she states that she has experienced gender biases, and she views being a woman as an important part of her identity. She states, “Sometimes I think if we can just kind of open up that view and just think, okay, I’m here to work, I’m here to do a phenomenal job regardless of my gender, my color, my sexual identity. That’s all part of me. But try not to get hung up on it.”

Anna feels that people see men as leaders, and she has experienced male leaders being selected for president roles in higher education without higher education experience. She was not asked to interview for an open president position although she was the vice president at

the time, even with twenty years of higher education experience and her doctorate, and eventually they made her the interim president for two years. After two years, they quietly removed the interim from her title, however, she experienced frustration, anger, and gender bias during the interview process. She states that when asking for feedback regarding why she had not received the president role outright, she was told, “the reason I couldn’t move forward was because I had a squeaky voice. I don’t have a squeaky voice!”

Anna believes that an educational environment has an impact on how effective leadership is defined, and she believes that the difficult part is when you get into a culture that is challenging and must decipher how to strategize and move within it. Some educational leaders want the team to grow and develop, others just want things to move along. The top leader has an influence on the university and how it is lead. Anna has acclimated and adjusted her leadership style to meet the expectations of leadership, “you really have to be a chameleon and work your best strengths within that boss’ expectations. I truly believe that.”

She has had several mentors throughout her career and the ones that have inspired her the most have been those that really have a passion for the work that they do. She has had several coaches that have been interested in helping others, rather than getting ahead and watching their example and their passion has been helpful when developing her leadership. She believes that female leaders in higher education must be willing to take risks, apply for new positions even if they don’t think they are ready, and “add a tool to your tool belt every year, learn something new, and always go out of your way to help others no matter how busy you are. Follow through is important. If you say you are going to do something, do it. It’s your word and it’s all you have.”

Anna’s early career experiences were in both industry and corporate settings, and she began her career in higher education in an administrative role. She explained that she

believes that if she had been in a field other than higher education, that her career trajectory would have been very different, as she believes that there are cultural, historical systems in place within higher education that create limited opportunities for females to advance in to leadership roles. She also highlighted that she has experienced gender bias, as she witnessed male leaders with less professional or higher education experience obtain advanced upper level leadership positions when competing with female leaders with significantly more qualifications. Anna has had several mentors that impacted her professional development, inspired her to pursue leadership opportunities, and encouraged her professional development. Along with inspiring those that she leads, she believes that professional development and continued support for career growth are crucial for female leaders to continue to obtain advance leadership positions.

Donna, Senior Associate Dean of Programs

Donna holds the position of Associate Dean of an academic department at a large, national, online university. She has always been interested in chemistry and the sciences and she knew in high school that she wanted to pursue a degree in chemistry. She was advised by her teachers that she would, “never succeed in a co-ed school, or even be accepted”. She went to an all-girls college and obtained bachelor’s degrees in both chemistry and math. She received a full scholarship to pursue her doctoral studies in physical chemistry. She had a challenging time passing the exams, and she ended up completing her master’s degree in chemistry and worked on research studies funded by the U.S. Air Force. Married and starting a family, she was looking to get out of her position as a full-time researcher, so she became a consultant for a company that was working on defense department initiatives. She worked with top secret clearance as a consultant, travelled all over the country visiting bases, and eventually worked for an airline to create a booking system, and then as a program manager for a retail management cell phone company, expanding the company over a five year period.

Donna left the cell phone company after five years and started her own tutoring business, which eventually grew to twenty students. She was very busy in this role, but she applied for a position at the university where she is currently a leader, and she obtained a faculty position. Donna's children were in high school when she decided that she wanted to pursue a doctoral degree in educational leadership. She got her EdD in four years from the university where she is currently employed, but they did not fund it. Following the completion of her degree, Donna applied for an associate dean of faculty, however she did not receive that position, and instead the university offered her a position as an Associate Dean of Programs, and after a couple of years she was promoted to Senior Associate Dean.

Donna believes that the following characteristics are essential for successful higher education leaders; effective listening, accountability, helping others to be accountable, a positive sense of achievement, being realistic about what others can accomplish, and effectively supporting others to reach their potential. She has observed that leadership positions in traditional higher education environments tended to hire males, and that they promoted males to presidents even if they did not have their degrees or the skills or the leadership experience. She explains, "I did not see in the traditional higher education environment, that my career was going to be very good....and they didn't value business experience at all, but at (online university) it's really a little different. I know that my skills and roles that I have had as a leader will advance my career here in higher education at this university."

She also has encountered gender biases when working at a traditional college related to promotions. She noted that males were quickly promoted to leadership roles, and "I didn't feel like they took females in the room very seriously at all. I really felt like the definition of leadership in higher education was broken." She experienced women being given Associate

Dean positions, but they weren't given the role of Vice President or a more advanced leadership position. She states:

They weren't given decision-making authoritative roles. They weren't given figure roles in the school...I loved the university a lot, and I loved the students, because I wanted to see them succeed in engineering, but I knew that that was going to be a very tough nut to crack, and it was disappointing.

She believes that the environment or setting that we work in is the critical influence on whether leadership is effective. "You could have good leaders, effective leaders, but at any given point, the environment can influence the ability for them to be effective leaders." The online university that she currently works at strives to foster an environment where people can offer feedback, collaborate, express themselves, and they work diligently to create non-toxic environments. She says that they consistently question, "how they can make a situation better, how can we work on our people skills?" She explains that university culture, "is where the effective leader transforms that negative bubble of environment and puts it back into a productive place where people are thriving and successful."

Donna had an effective mentoring experience where her leadership skills were enhanced and developed through direct feedback and guidance regarding what she needed to focus on to succeed as a successful leader. She felt inspired by her mentor's leadership modelling and her ability to not let things hold her back. Donna also has a mentor who is a Vice President at her university and who encourages her to, "develop my own skills as she is very attentive and really listens, and she is very polished and professional, so she inspires me to be kind and caring, but direct." Donna also believes that effective female leaders in higher education must be confident, believe in their skills, and not take feedback personally. She states, "I would also say that you don't have to be a male in order to be a female leader in

higher education. You don't have to behave like the male leaders in higher education for you to be accepted as a leader in higher education.”

Donna began her career as a consultant and then transitioned into a corporate role while she was starting her family. She eventually pursued a career in education in order to spend more time with her children. While working as a faculty member, Donna witnessed gender bias in a traditional college setting, and observed that male leaders were advancing into advanced leadership positions, and female colleagues with similar or more professional experience were not obtaining the same leadership opportunities. As Donna has advanced in her career, as a leader at an online university, she had the opportunity to work with mentors that have inspired her to develop her authentic leadership characteristics, and to value the importance of listening, effective leadership skills, and holding team members accountable, while also inspiring them, as she hones her leadership style to be a successful leader.

Emerging Themes & Concepts

This section presents the four themes that emerged during the research study and also includes participant's individual descriptions of their career experiences and trajectories, leadership beliefs, cultural influences that impact definitions of successful leadership, and the impact that working for an online college or university has had on their opportunities for leadership development and career advancement. It is important to note that all 10 participant's interview data were analysed when developing these themes. The four themes or concepts that emerged included; 1.) career trajectories and opportunities, higher education's impact on career advancement opportunities, and observations and experiences of leadership advancement, 2.) characteristics that define successful leadership in higher education, 3.) environment or culture's impact on defining successful leadership, 4.) elements that support career advancement; the impact of mentoring on career development and professional development opportunities for women at online colleges and universities. While

most of the individual participants expressed similar beliefs and experiences related to the themes explored in this research study, there were unique, divergent individual responses that emerged within each of the themes identified.

Theme 1: Career Trajectory

Common responses and beliefs emerged during the coding process related to the career trajectories of the ten research study participant's transitions into advanced leadership roles at online colleges and universities. Most of the research study participants had foundational career experiences in primarily corporate settings prior to beginning their careers in higher education. Seven out of 10 participants described these roles as providing them with both business and management skills. Four of the participants had initial careers in the fields in which they currently hold advanced leadership positions, (two in teaching, and two in nursing), and one out of the 10 participants had worked her way up to a leadership position as an instructional designer and then a leader in the field of technology and instruction.

One of the common elements that surfaced during coding was that almost of the research study participants had become adjunct or full-time faculty members prior to their advancement to leadership positions, (9 out of 10 participants). A common trend that influenced their decisions to leave corporate or other career settings to become faculty members was the flexibility it would offer them while they were raising their children. One participant, Donna, a Senior Associate Dean, stated that after working in the corporate world for many years she,

Needed to take a break. The kids need me. I recognized at that point, well into my thirties, that career is really important, but these two children were far more important than my career. Even though I know my career was important, they weren't thriving at all.

As a result, Donna became a tutor and eventually faculty member, which allowed her to spend summers with her children. Striking a balance between professional goals and supporting families emerged as expressed by 8 out of 10 participants when describing their career trajectories and their decisions to become faculty members prior to their advancement into leadership roles.

Another common element related to career advancement that emerged was the prevalence of the importance of timing, or luck, when describing the process of obtaining advanced leadership roles. Six out of 10 participants described their ascent into their initial leadership roles in higher education as having to do with timing rather than skills. Katie, an Associate Dean at a regional online university describes her career trajectory by stating, “I think I got in at a very good time when online learning was really just becoming, gaining traction, and it allowed me to try a lot of different roles, and work across different university cultures, and environments with different kinds of faculty. That sort of led me to where I am today.” Another participant, Sara, an Associate Dean at a small campus based college offering online programs, describes her advancement in to her current leadership role as involving timing, and a natural progression, “I just went in to the next position, until my Department Chair last year decided to step down and I was then the Associate Department Chair. So, all the positions were kind of like a natural progression. I wasn’t like seeking them out necessarily.”

Most of the participants explained that their careers began outside the field of higher education and four participants currently hold advanced leadership positions that administer career training related to their previous professional roles. Most of the participants began their higher education careers as adjunct faculty members, and many explained that they pursued faculty positions in response to the need to create balance between their personal and professional lives. Most of the participants expressed placing a priority on raising their

children while working in adjunct faculty roles, prior to pursuing leadership positions. The belief that timing and luck impacted career opportunities, rather than experience, skills, and qualification, was expressed by over half of the participants.

Higher Education's Impact on Career Advancement

Research study participants were asked to describe whether they believed that their opportunities for career advancement would have been greater, or if they would have had a faster trajectory outside of the field of higher education. Half of the research study participants indicated that they believed that the field of higher education limited career advancement to leadership roles, (6 indicated yes, 2 indicated maybe, and 1 indicated no, and 1 did not respond to the question). It is interesting to note that through the coding process, it was illustrated that participant responses varied across the colleges and universities represented in the research study. Anna, a Campus Director describes career advancement opportunities for female leaders in higher education when compared to those in corporate settings as, "it's harder in higher education and I'll tell you why. I have worked in the corporate world, and I feel we have so many entrenched systems of how we've always done things that it's really hard to innovate. I hate to say this out loud, but the tenure system and the unions, to be honest with you, it's a tough system to innovate in."

Michelle, a Senior Associate Dean, also believes that leadership opportunities for women are limited in higher education. She explains:

I think working in industry, there maybe were more opportunities for promotions and advancement. Working in higher education, I think it depends where you are, and what department you are in. One thing that somebody told me when I went from advising to academics was, 'Be prepared to not get promoted for a long time because that's just how academics works', and that's what happened.

Two participants believed that opportunities for advancement to leadership roles were not impacted by working in the field of higher education.

Most of the participants indicated that based on their experiences, they felt that higher education limited their opportunities to advance to leadership positions. One of the other concepts that emerged was that two participants believed that obtaining leadership positions within higher education was not limiting for women. It is interesting to note that both participants are currently leaders in career education fields that have been historically dominated by women.

Observations and Experiences of Leadership Advancement

When describing the differences in the leadership advancement opportunities and career trajectories of female and male leaders in higher education. Seven of the ten participants believed that male leaders were promoted at faster rates, and sometimes were hires more frequently into leadership roles with little higher education experience, and 3 participants (interesting to note that they all are leaders at Online University B), did not believe that there were perceived differences in the career trajectories of male and female leaders in higher education. Pamala, an Associate Dean, explained her observations and experiences by stating:

I watched it that continually when I was at another institution, well both the other institutions, of opportunities coming up and males continuing to be promoted to those opportunities....even though a male may not have a doctorate, they may be considered for a leadership role, while a female leader was told she needed to go get her doctorate to be considered.

Katie, an Associate Dean described the differences in male leaders' career trajectory by explaining observed differences in communication styles, and self-promotion techniques of male and female leaders:

I absolutely have noticed differences in career trajectories, absolutely....There was a male leader in a role similar to mine, and I always noted the differences between my approach and his, different enough to not be apples-to-apples, he very much talked about the end as though it was the birthday cake that was fully baked, and it had just come out of the oven with icing, and he really had no understanding of the ingredients that went into it to make it. I can extrapolate from that experience and determine that there are other male leaders who also have that same sort of rosy colored perspective, will promise you the world, not knowing what it takes to get to that place.

Regarding the three participants from Online University B, who did not perceive differences in the career trajectories of female and male leaders within higher education, it is important to note that they currently lead departments that focus on the health professions, nursing, and other predominately female dominated academic disciplines. Lauren, a Program Department Chair at Online University B, states,

I have not experienced differences in the career trajectories of female and male leaders in higher education. Every job that I have gotten has been based on the fact that I could do it the best. So, I've never paid much attention to the male/female dichotomy because whoever did the job the best, or could do the job the best, is who got the job. And so, I have never had a male counterpart pass me by that I've never passed by. I've never been denied a job as a female, and I have never seen a trajectory different because someone is a male. So just not my experience.

Most of the participants expressed that they had observed that male leaders in higher education experience more career opportunities and advance at higher rates than their female counterparts. Another observation explained by participants was that male leaders appear to be hired to hold leadership roles with little or no higher education experience, while female

leaders tend to have many years of higher education experience and history of leadership role progression prior to advancing to leadership roles.

Theme 2: Characteristics for Successful Higher Education Leadership

When describing the characteristics and behaviour that are essential for successful leadership in higher education, nine out of 10 of participants emphasized the importance of effective communication and establishing strong relationships, six out of 10 shared focusing on inspiring and developing others, adaptability, and holding others accountable, and setting expectations as essential, while five out of 10 discussed availability.

Almost all research study participants described building and sustaining trusting relationships with colleagues as crucial to their success as leaders within higher education. Katie, an Associate Dean supports the importance of this element of effective leadership by stating;

The ability to form and sustain good relationships with not just other academics, but with everyone who supports the academic enterprise. I think that is the key to building trust and establishing relationships, that are both strategically valuable and have practical value.

Lauren, a Program Department Chair at a large, national online university describes the importance of caring about each individual team member:

You've got to care about the people you are leading. And that's something I have done as a leader; is I have formed a relationship with every single direct report that I have. As a person, not as boss, but just as a person. For the life of me, I cannot see how somebody can be a leader without doing that.

Other important leadership characteristics that emerged were accountability and adaptability, in particular in the online educational field. Pamala, an Associate Dean at a large, national online university states:

I think you have to be very open, you're dealing with different types of learners, different types of people, different types of customers, so you have to be more open and considerate of everyone that you are working with. And also, just try to consider the environment around you. You cannot lead education these days, it's being led by a lot of other factors. So if you are not flexible right now, you're probably not doing very well in education. It shifts quickly and you have to be willing to change directions.

An interesting trend emerged through coding regarding successful leadership characteristics and behaviours that were associated with specific universities. Two large, national online universities had seven participants in this research study. The four participants from Online University A (Table 4.1) all expressed the importance of effective listening and developing a strong relationship with team members. As described by Michelle, a Senior Associate Dean at Online University A:

Servant leadership, especially when people are working with students, their needs have to be met. Yeah, authenticity and servant leadership. I think transparency and humility, effective communication, those kind of things, elements of transformational leadership. Certainly, I think that individualized consideration, and there's a need for some charisma, kind of keep the troops rallied.

The prevalence of the importance of building strong relationships with staff members and colleagues and inspiring and developing them, was expressed throughout the coded responses from the four participants from Online University A.

Analysing responses from the four participants from Online University B, also garnered similar findings, as each of the participants expressed the importance of availability when describing important leadership characteristics in higher education. Vanessa, an Academic Chair at Online University B, describes the importance of presence and

engagement as crucial elements of successful leadership, “The first thing that comes to mind is presence, I find information to support my faculty and help them find information when they need it. And then availability, I think that translating those things, those three things, presence, availability and mindfulness, are actually then modelling what I want my faculty to be as well for their students. That’s sort of a trickle-down thing.”

It is notable that all three participants from Online University B emphasize the importance of availability as a successful leader as important when supporting not only their team members but also the students that they provide services to.

The prevalent effective leadership characteristics that emerged were listening, successful communication skills, establishing trust, and focusing on developing individual relationships with team members. The important role that leaders within higher education play when training and developing others, holding them accountable, and setting clear expectations were also highlighted. The leadership behavior that was frequently emphasized by participants, when related specifically to online education, as the importance of adaptability, and the ability to innovate and change in order to continue to grow as both a leader and as a university.

Theme 3: Environmental/Cultural Impact on Definitions of Effective Leadership

The ten research study participants were asked if they believed, based on their career experiences that environment, organizational culture impacts definitions of effective leadership, and all participants except one indicated yes, (9 out of 10 participants). Participants expressed the belief that successful leadership is determined by the expectations of the environment, cultural norms and values, and that those definitions of effective leadership will vary across organizations and academic institutions. Holly, an Academic Chair, describes the impact that environment or setting has on leadership by stating, “where you are at in your leadership role would certainly be looked at differently, what you are being

evaluated against would look different too.” Michelle, a Senior Associate Dean, also believes that environment impacts definitions of leadership, she explains, “Absolutely, it’s been fascinating to watch that different leaders have created subcultures within the overarching culture, and within those subcultures, what appears to be the definition of leadership is very different. Within myself, leadership behaviours are this, this and this, but depending on who’s setting those cultural pieces, it’s not always those things.”

The research study participant that believed that successful leadership was not impacted by organizational culture or setting, Charlotte, an Associate Dean, explained, “Leadership is leadership. If you lead from authenticity, caring, kindness, and love. If you lead from graciousness, if you lead from honesty and integrity, it doesn’t matter where you lead.”, also went on to state that she has learned in “different settings in higher education, I’ve learned that I didn’t have to this in different cultures in different universities, There is an X, a very obvious political ladder, and you will climb that ladder and not go above. But the culture determines the success of a lot of people in an organization in higher ed. And if the culture is dominated by males, it’s a steep climb for females on the same credentials and calibre of talent.” It is notable that Charlotte’s responses related to culture’s impact on leadership appeared to shift when asked if she had altered her leadership style to achieve success in a specific college or university, culture or environment.

While the majority of participants believed that environment, setting or culture impacted definitions of effective leadership, there was a noted, coded divergence in responses when asked if they had altered their leadership styles to be successful in a college or university setting, culture or environment. All the participants representing colleges and universities other than Online University B indicated that culture and environment impacted their leadership style (7 out of 10 participants), while the three participants from Online University B stated that it did not influence their leadership styles. Pamala, an Associate

Dean, indicated that her leadership has been impacted by her environment and culture because:

It probably depended on her position and who I was working with, what I was doing, and the culture was a little bit different. For instance, if I was working with technology, that culture was very different....So I think within each area the cultures are a little different. So, you have to be mindful, listen to people. If a culture in one place is a little different, then you have to be willing to work with those folks, and adjust the way you see what you are doing according to their needs as well.

Situational leadership was mentioned in several of the participant responses related to adjusting leadership styles in response to culture expectations. Michelle, a Senior Associate Dean, explained that situational leadership, “is the one that is important always. It is important to understand what kind of leadership a situation calls for. Because sometimes it calls for kind of collaboration, and sometimes it calls for just giving the answer. So yes, I have altered my leadership style based on situation, and based on players involved.”

Lauren, a Program Department Chair from Online University B disagrees with the majority of participants responses regarding altering her leadership style due to cultural norms or expectations, she states, “No, I haven’t change it. This is my second college that I’ve worked for and I’ve never altered anything about my leadership philosophy, how I work, how I relate to people, never, no. It’s always worked really well and there hasn’t been anything to alter. I’ve never done it.”

Almost all of the study participants believe that setting and culture of a college or university impact how successful leadership is defined. The cultural expectations regarding effective leadership behaviour impacts expectations of leaders, and contributes to how they manage their departments, and develop relationships with their individual team members. A majority of the participants also explained that they have altered, or adapted their leadership

characteristics and style, in order to acclimate to the definition of effective leadership and expectations at their college or university.

Theme 4: Elements Supporting Career Advancement

The Impact of Mentoring on Career Opportunities

When asked to describe their experiences with mentors or coaches in higher education that had inspired them and supported their leadership development, the majority of participants were able to identify at least one mentor that had an impact on their leadership development and career advancement, (9 out of 10 participants indicated that a mentor had an impact on their professional development). Most of the participants reflected positive, productive mentoring experiences that supported their development as leaders. Vanessa, an Academic Chair, explained:

I have had three distinct mentors and coaches....one of them really pushed me to a place where I was always thinking of something, you know, instead of just doing what's required, but pushing beyond creatively. She really tapped into my strengths and show me that as a leader, how to find someone's strengths and build on those. I learned so much from her about how to manage people and how to have hard conversations, while still maintaining relationships, you know, those kinds of pieces of leadership that are hard.

The importance in building leadership skills and filling gaps in one's leadership while working with an experienced mentor were expressed by Sara, an Associate Dean:

She was very positive, and identified some holes that I might have, I don't make a strategic plan. I'm very busy and I like to get things done, but I don't always have the big picture. She's provided me with a lot of tools to help fill the gap, and she provide me with guidance on how to use the tools. She's met with me and members of my team together, so she's helped us work to create a system. I have another mentor that

I go to for difficult situations, she's kind of like my spiritual guru. She helps me come up with a plan.

Sara expresses the value of working with a mentor or coach when filling gaps in leadership styles and skills. She also emphasizes the importance of working with multiple mentors or coaches in order to obtain knowledge to inform specific situations, challenges, and areas of identified leadership development opportunities.

Most of the participants described experiences of working with a professional mentor within higher education that influenced their professional development and inspired them regarding career advancement opportunities. Mentors also played the role of coach, advisor, supporter, and instructor for most of the participants, and encouraged their leadership development within their current leadership positions.

Professional Development Opportunities at Online Colleges & Universities

Research study participants were asked if their current online colleges and universities supported their development as a leader and their career advancement, and all but one of the participants responded that yes, their academic institutions supported their leadership and career development either through mentoring, funding further education, enrolling them in university designed leadership programs when they were promoted to leadership roles, or through on-going leadership training programs. Most of the participants in this study experienced the positive, supportive impacts of leadership development opportunities provided by their colleges and universities. Lauren, a Program Department Chair explains:

The support that she has received from her university regarding professional development activities that foster career advancement, "The university has been absolutely amazing. They are constantly encouraging us to do professional development activities. To apply to jobs that are up the ladder. I've reached the pinnacle of where I want to be, but if I wanted to go further, I would have the support

to reach for it. In fact, the university has a whole department set aside for professional development for faculty and for leadership. They just want you to go as far as you possibly can and they support you in that, and there's always opportunities for professional development.

A majority of participants stated that their current online college or university has provided them with leadership opportunities through assigning a mentor, providing leadership training courses, encouraging them to participate in external professional development programs, or funding their doctoral studies. Most of the participants expressed the supportive role that their current colleges or universities have played in supporting not only their advancement as professional leaders, but also the expansion of their career trajectories in their leadership roles at that higher education institution.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this research study was to explore the professional experiences, leadership development, and career advancement opportunities of women in the field of higher education, specifically focusing on contemporary, online colleges and universities, where women have advanced in their careers at high rates. This study also illustrates participants' individual experiences related to defining successful leadership and their individual concepts of how leadership skills are influenced and evaluated in the context of contemporary higher education institutions, as well as how those educational settings have provided advanced leadership opportunities and professional development for them that reflect equity with their male counterparts.

Defining effective leadership, in higher education, produced similar responses among participants and illustrated the importance of building trusting relationships, establishing effective communication skills, having the ability to develop others while holding them accountable, and over fifty percent of the participants cited adaptability as one of the most

important leadership skills, in particular working in an online education environment. Another theme that emerged related to defining effective leadership was that most participants believe that environment, setting, or culture of a college or university impacts the definition of successful leadership behavior, and influences the leadership norms and expectations that are established. Most of the participants explained that they have adjusted or altered their leadership styles in order to be successful in their leadership roles within the context of the successful leadership expectations of their individual college or university.

Most of the participants explained the important role that mentoring has had on their leadership development and motivating them to pursue professional development training and pursue advanced leadership roles. Mentors have provided consistent support, advice, encouragement, and guidance related to creating opportunities to pursue career advancement opportunities. One of the large online universities in this research study has created a mentoring program for leaders as they advance to new leadership positions, as the majority of the participants explained that their currently universities provide leadership training, professional development opportunities, and funding for advancing their education, in order to create the foundation for their advancement within the higher education field.

Conclusion

The four themes or concepts that emerged during this research study emphasize the multiple elements that combine to contribute to not only female leaders' beliefs rated to successful leadership, but also how leadership positions are obtained within higher education. The theme of the impact that career trajectory has related to advancement to leadership roles, illustrates that while the majority of participants had foundations in corporate settings prior to beginning their careers in higher education, the majority of participants entered the higher education profession as adjunct or full-time faculty members. This allowed them to support their families while also pursuing careers. After holding those positions for many years,

participants then began to advance into leadership roles. Over fifty percent of participants believed that this advancement was rooted in luck or timing.

Most participants also believe that their leadership advancement opportunities and the rate at which they advanced, would have been faster in positions outside of higher education. The participants' observations related to leadership advancement indicated that a majority have experienced differences in the career trajectories and opportunities of their male counterparts, and that they have been promoted at higher rates without time spent in leadership roles, or higher education experience. The themes and concepts that emerged during this study will be explored related to the research study questions in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to illustrate and explore the professional experiences of female leaders in the field of higher education as they pursue career advancement opportunities, in the context of contemporary college and universities, where women have obtained career advancement and leadership positions at exponentially higher rates than traditional college and university settings. This study also highlighted the impact that educational environments and cultural beliefs and norms has on defining effective leadership at contemporary colleges and universities. Previous research suggested that organizational beliefs contribute to female leaders' accessibility to advanced leadership opportunities. Participants' beliefs and experiences as they pursued their higher education careers, along with how those shaped and defined their concept of the characteristics that promote successful leadership behaviours, were also identified and highlighted. This study also examined how contemporary higher education institutions support and foster the professional development and leadership opportunities for female leaders through leadership development training, funding for advancing education, and mentoring programs.

This research study was conducted by virtually interviewing and recording 10 female higher education administrators holding the leadership positions, including Dean, Associate Dean, Assistant Dean, Department Chair, and Associate Department Chair, and represent four contemporary, online U.S. colleges and universities. Interview transcripts were coded and analysed, and four themes emerged that were then applied in order to explore the study's three defined research questions.

Phenomenological research design was used during this qualitative research study to examine the common shared experiences of the participants regarding their career advancement and leadership opportunities in higher education. Through the coding and

analysis process, common and divergent experiences emerged, that reflected and identified shared experiences, illustrated similar and divergent experiences in the field of higher education, and illustrated beliefs and cultural norms existing within the college or university setting or environmental context in which the experiences occurred. This research design created a method with which to analyse and assign meaning and definition to those shared experiences, both highlighting and defining them, while also categorizing emerging themes, in the context of addressing the three research questions posed in this study.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do women in advanced leadership positions at contemporary higher education institutions describe their leadership development and career opportunities?

RQ2: What factors do women in advanced leadership positions believe created career opportunities and accelerated their career trajectories?

RQ3: How do participants characterize the culture/norms of their contemporary academic institution relative to their opportunities for advancement?

The four themes highlighted in this study, that have an impact on female leaders' career advancement opportunities, definitions of successful leadership, and the impact of professional development and growth supported by educational institutions, were; 1.) career trajectories and opportunities, higher education's impact on career advancement opportunities, and observations and experiences of leadership advancement, 2.) characteristics that define successful leadership in higher education, 3.) environment or culture's impact on defining successful leadership, 4.) supporting career advancement; impact of mentoring on career advancement opportunities, and professional development opportunities for women at online colleges and universities. These highlighted themes reflected the experiences, beliefs, and observations of the participants, and illustrated the multiple elements or factors that contribute to female opportunities for advancement to

leadership positions at colleges and universities. Participants definitions of successful leadership, the process by which leadership opportunities are accessible, and the resources provided for professional development, combine to create cultural norms and systems that impact their career trajectories as leaders in higher education.

Interpretation of the Findings for Research Questions

RQ1: How do women in advanced leadership positions at contemporary higher education institutions describe their leadership development and career opportunities?

Mentoring & Professional Development at Online Universities

Participants were asked to describe how women in advanced leadership positions at contemporary, online higher education institutions experienced their leadership development and career opportunities. Most of the study participants highlighted the crucial role that mentors had on their leadership development, motivation to continue professional development and training, and encouraging them to continue to pursue advanced leadership positions. Almost all of the study participants also experienced consistent, direct feedback from mentors regarding how they may perform more effectively in their current leadership positions, while strategically looking for opportunities within their university for advancement. The pivotal role that mentors played in developing leadership skills was explained by Sara, an Associate Dean, “I don’t always have the big picture. She’s provided me with a lot of tools to help fill the gap, and she provide me with guidance on how to use the tools. She’s met with me and members of my team together, so she’s helped us work to create a system. I have another mentor that I go to for difficult situations, she’s kind of like my spiritual guru.” The influence that mentors have regarding coaching female leaders and working to fill gaps, and develop effective leadership skills, and at times working with multiple mentors to do so, enabled participants to both enhance their inherent leadership styles, while also identifying the leadership skills that they need to development.

One of the large, national online universities, (identified in this research study as Online University B), has successfully created a mentoring program that advanced female leaders are enrolled in when they obtain new leadership roles. Mentoring is coupled with professional leadership development programs, and ongoing training is provided so that leaders may continue to develop their skills, while working toward obtaining more advanced leadership positions within the university. Most of the study participants highlighted the supportive, engaging, informative, and motivational approach that their online colleges and universities have toward providing leadership training opportunities as a source of encouragement for their pursuit of advance leadership positions within that educational setting. Lauren, a Program Depart Chair stated, “They are constantly encouraging us to do professional development activities. To apply to jobs that are up the ladder.... In fact, the university has a whole department set aside for professional development for faculty and for leadership. They just want you to go as far as you possibly can and thy support you in that, and there’s always opportunities for professional development.”

The combination of university supported mentoring and professional development opportunities for female leaders, not only enhances both their performance in their leadership positions, but also increases the productivity and retention of the members of their departments. By providing opportunities for career advancement within their online colleges and universities, leaders are retained, consistency and institutional knowledge are sustained, and the educational institution continues to illustrate a culture of investment in and value placed on its leadership.

As mentioned above, Online University B, was represented by three participants in this research study, and each of them expressed the belief that within the context of their university, they did not observe differences in the career trajectories and professional development opportunities of female and male leaders. Lauren, a Program Department

Chair, explains, “So, I’ve never paid much attention to the male/female dichotomy because whoever did the job the best, or could do the job the best, is who got the job. And so, I have never had a male counterpart pass me by that I’ve never passed by. I’ve never been denied a job as a female, and I have never seen a trajectory different because someone is a male.”

Online University B provides a comprehensive, consistent mentoring and professional development program for its leaders, impacting the experiences and beliefs of its female leaders related to gender equity and career opportunities within that university. Online University B also offers professional academic programs that train nurses, health professionals, and other careers that historically have been predominately female, and may contribute to the culture of equity related to career opportunities for female leaders, reflected by participants. These combined factors supporting the leadership development and career advancement trajectories of female leaders, along with the cultural norms of University B, may be a topic for further study, to provide insight regarding online higher education institutions that provide optimal leadership advancement opportunities for female leaders.

RQ2: What factors do women in advanced leadership positions believe created career opportunities and accelerated their career trajectories?

Career Advancement Opportunities in Higher Education

Participants described the following factors that women in advanced leadership positions in higher education believed create career opportunities for them and accelerated their career trajectories. Two themes emerged during the study that addressed this question; higher education’s impact on career advancement and observations and experiences of leadership advancement. Most of the study participants, (over half), stated that they believe their careers in higher education have limited their career advancement opportunities related to obtaining advanced leadership positions. Participants explained that there are limited

career opportunities for female leaders who have advanced to upper level leadership roles, and that the traditional systems and structures within the field historically have favoured male leadership styles. Anna, a Campus Director states, “I have worked in the corporate world, and I feel we have so many entrenched systems of how we’ve always done things that it is really hard to innovate. I hate to say this out loud, but the tenure system and the unions, to be honest with you, it’s a tough system to innovate in.”

Other participants indicated that in higher education, opportunities for career advancement are dependent on multiple factors including; timing, where you are working, and what department you are in. Michelle, a Senior Associate Dean described experience, “Somebody told me when I went from advising to academics, ‘Be prepared to not get promoted for a long time because that’s just how academics works’, and that’s what happened.” The system and structure for career advancement within higher education poses inherent challenges for female leaders as they emerge from faculty roles (almost all of the study participants held faculty roles prior to obtaining leadership positions), and begin the process of identifying leadership opportunities, and then competing for those positions.

Most of the participants in this research study also indicated that they had observed their male colleagues promoting to leadership positions at faster rates than female leaders. They also indicated that they had also witnessed upper level leadership positions being filled with male candidates that had little or no experience in higher education. One participant, Pamala, an Associate Dean, observed:

I watched it that continually when I was at another institution, well both the other institutions, of opportunities coming up and males continuing to be promoted to those opportunities....even though a male may not have a doctorate, they may be considered for a leadership role, while a female leader was told she needed to go get her doctorate to be considered.

An emerging observation expressed by participants was that differences in career trajectories of male colleagues, even when they held similar qualifications, skills, and positions as their female colleagues, were rewarded for their leadership abilities and styles, at both traditional colleges and universities and at half of the contemporary, online universities included in this study. This creates the need for further research and analysis regarding the inherent biases related to definitions of successful leadership that are emergent within the field of higher education, and are not specific to individual colleges and universities, or whether they are traditional, campus based, or contemporary, online educational institutions.

RQ3: How do participants characterize the culture/norms of their contemporary academic institution relative to their opportunities for advancement?

Impact of Culture on Defining Effective Leadership

Participants characterized the cultural norms at their contemporary, online colleges and universities relative to their opportunities for leadership advancement. Almost all the research study participants indicated that they believe that organizational culture impacts how an academic institution defines successful leadership behaviours. As highlighted in two of the study's emerging themes, characteristics for successful higher education leadership and environmental/cultural impact on definitions of leadership, participants observed that the cultural norms and values of a college or university influence the definition of effective leadership and those definitions will vary across each individual educational institution. In the context of defining leadership expectations, and skills and behaviours that are identified as desirable for candidates to move to advanced leadership roles, will be determined by how leadership is defined and emulated within the culture, and leadership subcultures of that educational institution. Michelle, a Senior Associate Dean, explains, "Where you are at in your leadership role would certainly be looked at differently, what you are being evaluated against would look different too."

Many participants also expressed that it has been insightful over the course of their leadership careers to observe how different leaders have created subcultures within the overarching culture of their universities and the definition of effective leadership is also defined, and influenced, based on complex systems of multiple cultural norms. The leadership culture in the context of an individual university, determines the success of leaders in higher education, and in the traditional university setting, it has historically been dominated by males (Charlotte). Almost all of the study participants, agreed that in order to advance in the context of higher education, it is necessary to acclimate, and adjust leadership behaviours to meet the leadership expectations and cultural norms of a college or university, to create opportunities for career growth. The cultural norms related to effective leadership behaviours impacts the expectations of leaders, defines how they manage others, and influences how measures of accountability and education practice are implemented. Along with effective communication and establishing trusting relationships with team members and colleagues, most of the study participants also indicated that adaptability was the most important leadership characteristic and skill when working in higher education, and specifically the evolving field of online education, in order to successfully lead teams, and obtain career advancement opportunities.

Alignment of Findings with Literature

The four themes that emerged during the research study were explored and most of them aligned closely with existing literature. The literature highlights two causes for gender stereotypes in higher education; cultural assumptions related to definitions of effective leadership characteristics and decreased access to leadership opportunities and mentoring (Dominici, Fried & Zeger, 2013). Applying the behavioural approach to this study, including the situational leadership approach and complex systems leadership theory are highly applicable, as reflected in the themes that emerged from the research findings, aid in

highlighting the most effective leadership styles and behaviors within an identified situational context or systematic context (Northouse, 2015). Related to the experience of gender bias, in the context of higher education, reflected by most of the study participants, the literature explains that defining effective leadership traits and style have been attributed to the male-centric nature of the study of leadership and therefore it has been traditionally defined by the masculine characteristics of its researchers, resulting in limitations and barriers experienced by female leaders when attempting to obtain leadership advancement. Limited value has been attributed to the collaborative, nurturing, educational, transformative leadership styles that include effective communication, within the context of advanced higher education leadership, although they are accepted as successful leadership characteristics within the settings of corporate and global professional fields (Dunn, Gerlach & Hyle, 2014).

Successful Definitions of Leadership & The Impact of Mentoring

Two of the themes highlighted in this research study, (characteristics that define successful leadership in higher education, and the impact of mentoring on career advancement opportunities), are also illustrated in leadership theory literature, (in particular organizational and transformative leadership), as there is a collaborative relationship that provides the foundation for successful organizational leadership (Burns, 1978). Leaders consider the individual support needs of their followers, set appropriate expectations, and use their influence to motivate and develop team members with shared goals and objectives. Female leaders in higher education, (as reflected by most of the study participants), reflect organizational leadership by emulating highly collaborative, effective communication focused, and relationship building approach to leadership. Multiple organizational systems theories emphasize the importance of advanced transformational leadership techniques that are currently successfully utilized by leaders in contemporary leadership roles in a diverse range of organizational contexts (Marion & Gonzalez, 2014).

Higher Educations Cultural Impact on Defining Successful Leadership

As reflected by three of the themes emerging during this research study, 1.) observations and experiences of leadership advancement, 2.) characteristics that define successful leadership in higher education and, 3.) environment or culture's impact on defining successful leadership, when female leaders confront challenges when developing their leadership characteristics within the confines of traditional higher education's leadership norms, they experience pressure to adapt or acclimate to those norms, to meet the expectations and standards of their environments' cultural beliefs regarding definitions of effective and accepted leadership behaviour.

The literature regarding equal career opportunities for female leaders in higher education, describes two myths; the first is that women have already achieved true equal opportunity, and the second is that the definition of successful leadership in higher education settings has not shifted, and that their role in leadership within the context of traditional structures and norms is still evolving, (Fitzgerald, 2013). Female leaders are asked to re-define their leadership style, skills, and behaviours to reflect the accepted, acculturated leadership behaviours of their colleges or universities, while confronting the challenge of re-inventing their individual definitions of leadership that are based on their inherent leadership styles and previous career experiences. This creates a juxtaposition for female leaders as they struggle to conform to cultural leadership expectations, balancing their intrinsic experiential beliefs regarding leadership behaviours, and re-developing their definitions of leadership through the lens of a combination of cultural norms and inherent individual experiences.

The other element that contributes to the complexity of the definition of leadership identity, is that environments and cultures are frequently shifting, and higher education in particular continues to evolve as educational structures, delivery models, and successful leadership practices, are influenced by the shifting needs and expectations of students and

other stakeholders. As the educational environments in which they are leading continues to evolve, the need for effective communication, adaptability, and accountability, (as identified by the study participants), surface as crucial leadership characteristics that are necessary for advanced higher education leaders to effectively lead in the complex, evolving higher education environments.

Mentoring & Professional Development: Supporting Career Advancement

Another illustration of literature correlating with themes that surfaced during this research study, was the impact that mentoring and professional development has on creating opportunities for female leader's career advancement. In higher education, there are very few mentors and limited professional leadership development opportunities for female leaders (Tiao, 2006). This is influenced by advanced male leaders lack of involvement and hesitation when working with and mentoring female leaders, competition among the limited number of women currently in leadership positions, a lack of females that hold leadership roles that would create effective mentoring opportunities. This concept was expressed by most of the study participants, as earlier in their higher education careers, (in particular when they worked in traditional college and university settings), most of the participants experienced an increase in opportunities to participate in university supported mentoring programs, and professional development funding and training, when they began leadership positions at their current contemporary, online colleges and universities. Most of the participants highlighted the benefits of working consistently with a mentor, (support in current leadership position, coaching and development of leadership characteristics and skills, and advising regarding career advancement opportunities), and also described the professional development focus and investment that their online educational institutions had made in them to continue to develop their leadership. While the literature highlights limitations that female higher education leaders experience regarding a lack of mentoring and professional development

opportunities in the context of traditional higher education settings, further study may be needed to create a body of literature that reflects the opportunities provided to advanced female leaders at online colleges and universities.

Major Findings

There were three major findings highlighted during this research study, based on the analysis of both the narratives and coding of participant responses. The first was that across the four contemporary, colleges and universities represented in this study, participants that were provided with a combination of consistent mentoring and professional development and leadership training opportunities expressed positive feedback regarding their experiences in their leadership positions, and were presented with not only support for pursuing career advancement, but were also offered advanced leadership opportunities within their colleges and universities (9 out of 10 participants). Another significant finding was that while most participants were aware of and had experienced gender biases related to career opportunities in higher education, and had experienced them in traditional college settings, in the context of their current online universities, they did not express that they had experienced male counterparts being promoted at higher rates than female leaders.

The final major finding was that examples of cultural impacts on definitions of successful leadership was illustrated when analysing the responses of eight participants representing two large online universities. The responses of those participants when asked to define effective leadership characteristics and behaviours in higher education, were concise and similar based on the university they represented. (using specific words and phrases to describe effective leadership). This indicate a direct correlation between how leadership is defined and acculturated in an educational setting, (in this case an online setting), how it is indoctrinated within the culture, and then emulated by its leaders.

Implications and Recommendations for Action

This research study may act as an initial catalysis for further research and literature exploring definitions of successful leadership within online higher education, examining and highlighting career advancement opportunities that have emerged for female leaders in online education over the past decade, and filling gaps in the literature related the evolution of effective leadership principles as defined and influenced by online education. There are also gaps in current literature related to an analysis of female leaders at traditional colleges and universities and those contemporary, online institutions, and their career trajectories, and advanced leadership roles held over the past two decades. Gaps in literature regarding adaptability leadership in an online university or educational setting, will also emerge over the next few years as a direct result of the pandemic, and will include many of the leadership themes and concepts that emerged in this study.

The practical, operational recommendation emerging from this research study is the importance of establish mentoring and professional development programs at all levels of leadership for female leaders at online colleges and universities. Creating a national online mentoring program for mid and upper level female leaders, through an accredited professional association, or an accredited academic program, will provide women in the field of higher education with opportunities for professional networking, leadership development, coaching, consistent feedback and support in their leadership roles, and will promote the identification of career advancement opportunities nationally across online academic institutions.

Recommendations for Further Study

The findings of this qualitative research study were limited to the analysis of narratives provided by female leaders at online colleges and universities. In order to fill gaps in the research conducted and reflect changes regarding definitions of effective leadership at

are occurring currently, there are three recommendations for further study. The first recommendation is a quantitative study that examines the number of female leaders that have held advanced leadership positions at online U.S. colleges and universities over the past two decades and then explore their career trajectories, pace of advancement, and the colleges and universities they represent. This will provide data to highlight the rates of female leaders' advancement in online higher education, that will provide researchers with detailed data regarding the factors that impacted their opportunities for advancement. The second recommendation for further study is a mixed methods research study that explores how leadership is defined within the context of large, national online universities, and the impact that the pandemic has had on shifting definitions of successful leadership behaviors related to specifically to female leadership, over the next few years.

The third recommendation is a qualitative research study that explores correlations and common themes that emerge regarding participants' responses to not experiencing differences in male and female career trajectories and never adjusting their leadership styles based on environmental or cultural expectations. How their experiences and observations may be representative of their previous professional fields, areas of academic discipline, the current culture and definition of successful leadership at their current university, or a combination of these elements may warrant further inquiry.

Conclusion

During this qualitative research study, the professional development and career advancement opportunities of ten female leaders, holding various advanced leadership positions, and representing four online colleges and universities, were explored through narratives and the analysis of research question responses. Four themes emerged during the analysis and coding process, and those themes were then applied when addressing the study's research questions. The purpose of the study was to examine the professional experiences of

female higher education leaders as they pursue career advancement, in the context of contemporary college and universities. This study also examined the impact that educational environments and cultures have when defining effective leadership in the context of colleges and universities.

Career advancement opportunities in higher education and the impact of organizational culture on defining effective leadership were two elements, as described by participants, that contributed to creating challenges or barriers as they pursued advanced leadership positions. Most of the study participants expressed their belief that their careers in higher education had limited their career opportunities due to a limited number of those roles, and the traditional structures and cultural norms that have previously given preference to traditionally male leadership styles, and specifically to male leaders. Participants also described the impact that institutional culture has on defining and enforcing norms related to defining successful leadership, specifically in the context of traditional college and university settings. Cultural norms and the values of a specific educational setting directly define effective leadership and determine whether female leaders will be allowed opportunities for leadership advancement.

Participants expressed the importance of mentoring and professional development opportunities, which are currently supported at most of the online colleges and universities represented in this study, and they highlighted them as having a large impact on the leadership development, success in leadership position and career advancement opportunities. Providing these opportunities for female leaders in higher education, (at both traditional and contemporary, online educational institutions), was expressed by participants as a key component when both retaining them at their current institution and providing them with support and opportunities to define their career trajectories, and pursue advanced leadership positions.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

1. Did you know that currently only 30% of U.S. college and university presidents are female?
2. Describe your career path and what led you to your current role.
3. What characteristics and behaviors do you believe are essential for leaders in higher education?
4. How do you think your role as a leader in higher education impacted your career advancement?
5. If you encountered biases, stereotypes as you advanced in your career, how did those challenges transform or impact your definition of leadership?
6. Have you observed differences in male leaders' career trajectories compared to those of female leaders? Can you give me an example?
7. Based on your career experiences, do you believe that environment and setting impact definitions of effective leadership?
8. Have you ever altered your leadership style to achieve success in a specific college/university culture/environment?
9. How has your current college/university supported your development as a leader and career advancement?
10. Describe mentors, coaches that worked with you to develop your leadership skills. How did they inspire you?
11. Reflecting on your development as a leader, are there specific experiences that influenced your development, and what advice would you share with aspiring female leaders in higher education?