LEADING WHILE FOLLOWING:
MID-LEVEL WOMEN ADMINISTRATORS IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

By

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ABSTRACT

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Previous research indicates that mid-level women administrators are under-valued as leaders and followers despite their capacity and influential connectivity up, down, and across the organizational chart. Few studies have provided insight into the leading and following experiences of mid-level women administrators in the community college. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore what meaning mid-level women administrators ascribe to the experience of being both a leader and a follower within the community college sector. Participants discussed their experiences through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and described the perceived effects of those experiences on their leadership and followership practices.

The study employed criterion sampling to recruit ten participants in the Midwestern United States who held mid-level administrative positions of director, assistant/associate dean, or dean in community colleges. It was guided by an integrated conceptual framework of leadership identity construction, feminist standpoint theory and gendered organizational theory. Data analysis revealed findings related to leading and following interactions, influences of cognitive development on leading and following, and navigating an adverse work environment. Implications from the findings suggest that community college practitioners and leaders will benefit from enhanced leadership professional development, interrogation of implicit gender bias embedded with the institution, and the reduction and removal of race-based microaggressions among faculty, staff, and administrators.

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Sharon and Ray Pack, who instilled in me and nourished a love of learning that has made all things possible throughout my life.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

In the United States women now earn more doctoral degrees than men with approximately three-quarters of the PhDs going to women in fields such as public administration, health sciences, and education (Okahana & Zhu, 2018). Organizations and institutions with women in leadership positions often outperform peer institutions without female leaders (Lennon, 2013). Women hold the majority of mid-level administrative positions in community colleges (Phillippe, 2016). Mid-level leadership has been acknowledged as crucial to the effectiveness of higher education organizations in achieving academic success and implementing change initiatives in the United States, Canada, and New Zealand (Marshall, 2012). Mid-level administrators, located between senior leaders at the top and staff at lower levels of the organizational hierarchy, are uniquely situated to exert influence up, down, and across the institution as both leaders and followers.

Pivotal to the effectiveness of the community college, mid-level women administrators – deans, assistant deans, and directors – function as change agents as they conduct the day-to-day operations such as strategic plan implementation, student engagement, and effective resource management (Eddy, Garza Mitchell, & Amey, 2016). Women mid-level administrators often serve as role models and mentors for other women who are considering a career in higher education administration and "can have far-reaching influences not only on the institutions themselves, but on the scope of research and knowledge that affects us all" (Lennon, 2013, p. 16). Yet women's capacity for leadership is undervalued, reflecting a failure of the institution to recognize and maximize female leadership talent (Catalyst, 2007), and as administrators, they are not always regarded as leaders. Much of the leadership research centered in community colleges is focused on challenges confronted by women as they navigate the career ladder to senior-level

positions of chief academic officers and the presidency. However, mid-level administrators have the most influence on operations, organizational priorities, and performance of the college as they bridge perspectives of senior leaders and those whom they indirectly and directly supervise (Rosser, Johnsrud, & Heck, 2003; Eddy, Garza Mitchell, & Amey, 2016). By understanding the leading and following experiences of women in mid-level administrative positions in the community college, this study contributes to a broader inclusion of leadership beyond the privileging of senior-level positions. Valuing the roles of mid-level women administrators will help institutions provide better support for these leaders, ensure their organizational culture is inclusive and promote initiatives that cultivate racial and gender diversity.

Background of the Problem

Those in administrative roles often consider their position as the primary rationale for being named a leader (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006) and therefore, positions on the organization chart often dictate who is and is not considered to be a leader. Mid-level administrators are often characterized as managers, individuals who spend much of their time in transactional activities such as scheduling classes, attending meetings, and program and curriculum maintenance (Gillett-Karam, 1999). Where managers were once considered to be leaders (Drucker, 1955) the term has since taken on an inferior connotation due to promoted ideas like "A good manager does things right. A leader does the right things." (Bennis & Goldsmith, 1997, p. 4). In bureaucratic systems such as the community college, evidence suggests faculty, staff, and administrators are socialized to believe that leaders have greater knowledge and expertise and as a result, should be accorded higher status and privilege (Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patero, & McGregor, 2010). This idealized view of leadership reinforces status inequalities and power differentials and contributes to the "subordination of followership" by demeaning the role of

mid-level administrators (Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007, p. 169).

As comprehensive, open-access institutions, community colleges are often tagged as "People's Colleges" (Meier, 2018, p. 16), emphasizing universal access for all, innovation, and growth. Yet the expected cultural and racial acceptance, opportunities, and networks that are assumed characteristic of such institutions are not always experienced by White women and women of color in mid-level administrative positions. Rather than viewing their leadership based on its own merits and contributions to the college, these administrators are often characterized as professionally limited by their own choosing or by the bureaucratic nature of the community college where they become "stuck in the middle" (Eddy & Ward, 2015, p. 9). This marginalized view of mid-level women administrators is further complicated by scholars who lament the loss of talent when those who aspire to lead from the middle do not seek higher-level positions.

Research regarding gender stereotypes and leadership has shown an incompatibility between the role of the leader and the gender role. For example, women leaders receive unwarranted lower evaluations than male leaders and are not considered as often for leadership positions because they do not appear to fit the image of a typical leader (Heilman, 2012). This stereotype perpetuates the double bind that women experience when they behave outside of their prescribed gender role. Stereotypical male models of leadership further perpetuate what it means to be a leader in the community college, pushing to the margin women, leaders of color, and leaders across the gender continuum because they do not fit within this narrow perspective.

Problem Statement

Mid-level women administrators are at the center of the community college and function as the "transmitter of core strategic values and organizational capacity (Clegg & McAuley, 2005, p. 24). Yet their leadership capacity and influential connectivity within the institution – up and

down the organizational chart and with internal and external stakeholders across departments – is not recognized because they are often viewed as being "tied as a subordinate or place-bound position" (Gillett-Karam, 2017, p.42) in the college. The general problem addressed in this study was the undervaluation of women mid-level administrators first as leaders and followers, and second, as women oppressed by the dominant paradigm that women in the community college have achieved representational equity and the time to focus on their special needs has passed.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore what meaning mid-level women administrators ascribe to the experience of being both a leader and a follower within the community college sector and the perceived effects of that experience on their leadership and followership practices. The study used methodology that examined the perceptions, attitudes, and lived experiences of mid-level women administrators – directors, assistant/associate deans, and deans – as they fulfilled their administrative responsibilities and leveraged influence to advance the mission of their prospective institutions. Little research exists about how women mid-level administrators conceptualize their identities as both leaders and followers. This study answered the call by Eddy and Khwaja (2019) for community college leadership scholars to fulfill their "responsibility in questioning structures that keep women from thriving as leaders" (p.70).

Research Question

Based on information presented in the previous sections, the following research question informed the design of the study: How do mid-level women administrators in community colleges make meaning of their identities as both leaders and followers? I limited the scope of the study to focus specifically on women serving in director, assistant/associate dean, and dean positions in the community college. I recruited women working in community colleges in the

Midwest United States and limited the number of participants to ten (Creswell, 2014). Limiting the scope of the study was beneficial as it allowed me to focus on my objective of collecting rich data and developing a deep understanding of the participants' experiences while sustaining a keen interest in my topic (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). In chapter three, I provide detailed accounting of the procedures I used to identify and recruit participants.

Significance of the Study

The research on women in mid-level administration is underdeveloped in several ways. As I discuss more fully in chapter two, studies on women in community college leadership have primarily focused on the presidency and on women who have successfully achieved senior-level positions. Research into the leadership of women college presidents has produced numerous studies related to ways that women lead such as participatory decision-making, shared or team leadership, collaboration, relationship-based, inclusiveness orientation, and the social change model of leadership (Kezar, 2014). This dissertation moved beyond studies of women's leadership styles to illustrate the ways in which women with multiple and fluid identities construct leadership and followership in the community college.

Much of the literature on women leaders assumes they aspire to move up the career ladder and focuses on barriers they need to overcome in order to advance to senior-level positions. However, there is still a lack of understanding of how career objectives develop and influence women's choices, how the institutional climate is influenced by gender-based expectations, and how women in leadership roles respond to the organizational culture of the community college. I contend that the lack of a research focus on mid-level women administrators is one way they continue to be marginalized and swept to the periphery of higher education.

To address these voids in the literature, this study provides insights into how mid-level women administrators negotiate the complexities of leading while following. Understanding the leading and following experiences of women as grounded in their lives, work, and meaning making as director, assistant/associate deans, and deans in the community college offers promising insights into how others in mid-level positions may successfully build coalitions, intervene among warring factions, hold internal and external threats at bay, and guide and encourage others.

By exploring the lived experiences of mid-level women administrators, I have added to the current research by describing and interpreting how these women construct their leader and follower identities and what they go through in the process. This study added new insights to the existing leadership and followership literature, discussed implications for community colleges and for those responsible for designing leadership development programs, and suggested additional opportunities for research. The study also contributes more broadly to practice by contributing to the identification of institutional structures and processes that increase leadership and followership effectiveness at all levels across the organization.

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical frameworks that guided this study provided an overall orienting lens that influenced the central question that was answered, informed how the data was collected and analyzed, and provided a call for action from the study's findings (Creswell, 2014). As a feminist researcher, I believe that women's perspectives, activities, and behaviors are essential to understanding and taking action to improve their social situations. Yet within the study of higher education, feminist research is primarily absent from leading peer-reviewed higher education journals (Hart, 2006; Hart & Metcalf, 2010; Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011). This study used

feminist standpoint theory as an established approach to the construction of knowledge that disrupts barriers between academia and activism, between theory and practice (Brooks, 2007). Prior research on the leadership experiences of women includes limited exploration of the intersections of gender and race. As Parker (2005) cautioned, "to advance a model of feminine leadership based on White women's gender identity essentially excludes Black women's experiences in constructing gender identity and, therefore, excludes Black women's voices in theorizing about leadership" (p. 10). Therefore, because it facilitates the centering of women's diverse voices and distinct social experiences, feminist standpoint theory was an applicable theoretical framework for research conducted about mid-level women administrators in the community college. The focus was intentionally placed on the voices of women and on their experiences, not on the full gender spectrum.

In addition to feminist standpoint theory, this study utilized the theory of gendered organizations. As explained by Acker (1990), "to say than an organization is gendered means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine" (p. 146). While gender was initially conceptualized as a separate analytic unit in organizational studies, Acker (1990) made the case that because it is an integral process of organizations, an intentional examination of gender is required in any analysis. The theory of gendered organizations was used in this study to understand the means in which gender norms, as experienced by mid-level women administrators, were upheld or suspended by existing institutional practices in the community college.

Traditional approaches to studying leadership involve role-based views reliant upon leader traits and behavioral styles as foundational to organizational outcomes. However, the

study of mid-level administrators, who both lead and follow, required a constructionist approach that views followership as a necessary element in the co-construction of leadership. DeRue and Ashford's (2010) theory of leadership identity construction views leadership and followership as socially constructed processes in which leader and follower identities shift back and forth as individuals engage in mutual influence processes. In this approach, followership is not tied to a role but to following behaviors that can include leader and follower claiming and granting as well as resisting or negotiating with another's influence attempts (Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, and Carsten, 2014). To understand the lived experiences of mid-level women administrators in the community college, leadership identity construction along with gendered organizational theory and feminist standpoint theory helped me to make sense of the phenomenon of leading and following from the middle.

Methodology and Method

The decision to apply a qualitative methodology for this dissertation was based on the question that I wanted to answer. Specifically, I sought an understanding of the deep meaning of women's experiences as mid-level administrators in the community college and how they communicate their experiences as both leaders and followers. Therefore, a qualitative methodology was used with a phenomenological approach as it assumes the essential meaning of the experience is made known through dialogue and reflection (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). The primary method used was in-depth interviewing to bring forth participants' stories about their lives in relation to the subject matter, with the focus on both their past and present experiences. According to van Manen (1990) two purposes of the in-depth interview are:

> To explore and gather experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for
> developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon…and as a vehicle

to develop a conversational relation with a partner (interviewee) about the meaning of an

experience. (p. 66)

In addition, in-depth interviewing allows the feminist researcher to access the voices of those

who are marginalized in a society. In this study, I used in-depth interviewing to understand the

lived experiences of mid-level women administrators and the subjective understanding they

bring to leading and following in the community college.

Definition of Key Terms

A list of the definitions of key terms for this study is provided below:

1. *Mid-level administrators*: For the purposes of this study, mid-level administrators are those

   in positions of dean, assistant dean, associate dean, and director that oversee academics,

   student services, and administrative services in the community college. This term does not

   include full-time faculty, presidents, senior vice-presidents, vice-presidents, or provosts

   (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019).

2. *Leader***:** For the purposes of this study, a leader is defined as a community college

   administrator.

3. *Gender:* For the purposes of this study, gender refers to the patterned, socially produced

   differences between female and male, masculine and feminine. The concept of gender as a

   symbol of power usually includes the subordination of women, either concretely or

   symbolically (Acker, 1990).

Organization of the Study

In chapters two and three I provide additional background for this study. Specifically, in

chapter two, I review the literature on mid-level women administrators in the community college

sector and the limitations of the extant research. I also discuss the theoretical frameworks that

informed this study. In chapter three, I detail the methodology and method used for data collection and analysis. In chapter four, I first describe the participants and then present the findings from the study. In chapter five, I present the key findings of the study and discuss the participants' experiences as conveyed by the themes that emerged from their voices. I explore the relationship of findings to prior studies and end the chapter with a discussion of study limitations, implications for practitioners and leaders, recommendations for further research, and summary of the study.

CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

To make use of literature in a qualitative study is to assume the inquirer learns from the participant, rather than stipulates the questions to be answered from the researcher's point of view (Creswell, 2014). The goal of a literature review is generally to define an interrelated body of research, which is analyzed and critiqued in order to identify limitations and gaps that can be addressed in a study. The literature reviewed in this chapter is essentially bounded in several ways. First, the literature is focused on women's leadership experiences in higher education. Other than the presidency, women leaders in community colleges are under studied. As a result, studies are included that focus on women administrators in four-year institutions. Second, I focused this literature review on the concepts of leadership and followership as they relate to mid-level leaders in the community college. In this way, I limited the topics of leadership and followership to literature that is most pertinent to my study.

This section begins with an overview of the historical conceptions of leadership in the community college followed by women leaders in higher education. I then discuss the literature related to leadership and followership and processes of constructing leader and follower identities, including particular challenges faced by women. I conclude the literature review with a discussion of the theoretical frameworks that informed this study: feminist standpoint theory, the theory of gendered organizations, and leadership identity construction.

Historical Conceptions of Leadership in the Community College

During the twentieth century, the literature on leadership primarily focused on traditional, individualistic models that celebrated positional leaders at the top of the organization who were born to lead due to innate characteristics related to personality, ability, traits, and style (Burns, 2010). Attempts to describe good leadership were reliant on great-men theories, which assumed

that first-rate leaders were male and usually defined through social contexts dependent upon a posthumous appraisal such as the oratory of Martin Luther King, the quiet strength of Gandhi, or the magnetism of Churchill (Bathurst & Monin, 2010; Curry, 2000). Now mostly discredited, these theories focused primarily on traits such as courage, force, might, and potency with which one was presumably born. Broadening the span of leadership research, scholars turned to behaviors of leaders to identify tasks and relationships in the quest to understand the leadership process that would best denote leadership effectiveness. While it is beyond the scope of this section to discuss all leadership theories, I briefly review situational, transformational, and servant leadership as these theories have been found to be influential in some studies of higher education leadership (Chandler, 2011; Gill & Jones, 2013; Gonzales Sullivan, 2009).

Developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1993) and used extensively in organizational leadership training and development, situational leadership suggests that leaders should adapt their styles on a continuum from delegating to directing in order to meet the changing needs of their employees. Prescriptive in nature, situational leadership is easy to understand and provides concrete guidelines for leaders to use in adapting their style to four developmental levels of their employees based on their competence and commitment. However, limited empirical studies have been published and they did not find strong evidence to support situational leadership as a valid leadership model. Further, the theory does not clearly articulate how competence and commitment are conceptualized for each developmental level (Northouse, 2013).

Transformational leadership has been the focus of much leadership research since the early 1980s. Transformational leaders are often described as exceptional people with high moral standards who change the organizational culture by raising the motivation and morality of their followers to newly achieved heights (Bensimon, 1989). In his seminal book on leadership Burns

(2010) argues that the outcome of transforming leadership "is a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents" (p. 67). Transactional leaders, on the other hand, maintain the existing culture and direction of the organization and view leadership as an exchange of influence between leaders and followers (Bensimon, 1989). Throughout the 1980s, other scholars continued to expand and refine the nature of transformational leadership and there is considerable evidence that it is an effective leadership approach in a variety of different situations (Northouse, 2013). However, because transformational leadership stresses that it is the leader who moves followers to do exceptional things, some argue that transformational leadership suffers from a "heroic leadership" bias (Twombly, 1995; Yukl, 1999).

Servant leadership was first conceived and introduced by Greenleaf (1977), based on his own corporate experience and the influence of author Hermann Hesse (Spears, 2002). The servant leader is one who places the highest priority needs of others over his own and nurtures the development of others and empowers them to serve the greater good of the organization and the community at large (Greenleaf, 1977). In her critique of servant leadership, Eicher-Catt (2005) points out that while servant leadership may appeal to women leaders because of its apparent focus on inclusivity and participation, it is not gender-neutral as some proponents of the approach have claimed. Rather, servant leadership maintains a spiritual view of leadership that supports patriarchal norms by "insidiously perpetuating a long-standing masculine-feminine, master–slave political economy that negates its so-called revolutionary potential to advance genderless leadership" (Eicher-Catt, 2005, p. 17).

During the exponential growth of community colleges in the 1960's and 1970's most college presidents forged a path of patriarchal leadership endemic of bureaucratic organizations,

and during the next three decades they worked to implement models from the business world emphasizing efficiency and effectiveness (Eddy, 2010). A hierarchy of leader-managers emerged from management theory in the latter half of the twentieth century whereby the concept of manager evolved from being a leader of workers to a leader of managers to a leader of leaders, culminating in the position of CEO/President. This bureaucratic framework perpetuated a top-down model of leadership in community colleges in which the president became the CEO of the organization. As such, he delegated activities related to faculty, students, academics, and finance to deans and other "higher-order managers" (Teo-Dixon & Monin, 2007, p. 6). Today, White males fill the greater part of community college presidencies as well as senior-level administrative positions (Eddy, 2010; Ward & Wendel, 2017). Discourse perpetuating the masculine hero model for leadership is still in place as evidenced by many articles related to community college leaders in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* between 2000 and 2010 (Wilson & Cox, 2012).

Women Leaders in the Community College

Higher education studies in community college leadership have largely focused on the presidency and pathways to the presidency via the position of Chief Academic Officer (CAO) (Garza Mitchell & Eddy, 2008). This may be due to the value placed on the traditional hierarchical reporting structure in community colleges. In a qualitative study of six women chief academic officers, Cejda (2008) found that the community college was the institution of choice for CAOs because of their deep commitment to students served by the instructional mission of the college. In support of women's pursuit of and persistence in the community college presidency, other studies expanded the participant pool to include retired presidents as well as faculty, state university system leaders, community college trustees, and search firm

representatives to focus on successful practices and conditions (Martin & O'Meara, 2017).

Various leadership studies have recruited women participants currently serving as vice presidents and presidents at community colleges to examine the influence of gender and environmental factors within the organization (Eddy & Cox, 2008; Gill & Jones, 2013). Some women in the roles of president and vice-president viewed their leadership as transformative, supportive, and student-centered (Gill & Jones, 2013), while others conformed to more traditional ways of leading such as authoritative and hierarchical (Eddy, 2010).

Studies of women leaders in higher education have focused on barriers that obstruct their progression up the career ladder. In her study of 26 women presidents, provosts, and vice-presidents at various types of institutions, Diehl (2014) found that women leaders experienced professional obstacles resulting from their gender, including discrimination, tokenism, lack of mentoring, workplace harassment, and salary inequalities. Other barriers include an unwillingness to consider a higher position if relocating one's family is required (Marshall, 2009). This finding is consistent with other research that suggests women leaders often structure their careers to prioritize their children's lives and their husband's professions (Eddy, 2009).

Some researchers posit that because women leaders face unique challenges in higher education, they benefit from leadership development programs that are tailored to their specific needs (Sulpizio, 2014). Leadership development consists of formal and informal processes that aim to increase individual effectiveness in order to maximize institutional outcomes (Cloud, 2010). Formal professional development programs sponsored by associations and institutions affiliated with higher education institutions are often highlighted in the literature. In their assessment of the current state of leadership development for women in higher education, Madsen, Longman, and Daniels (2012) highlighted a sample representation of 84 different

programs offered by associations or post-secondary institutions primarily in the United States. These included programs such as Higher Education Resource Services (HERS) which supports the advancement of women to the highest executive positions by increasing competencies such as negotiation and conflict management, financial analysis and budgeting strategies, and development of political alliances and leading change (White, 2014).

In addition to acquisition of leadership skills and competencies, informal professional development activities provide opportunities for networking and mentoring, both important to career growth (O'Brien & Janssen, 2005). Ballenger (2010) claimed that women's careers in higher education leadership advanced significantly when they had established in-depth mentoring relationships. Focusing on senior level women serving in academic or student affairs administrative positions in a variety of institutional types, Fochtman (2011) investigated how they achieved in their leadership roles. She found that women who were mentored, recruited for leadership roles, and who employed strategies to maintain a work-life balance were more likely to persist. They were also motivated by unique life lessons that were significant for each leader as well as a desire to mentor the next generation. In her study to explore on-the-job learning needs and strategies of women community college presidents, Gonzalez Sullivan (2009) found that because all participants had a doctorate degree, they worked to meet their learning needs through informal learning strategies. These included mentoring, apprenticeships, the use of expert consultants, attending conferences, and discussions with colleagues who had more experience in a given topic. While these studies provide many insights, they do not illuminate understandings about women leading from the middle of the organization.

Research on women in mid-level administrative positions in the community college is underdeveloped compared to studies on women in senior-level leadership roles. Studies specific

to mid-level administrative roles primarily focus on describing the types of work-related activities in which they engage. Mid-level administrators must effectively juggle a myriad of competing priorities that include faculty evaluation, fiscal accountability, facilitating community relations, understanding the legal implications of lawsuits, administering policy, and acting as a mediator between senior level leaders and faculty regarding various interests, agendas, and matters of student success (Rosser, 2004; Wild, Ebbers, Shelley, & Gmelch, 2003).

Yamasaki (1999) suggested that mid-level administrators in two-year institutions practice "managerial leadership" (p. 67), in which their success as a leader is judged in part by their effectiveness as a manager. Some scholars posit that mid-level administrators have little time or energy to become effective leaders due to the inordinate amount of time and effort spent on managing their teams to meet work-related goals and objectives (Boggs & McPhail, 2020). Others have advocated that those in mid-level administrative positions should delegate management activities to knowledgeable non-academic administrators to focus more time and energy on genuine leadership pursuits (Jones, 2011).

Researchers have observed that mid-level administrators experience a high level of occupation-related stress, particularly associated with role strain, human interactions, and job demands (Wild et al., 2003) and often work long hours, including evenings and weekends in order to meet job expectations. In her qualitative study, Bailey (2008) found that community college deans perceived their positions as ones with "overflowing workloads, chaotic work pace, and diverse responsibilities" (p. 783). Stress related to pressures of the job may be due to a high need to regulate emotions as mid-level administrators serve both senior leaders and faculty and therefore, power balances are likely to be unequal (Tunguz, 2014). In their participatory action research study, Gonzales and Rincones (2013) noted that the function of 'buffering' (p. 9)

between senior administrators and faculty required exhaustive emotional labor, resulting in high levels of stress.

These studies view the function of mid-level administrators from a very limited perspective, focusing on the demands and stresses of managerial responsibilities rather than the unique ways in which mid-level administrators may leverage the potency of their position to meet the challenges of today's community college. Some research has found that beliefs regarding effective leadership are slowly progressing from trait-based, authoritarian models to models built on collaborative relationships, team building, and shared decision-making, approaches that are more often associated with women leaders (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006). However, few studies have investigated how women lead from the middle of the organization. While research on leadership has primarily focused on the leader, there has been some attention paid to followers and their influence on leaders and the leadership process. In the next section, I discuss how implicit leadership theories and implicit followership theories have contributed to negative connotations of the follower concept.

The Romance of Leadership

The leader as hero paradigm is extended in leadership research that focuses on the romance of leadership (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich,1985). By elevating leaders to the highest pinnacle and depicting them as larger than life heroes, we rely on leadership as a way to explain and help us understand the complex cognitive and moral outcomes of organized activities (Meindl et al., 1985). Romancing leadership is further problematized by implicit leadership theories, those common everyday beliefs about leadership traits and behaviors, which are often used to explain or interpret leader behaviors. The implicit leadership theories of mid-level administrators may include leadership characteristics such as charismatic, tyrannical,

communicative, dedicated, intelligent, sensitive, decisive, and strong (Schyns & Schilling, 2011).

The romance of leadership has implications for the perceptions of followers as well. When organizational performance is attributed solely to leaders, the contribution of followers is devalued. For example, in transformational and charismatic leadership perspectives, followers are only motivated and inspired because of the exceptional behaviors and skills of the leader (Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007). Such a demeaning effect on followers results in "subordination of followership" (p.169), conceptualized through images that portray followers as unfortunate, passive, and compliant individuals who are motivated only by their leader. These images are further amplified through implicit follower theories in which people are categorized as embodying either a followership prototype of being industrious, enthusiastic, and a good citizen or a followership anti-prototype of conformity, insubordination, and incompetence (Sy, 2010). Implicit follower theories support stereotypes of who is and is not an effective follower. Being labeled a follower can result in negative outcomes for mid-level administrators who may experience reduced positive affect and less motivation to perform extra-role behaviors, thus minimizing their capabilities (Hoption, Christie, & Barling, 2012). Instead of defining leadership as a one-directional social interaction in which leaders influence the behavior of their followers, studies suggest that followers themselves can positively or negatively influence leadership outcomes (Tee, Paulsen, & Ashkanasy, 2013). If we "shift the lens" (Shamir, 2007) from the leader to the follower, a different perspective comes into view. In the next section I discuss the literature in relation to the construction of a leader identity, followed by various theories related to followership identity.

Construction of a Leader Identity

Leaders and followers in the middle must develop influential relationships with

supervisors, direct reports, and colleagues in order to effectively lead up, down, and across structures and networks (Branson, Franken, & Penney, 2016). Developing a compelling sense of purpose is key to the construction of a leader identity (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011) and a critical element of the mid-level leader's role. At its core, identity refers to an individual's self-definition, how she answers the question, "who am I?" or "who are we?" (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016, p. 113). The process of identity construction enables the individual to define who she is, resulting in the outcome of identification, or in the case of this study, the extent to which mid-level administrators internalize a leader as well as a follower identity.

Due to the various functions of the community college in meeting ongoing challenges related to accountability demands from external stakeholders, increasingly diverse needs of students, endless requirements of technological improvements for curricular programming, and ever diminishing financial resources, mid-level leaders find that change leadership is at the heart of their work (Wharton, 1997). As change agents leading from the middle and focused on the purpose of implementing the multiple missions of the community college, mid-level administrators are uniquely positioned to work across departments and disciplines to accomplish institutional goals. As such, their leadership is best described as multidimensional "influence relationships among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes" (Rost, 1991, p. 102). For example, mid-level administrators reported a higher ability to successfully achieve initiatives through influence than presidents and executive leaders who reported limitations in their amount of power and control (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006).

In addition to developing a compelling sense of purpose, becoming a leader is a recursive process in which one internalizes a leader identity through a set of relational and social processes (Ely et al., 2011). A potential leader takes action intended to establish leadership and if affirmed

by others, is motivated to take further action. If not affirmed, the aspiring leader is discouraged from further assertions. Over time, the prospective leader accrues enough achievements to inform her sense of self as a leader, along with feedback about her match for leader roles (Ely et al., 2011). The internalization of a leader identity empowers individuals to more effectively participate in leadership processes that enable the accomplishment of organizational objectives (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016).

Taking a constructionist approach, Uhl-Bien et al., (2014) posit that leadership occurs through influence attempts and corresponding deference behaviors. This construction of leadership assumes that leadership is both claimed and granted and involves a "dynamic exchange of leadership and followership that is constantly being renegotiated across time and situations… [such that] the boundaries between leader and follower identities are permeable" (DeRue & Ashford, 2010, p. 634). Understanding one's own social construction of followership as well as the beliefs of senior leaders, staff, and peers determines how effectively leadership is co-produced. For example, senior leaders who hold passive constructions of followership may regard mid-level leaders who have proactive followership identities as strident, defiant, or impertinent (Carsten et al., 2010). Conversely, mid-level followers with passive identities of followership may find it difficult to work with senior leaders who are more effective when they are able to co-construct leadership with their followers. Additional research is needed to understand how mid-level women administrators successfully navigate between their leader and follower identities as they analyze, diagnose, and appropriately respond to others in the course of a given day, week, or month.

Theories Related to Follower Identity

Due to the long-standing emphasis on a leader-centric approach to leadership research,

theories on followership, defined as "the nature and impact of followers and following in the leadership process" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 84), are rooted in studies of middle management (Crossman & Crossman, 2011). A philosopher ahead of her time, Mary Parker Follett (1868-1933) is today one of the most prophetic founders of modern management theory (Bathurst & Monin, 2010). Follett (1949) acknowledged that leaders and followers exist in a positional relationship to one another, but she rejected the idea that leadership occurs through domination and direction of subordinates. She advocated instead for a process of leadership in which power is shared because everyone understands the common purpose of the organization and thus co-action takes place among all members, regardless of their position within the hierarchy (Follett, 1949). Even though Follet's (1949) ideas were deemed problematic and subversive and rejected by management theorists of the twentieth century, her views laid the groundwork for today's more modern leadership and followership theories (Bligh, 2011). In the following section, I review the followership literature related to descriptive and prescriptive behaviors (Crossman & Crossman, 2011).

Descriptive Followership Behaviors

In his seminal text on corporate mid-manager training, entitled *The Power of Followership*, Kelley (1992) used a descriptive behavior typology to claim that followers exhibited active or passive behaviors based upon causal variables related to their levels of dependency and their ability to be critical thinkers. In this model, dependent, uncritical passive followers are perceived as unwilling to share their concerns, preferring a bystander position and minor participation. Alternatively, conformist followers are perceived as active but overly focused on avoiding conflict in their quest to carry out the leader's directives (Crossman & Crossman, 2011). The ideal followers are categorized as exemplary because they demonstrate

resourcefulness, are self-starters, and bring forth opposing views in the best interest of the organization. However, in the extreme, they can become alienated followers who work against the leader and are perceived as cynical and skeptical (Kelley, 2010). Finally, pragmatist followers are thought to operate at the crossroads, minimizing conflict by balancing directives from their supervisors with their own motivations to protect their best interests within the confines of the organization (Kelley, 1992).

Seeking to validate Kelley's (1992) behavior dimensions of followership, Blanchard, Welbourne, Gilmore, and Bullock (2009) conducted a quantitative study with university employees. They found that Kelley's (1992) conceptualization of followership dimensions was validated, and followers' active engagement levels were positively related to both organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Blanchard et al., 2009). As the participants in this study were faculty at a research university, focused on research, teaching, and service, the results are not generalizable to mid-level women administrators in the community college. Further, a self-reported survey does not provide rich data that would come from a qualitative study about the participants' issues, voices, or lived experiences related to the follower role in the higher education setting.

Prescriptive Followership Behaviors

Chaleff (2008) focused on ideal behaviors that followers should exhibit rather than describing their behaviors. He referred to proactive followers as those who practice courageous followership and stated that courageous followers have an ethical responsibility to bring forth unpleasant information and provide critical feedback to leaders when necessary. However, followers may find it difficult to push back on senior leaders out of concern for causing harm to their reputation or damaging the relationship. Chaleff (2008) argued that it is critical to build a

trusting relationship with leaders by serving a common purpose and proactively supporting their success. When leaders know that followers have their best interests at heart, leaders are more open to constructive questioning of their behavior or challenging of their policies. Chaleff's (2008) theory of courageous followership highlights the importance of refining one's skills in holding tactful, sensitive conversations that link the issue at hand to the other person's own values in order to build a trusting relationship. Both Kelley's (1992) and Chaleff's (2008) theories take a follower centric approach to leadership rather than a follower perspective of followership, which is discussed in the next section, followed by the view of followership as a process.

Follower Perspectives of Followership

As studies in followership advanced, Uhl-Bien and Pillai (2007) posited that constructed beliefs of followership influenced attributions by followers about themselves, their own positions, and their participation in the leadership process. In a qualitative study of 31 participants from a range of organizational levels and a variety of industries, including education, Carsten et al., (2010) examined how individuals constructed their roles as followers within the organization, along with their corresponding qualities and behaviors. They found that participants defined their roles along a continuum of three constructions: passive, active, and proactive. Those with a passive construction believed it was important to follow directives, defer to the leader and support the leader's projects. For respondents who held an active construction, offering their opinion when provided the opportunity and speaking up when necessary were important. However, they were not willing to openly challenge the leader, preferring to remain loyal and compliant. Those with a proactive construction viewed themselves as active participants in the leadership process. They believed their responsibilities as followers were to

challenge and question leaders, rather than "blindly following directives from above" (p. 557), in order to ensure the mission of the organization was advanced. According to Carsten et al., (2010), the proactive followers exhibited behaviors more in line with leading such as influencing and persuading through upward communication in an effort to effect positive change.

More recently, Carsten, Uhl-Bien, and Huang (2017) conducted a quantitative study to examine the degree to which certain follower orientations impacted the relationship with leaders. They investigated followers with a passive orientation and followers with a co-production orientation – "the belief that followers should actively engage and partner with leaders to enhance the effectiveness of the work unit" (Carsten et al., 2017, p. 5), also referred to as exemplary followers (Kelley, 1992). They found that leaders reacted more positively to followers with a strong co-production orientation, who were more likely to voice concerns and share recommendations with the leader rather than forward problems on to the leader. Not surprisingly, their findings also indicated that leaders reported less help, enthusiasm, and involvement with goal achievement when working with employees who had a passive follower orientation due to their reticence in sharing ideas and concerns as well as a tendency to disengage by handing over problems to the leader for resolution (Carsten et al., 2017). While this study helped advance empirical understanding of followership theory, it was based on a survey sample from a large internet company in China consisting of 306 employees and 42 managers, nine of which were women. To date there are no known studies that investigate followership role orientation and the relationship with leaders in higher education, either from a mid-level administrator to senior-level positions or from senior-level positions to the presidency.

Followership as a Process

Other scholars have focused on followership as a process among informal leaders in

team-based environments, often referenced in the literature as shared or distributed leadership because leadership activity is shared or distributed among group members, rejecting a distinction between leaders and followers (Shamir, 2007). Critics of shared and distributed forms of leadership point out that participants must somehow know how to be ideal leaders as well as non-leaders (Ford & Harding, 2018), and those in positions of delegated authority usually retain agency, power, and resources (Kezar, 2012). However, other researchers posit that shared and distributed leadership allow people to alternate between leader and follower identities, depending upon their immediate social context and the variance of activities that require diverse skill sets (Epitropaki, Kark, Mainemelis, & Lord, 2017). Based on these examples, the literature would benefit from studies related to the context in which mid-level leaders construct their leader and follower identities in order to provide clarity regarding effective ways to meet outcomes. In the next section I conclude with a discussion of the challenges to constructing leader and follower identities.

Challenges to Leader and Follower Identity Construction

How a mid-level administrator perceives her identity as a leader as well as a follower impacts her beliefs and behaviors related to power dynamics and contextual elements, in addition to intersecting aspects of identity such as gender, race, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status (Kezar & Lester, 2010). Internalizing a leader identity may be particularly difficult for individuals along the gender spectrum as they grapple with a double standard related to effective leadership behaviors and qualities associated with gender stereotypes in the workplace.

Gender stereotypes are oversimplifications of traits attributed to men and women and have both descriptive and prescriptive properties (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Descriptive gender stereotypes stipulate certain characteristics belonging to women and men. They endorse negative

beliefs about a woman's job performance by constructing a perceived "lack of fit" (Heilman, 2012, p. 114) between the traits attributed to women and the traits believed essential for success in traditionally male roles such as leadership. Traits traditionally associated with leadership include independence, aggressiveness, authority, and control, and are usually attributed to men and understood as masculine (Fletcher, 2004). When women exhibit male-oriented leadership traits such as confidence, assertiveness, or being self-directed, they are often perceived to be less personable leaders (Eagly, 2007) and therefore, less likely to effect change through influence of others (Catalyst, 2007). Due to the descriptive component of gender stereotypes, stereotyping becomes a normative cognitive process for individuals, continuously organizing and structuring the flow of information received about men and women on a daily basis (Burgess & Borgida, 1999). Thus, in order to be seen as an equally skilled leader, women, more than men, are compelled to prove their competence over and over again. This pattern of "Prove-it-Again" bias (Williams & Dempsey, 2014, p. 3) can have devastating consequences on leadership identity construction for mid-level women administrators in the community college.

Whereas descriptive gender stereotypes describe what women and men are like, prescriptive gender stereotypes are based on assumptions about how women and men should and should not behave (Heilman, 2012). Because descriptive gender stereotypes dictate that women are communal, it is therefore believed women should demonstrate communal attributes such as being kind, demonstrating concern for others or using consensus-based decision-making. Women who enact communal behaviors, however, may be liked but they are not respected (Fletcher, 2004; Rudman & Glick, 2001). Prescriptive gender stereotypes specify that women who enact agentic attributes and behaviors associated with men may be viewed as competent but are not liked and are often perceived as abrasive, arrogant, and self-promoting (Heilman, 2012). Because

success is stereotyped as both male and masculine, women are expected to strike a precarious balance between masculinity and femininity. Williams and Dempsey (2014) refer to this type of double bind as a tightrope, in which women must work twice as hard as men to overcome gender stereotypes while constantly managing perceptions of their leadership behaviors as either "too masculine" or "too feminine" (p. 61).

Implicit followership theories have also shown an explicit gender bias toward women in which a typical female follower is perceived as communicative, team-minded, and task-oriented but not aggressive or uncooperative (Braun, Stegmann, Hernandez Bark, Junker, & van Dick, 2017). Just as implicit leadership theories indicate there is a push effect that effectively discourages women from leadership roles, implicit followership theories may create a pull effect, which keeps women in followership positions because others believe they are well suited to the follower role (Braun, et al., 2017).

The process of internalizing a leadership identity is laden with obstacles for women who must establish credibility in a world that is deeply troubled with female power and authority (Ely et al., 2011). This type of implicit bias promotes conflict among women, resulting in a tug of war about the most effective way to be a woman. When confronted with gendered leadership beliefs in the workplace, women leaders may use coping strategies such as distancing themselves from their gender group by enacting stereotypically masculine traits and characterizing themselves as ambitious, competitive, and aggressive while criticizing and stereotyping other women (Derks, Ellemers, van Larr, & de Groot, 2011). Known as the queen bee effect, these women are reluctant to view their gender identity as relevant in the workplace and are therefore more likely to deny that gender bias applies to them. As a result, career opportunities for other women in the organization may be restricted and the perpetuation of

gendered beliefs and stereotypical expectations go unchecked (Ellemers, Rink, Derks, & Ryan, 2012).

For women of color, who must contend with both gender and racial stereotypes of leaders, the effects of compounded discrimination can limit their professional growth and ability to thrive in leadership positions. First hypothesized by Frances Beal in the 1960s, Black women are subjected to *double jeopardy* in which they experience the outcomes of both gender and racial bias (Beal, 2008). Further advancing this concept, Crenshaw (1993) introduced the term *intersectionality* in her seminal work, *Mapping the Margins*. Through an investigation of the ways in which social structures and politics come together to reconceptualize the identities of women of color, Crenshaw (1993) argues that by focusing on intersecting competing discourses, the diversity of different identity aspects is made visible, thus avoiding strategic silencing of one group over another. More recently, others have asserted that people with intersectional subordinate identities experience distinct modes of oppression known as "intersectional invisibility" (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). According to this view, Black women, for example, are often marginalized or ignored because they are not seen as prototypical members of their racial group or their gender group. Thus, Black women may experience the construction of a leader or follower identity differently than White women or Black men.

Empirical research on women of color in community college mid-level administrative positions is scant. Focusing on the exploration of leadership practices and perspectives of African American women serving as mid-level student affairs administrators, Clayborne and Hamrick (2007) found that participants adhered to a distributive leadership style, but findings were mixed regarding the influence of race and gender on their practice. Some rejected outright any limitations to their leadership due to race or gender while others noted the bind that occurs

when coworkers ascribed racial or gender-based criteria to them.

Gardiner (2014) sought to expand understanding of authentic leadership in her phenomenological study conducted with ten senior women leaders of diverse backgrounds in universities and women's colleges in Canada, the Philippines, and the United States. Most of the participants believed their ability to navigate institutional obstacles and remain true to their values was negatively influenced by their gender. Some stated that gender bias had a damaging impact when trying to effect positive change. The goal of leading authentically was an even greater challenge for those who also experienced racism or classism in addition to gender bias (Gardiner, 2014).

In a comparison of two studies involving 71 women of color professors in science, technology, math, and engineering and 56 White women outside of academia, Williams (2014) confirmed the oversimplification of the double jeopardy hypothesis due to the complex dynamics of race and gender. She found that Black women were less likely than White women to be penalized for having a direct, no-nonsense communication style. However, an authoritative style was acceptable only if furthering the goals of the institution. When Black women were viewed as self-promoting, they confronted problems of being "too masculine" (p. 241), but less so than other women of color. While all women in the study reported bias triggered by motherhood, only women of color were under more pressure than White women to serve on diversity and women's initiatives (Williams, 2014).

In examining the literature, an abundance of research exists regarding women in senior-level leadership positions in four-year institutions. There is limited research on women in mid-level administrative positions and how they perceive their leader and follower identities in constructing leadership in the community college. Further, the research on followership is

underdeveloped as well. I turn now to the theoretical framework that guided data collection and informed the data analysis of this study.

Theoretical Framework

In thinking about which theoretical frameworks would guide this study, I looked to the literature review as well as previous research conducted on leadership of women in higher education. The complexity of the topic – an amalgamation of leadership identity construction, institutional norms and structures, and the reproduction of class, gender, and racial relations of inequality – requires integrating several theoretical frameworks in order to engage in thoughtful analysis and critique. In the following sections, I provide a rationale for selecting feminist standpoint theory as the feminist lens for this study. I then incorporate the influence of the community college as a gendered context for the study. I conclude with a section on the concept of leadership identity construction as a lens for understanding how mid-level women administrators co-create reciprocal and mutually reinforcing identities as leaders and followers.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Since its origins in the 1970s, feminist research has been described in a variety of ways. It is focused on outcomes of action and social change (Fonow & Cook, 1991); it is concerned with reflections of the researcher as well as participants' thoughts on the meaning of their experiences under examination (Fonow & Cook, 2005); and it "seeks to respect, understand, and empower women" (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, p. 778). At its core, it is research that seeks to study and unearth inequities and social injustices that affect the lives of women and other oppressed peoples (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Feminist research empowers scholars to reflect on the invisibility of women within the academy while providing a unique view of their everyday lives (Blackmore, 2014). Feminist research is important because there exists still today hegemonic

beliefs and practices that bolster systems of gender inequality. For example, women continue to bear the brunt of responsibilities for child rearing and family care, they continue to experience work-related discrimination and sexual harassment, and they continue to suffer violence and poverty on scales greater than men (Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005).

This study used feminist standpoint theory to examine the intersections of leader identity, follower identity, gender, race, and the community college setting. Feminist standpoint theory takes the position that women, as members of marginalized groups, have perspectives that not only begin in their own experience but also reflect understanding of the prevailing beliefs to which they are subjugated (Smith, 1990). According to Harding (1995), feminist standpoint theory advances the belief that knowledge is socially situated for women and others who are marginalized by intersecting systems of oppression. Their standpoints emerge from the periphery, "outside the dominant paradigms and conceptual schemes" (Harding, 1995, p. 344). Members of dominant groups, White males for example, do not have the same understanding of social power dynamics in their knowledge experiences as do marginalized populations such as women, people of color, and gender and sexual minorities (LeSavoy & Bergeron, 2011).

In bell hooks' (1984) account of growing up poor and Black in Southern Kentucky she portrayed the unique standpoint that develops as individuals fight to survive, "living as we did – on the edge–we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out … we understood both" (p. vii). This position on the margins of the prevailing culture allows the "outsider within" (Collins, 1986, p. 14) to provide a more complete and less one-sided view of situated knowledge than that of the dominant "insiders" (p. 14) who are usually White males. Thus, women can cultivate a "kind of double vision" (Naples & Gurr, 2014, p. 33) allowing them to perceive both their own reality and that of the dominant group, and

therefore, a broader understanding of the social world. Men, as members of the dominant group, are restricted in their view, due to their position that reality is more likely based on their own experiences because women's daily lives and labor are invisible to them (Brooks, 2007).

A standpoint is achieved based on self-reflective analysis from a specific person, group, or location rather than obtained because one happens to be a member of an oppressed group or happens to share a social location (Collins, 1990; Hartsock, 1987). Standpoint is also viewed as constructed in community through "historically shared, group-based experiences" (Collins, 1990, p. 375). A collective analytic process must take place prior to the articulation of a standpoint in order that women's class and racial identities do not solely define who is or is not a member of a particular group (Collins, 1990; Sandoval, 2000). Building on Collins' (1990) work, most standpoint theorists today locate standpoints in specific community contexts and pay particular attention to the dynamics of race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, age, physical ability, nationality, and citizenship status.

In addition to shifting the lens to multiple ways of knowing, feminist standpoint scholars use a critical analysis of discourse to reveal the various ways in which women and others are marginalized by intersecting systems of oppressive power. Attributed to Kimberle Williams Crenshaw (1993), the concept of intersectionality has been identified as a crucial contribution to feminist theory (McCall, 2005) not only because it recognizes many different dimensions of identity but also because it uncovers "the complicated privileging or targeting-for-oppression spaces at the intersections of those dimensions" (Davis & Klobassa, 2017, p. 302).

As feminist standpoint theory has continued to evolve, intersectionality has attracted the attention of scholars in higher education who apply it to educational issues related to various populations because of its emphasis on coupling identity with structures of privilege and

oppression (Jones, 2014). However, Jones (2014) points out that higher education scholars have been unsophisticated in applying intersectionality to their work because they have overemphasized its treatment of identity. Intersectionality is only about identity when inequality structures are center stage and identities are considered as a result of social issues and power dynamics (Jones, 2014). As Collins (2009) reminds us:

> In recent years, intersectional analyses have far too often turned inward, to the level of personal identity narratives, in part, because intersectionality can be grasped far more easily when constructing one's own autobiography. This stress on identity narratives, especially individual identity narratives, does provide an important contribution to fleshing out our understandings of how people experience and construct identities within intersecting systems of power. Yet this turning inward also reflects the shift within American society away from social structural analyses of social problems. (p. ix)

Intersectionality has been described as an "analytic sensibility...a way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to *power*" (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 795). It has also been critiqued for "the complexity that arises when the subject of analysis expands to include multiple dimensions of social life and categories of analysis" (McCall, 2005, p. 1772). Nevertheless, engaging the politics of difference through reflective dialogue and intersectional critique shows how feminist standpoints have shifted and become reformulated along lines of race, class, sexuality, nationality, and other socially determined categories of difference (Sabzalian, 2018). The claim that women can be pigeonholed into one group with similar characteristics and a solitary standpoint has been rejected. These diverse social locations and their corresponding epistemic and political commitments enrich feminist standpoint theorizing and affirm the power of standpoint logic rather than splinter standpoints in

order to determine the most oppressed location from which to inquire (Harding, 1992).

In her qualitative study of support staff across four institutional types, Armstrong Ash (2017) drew upon feminist standpoint theory to examine the narratives of women located in marginalized positions of support staff roles. This lens allowed the participants' voices to emerge from the margins and enter the conversation about the value of contributing to student learning and development in higher education institutions. Support staff likened their work to serving in "helping or mom roles" (p. 149) in which they provided emotional support for students, faculty, and staff. The study's participants emphasized the gendered nature of their roles due to a belief that being female was an asset in their jobs due to increased approachability for students, especially when they were in crisis. Further, the study revealed that support staff's contributions to student success were often overlooked and unrecognized by the institution even though participants expressed commitment to their jobs and felt empowered by their work (Ash, 2017). Thus, feminist standpoint theory can help researchers examine how community colleges often replicate or promote gender stereotypes, and as in this example, how hierarchy reinforces the gendering of positions as they reside in the organization (Acker, 1990; Acker, 2006).

Using feminist standpoint theory, questions regarding how gender is operationalized in the community college for mid-level women administrators is explored, analyzed, and better understood. Feminist standpoint theory offers a means for unearthing areas of intersection as well as identifying power sources that negatively impact the experiences of mid-level women administrators related both to leading and following across the organization. For example, the use of feminist standpoint theory by Martin and O'Meara (2017) brought to light how women in the study unified their individual power to create a more inclusive environment that supported change, valued numerous perspectives, and contested masculine norms and traditions which

were present in the leadership culture of Maryland's community colleges. Within the lens of feminist standpoint theory, mid-level women administrators in community colleges who are, more frequently than men, located in marginalized positions on the periphery, are best able to bring forward oppressive gender issues to be addressed at the center of the institution (Eddy, Ward, & Khwaja, 2017). Therefore, in my study I used in-depth interviews as a means to understand the lived experiences of the participants. By doing so, I was able to reach the subjugated knowledge that is often hidden from mainstream knowledge building (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

Examining the Community College as a Gendered Organization

In her theory of gendered organizations, Acker (1990) argued that gender is constructed along divisions of power, allowed behaviors, and labor, with senior positions almost always occupied by men. In line with other feminist scholarship that the category of gender is fundamentally complicated by class and race/ethnicity (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984), Acker (2006) extended the concept to include organizing activities that constitute inequality regimes, defined as "loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations" (Acker, 2006, p. 443). Traditional bureaucratic organizations often enable gender and class inequalities through the steepness of hierarchy (Acker, 2006). A closer look into the gender and racial make-up of employees in community colleges reveals that White males constitute the majority of presidents with high salaries (Edwards, 2017) while White women and women of color make up the majority of low-paying support staff positions at the bottom of the organization (Ash, 2017).

Practices and processes used by organizations to achieve their goals produce class, gender, and racial inequalities (Acker, 1990). The concept of the "ideal worker with no family

responsibilities" (Williams, 1989, p. 801) supports the gendered construct that men's careers consume all of their time while their spouse takes care of home and family needs. This division of power and labor in gendered organizations, such as community colleges, is more problematic for women who strive to fulfill job demands as well as the demands of their home, children, or aging parents. For example, in qualitative studies of women executives in community college leadership positions, participants all made choices to delay their careers to accommodate their husband's professional progress or until their children were older (Eddy & Cox, 2008; Edwards, 2017). Marshall (2009) found that female senior administrators who chose to prioritize the needs of their families experienced negative outcomes such as limited involvement in professional organizations, foregoing advanced educational opportunities, a lack of sleep and energy, and increased marital strain. Career progression was also impacted in Ward and Wolf-Wendel's (2017) longitudinal study in which the majority of female faculty who had considered seeking a career move into a higher leadership position opted to remain in the teaching ranks. These experiences point to a type of gender bias known as the "maternal wall" (Williams, 2005, p. 91), in which mothers experience the bind between being an ideal worker and being an ideal mother. Women who work are believed to be less family oriented and less sensitive to the needs of others while women who have children are expected to put their children first at the expense of their own careers. Thus, motherhood is regarded as discordant with production of high-quality work (Williams, 2005).

The concept of community colleges as gendered organizations with inequality regimes is also reinforced through the emotional labor imposed upon staff, faculty, and administrators (Gonzales & Rincones, 2013), particularly for women (Lawless, 2018). Female administrators and faculty have reported they are often expected to provide emotional support to students

through a mothering or caretaker role (Ash, 2017; Lawless, 2018). Larson (2008) pointed out that this type of "pink collar work" (p. 49) perpetuates stereotypes of women as nurturers and men as authority figures. Women found that their personalities, interpersonal relationships, and facial expressions were more likely to negatively influence their evaluations when they were perceived as withholding the emotional labor expected of their gender (Lawless, 2018). Such contradictory pressures compel women leaders to temper self-presentation, such as dress and language, so that their role performance is perceived to be feminine enough as women but not so feminine that their position as leader is rejected (Acker, 2010).

These studies show how the gendered structure of the community college and its focus on the masculine ideal worker norm negatively impact women's choices with regard to work-life balance for women faculty and senior-level administrators. This research consequently raises concerns about the resiliency of mid-level women administrators and their capacity to successfully navigate a leadership career given the gendered context of the community college. Bensimon and Marshall (2003) noted that gender equity will continue to be hindered until knowledge is created by questions distinct from those traditionally proposed. Therefore, in this study I used gendered organizational theory to examine the challenges mid-level women administrators experience to their leadership and followership practices and how they contended with those challenges. In the next section I offer leadership identity construction theory as a means to explain the identity work necessary to becoming a mid-level administrative leader in the community college.

Leadership Identity Construction

Forming and internalizing a leader identity is fundamental to the process of becoming a leader and is based on identity construction as an integration of the three elements of self-

concept formation: individual internalization, relational recognition, and collective endorsement. (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Individual internalization focuses on the individual and new aspects of her self-concept that incorporate the identity of leader or follower. For example, a mid-level administrator begins to think of herself as a leader (follower) when she asserts leadership (followership) behaviors and engages in leadership (followership) activities that are associated with the concept of being a leader (follower) within her particular context (DeRue & Ashford, 2010, p. 629).

Relational recognition points to the relationship among individuals and explains how a leadership identity is relationally recognized through the acceptance of the reciprocal role identity as follower and vice versa. In addition to a mid-level administrator internalizing a leader identity, the leadership identity is stronger if others take on a reciprocal follower identity. In this way leadership is expressed as a recognized relationship among individuals not as something possessed by the leader (DeRue & Ashford, 2010, p. 629).

Collective endorsement means that the broader social group perceives the individual to be a member of the leader or follower group. For example, a mid-level administrator might not perceive herself as having the attributes of a leader or as being in a leader position, but the department within which she works may collectively endorse her as a leader and thereby initiate the leadership identity construction process. Rather than a stagnant and hierarchical conception of leadership, DeRue and Ashford's (2010) theory of leadership identity construction is based on a dynamic, social, and relational conception of the leadership development process (p. 629).

DeRue and Ashford (2010) ground their description of the leadership development process in the concept known as identity work, which refers to "people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising" their identities (Sveningsson &

Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). Expanding upon this definition, DeRue and Ashford (2010) propose that identity construction is undertaken when an individual proposes a particular persona through certain behaviors that are then reflected back, thus reinforcing the persona as a legitimate identity for the individual. If the behaviors are not reflected back, then the persona is not reinforced as a legitimate identity.

When individuals "claim" a leader identity and others affirm or "grant" that identity, then leaders and follower identities are socially constructed, and the leader-follower relationship is formed. Claiming refers to the actions people take to affirm their identity as either a leader or a follower while granting refers to the actions that a person takes to impart a leader or follower identity onto another individual (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). For example, in the community college, a dean may turn to a director and ask if she would like to kick off the meeting, thus affirming her identity as a leader and claiming a follower identity for himself in that moment. In the same meeting, an associate dean may offer a suggestion for instructional improvement. If the dean does not support the suggestion, the associate dean's action to affirm his identity as a leader is not granted. Thus, leader and follower identities are internalized over time through the reciprocal claims and grants from other group members. As the larger organization acknowledges the emerging relational structure and pattern of influence, the individual's leadership identity becomes collectively endorsed in the broader organizational context (DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

Mid-level women administrators are often overlooked and marginalized as lower-level managers in the community college, even though they are leaders in their own right, positively effecting change and student outcomes through their unique positions to lead up, down, and across the organization. In this section, I have described how studying the experiences of mid-

level women administrators in the community college requires a theoretical framework that considers the interrelationships between feminist standpoint theory, gendered organizational theory, and leadership identity construction. In this study, I integrated the principles from the theoretical framework to critically examine and understand the experiences of women mid-level administrators in the community college.

Summary

In this chapter I provided an overview of the historical conceptions of leadership in the community college and discussed studies related to women leaders in higher education. While the studies provide many insights into women in senior-level leadership roles, primarily at four-year institutions, there is a significant gap in the research about women in mid-level administrative positions in the community college. I then discussed the literature related to the role of followers, their influences on leaders, and the leadership process as well as how implicit leadership theories and implicit followership theories have contributed to negative connotations of the follower concept. I identified a secondary gap in the literature related to followership role orientation and the relationship of followers with leaders in higher education. I then discussed processes of constructing leader and follower identities, including particular challenges faced by women. Additional research is needed to understand how mid-level women administrators successfully navigate between their leader and follower identities as they analyze, diagnose, and appropriately respond to others in the course of a given day, week, or month. I concluded the literature review with a discussion of the theoretical frameworks that informed this study: feminist standpoint theory, the theory of gendered organizations, and leadership identity construction.

In chapter three, I describe the methodology and methods that were used to understand

how mid-level women administrators experience leading and following in the community college. I discuss the procedures used for data collection and data analysis. I conclude with a discussion of the validation processes that were used in the study along with a statement of my positionality.

CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH DESIGN

This study of ten women administrators in the community college sector in the Midwest United States was designed to promote understanding and bring to light hidden dimensions of leading and following for mid-level women administrators in the community college. It was developed to explore what meaning mid-level women administrators ascribe to the experience of being both a leader and a follower within the community college sector and the perceived effects of that experience on their leadership and followership practices. Specifically, the research question guiding this study was: How do mid-level women administrators in the community college make meaning of their identities as both leaders and followers? I employed a qualitative design drawing upon a phenomenological approach to the study. I begin this chapter by explaining my worldview followed by an overview of the research design. I then describe population and site selection, data collection, and data analysis. The chapter concludes with the validation strategies that were used and my positionality for this study.

Worldview

My approach to this study was based on a transformative worldview, in which I hold that the outcomes of research inquiry should lead to an agenda for change, improving the lives of the participants or the institutions in which they work (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). I view as problematic women's distinct conditions and the organizations that structure those conditions and believe research inquiry can give voice to the oppressive social constraints placed on women by their gender (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, my research interest of mid-level women administrators' lived experiences as both leaders and followers in the community college is aligned with a critical humanist approach that views "individual consciousness as the means to empower, transform, and liberate groups from dominating and imprisoning social

processes…and relies on an interpretive epistemology" (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 34).

Feminist research does not claim one single epistemology, methodology, or use of a particular method. Just as the lived experiences of women are numerous and their social reality ever-evolving, so too are the ways in which to pose research questions and investigate them using a feminist perspective. Harding (1987) described method as "a technique for gathering evidence" (p. 2), methodology as "a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed" (p. 3), and epistemology as "a theory of knowledge" (p. 3) about who can be a knower and what can be known. Thus, feminist scholars may use the same methods as other researchers, but their studies are directed through methodologies supported by epistemologies that seek to understand the experiences of women (Harding, 1987).

Design Overview

As a feminist scholar in higher education who began her research inquiry from a woman's standpoint, a qualitative design was preferred for this study in order to obtain rich data about women's issues, voices, and lived experiences. In this study, I sought a deeper understanding of the experiences that influence mid-level women administrators' construction of their own leader and follower identities in the community college. To uncover the underlying meaning of mid-level women administrators' experiences around the phenomenon of leading while following, I used a qualitative design drawing upon a phenomenological approach and focused on how participants articulated their experience through descriptions of social interactions. (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). This approach sought to describe the phenomenon of mid-level leadership from the perspective of the participants, including what they experienced and how it was experienced (Creswell, 2014).

Qualitative Studies of a Phenomenon

Qualitative studies of a phenomenon all share certain features including a focus on a phenomenon for exploration; a small group of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon; and the processes of bracketing whereby the researcher sets aside her own experiences in order to obtain a new perspective on the phenomenon under investigation. In addition, qualitative studies of a phenomenon entail data collection procedures in the form of interviewing individuals and analysis of data that moves from the narrow unit of analysis to the broader units, and on to detailed descriptions that summarize both what the participants experienced and how they experienced it. (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

There are two main approaches to phenomenological research – descriptive and interpretive. Those who apply descriptive phenomenology are inclined to believe that the researcher unearths meaning and then describes what she has found whereas those who apply interpretive phenomenology are inclined to believe that the researcher interprets meaning and unavoidably, gives some meaning to the phenomenon in the process (van Manen, 2014). In this study, I applied interpretive phenomenology so that I could make an interpretation of the meaning of the lived experiences of the participants in my study, rather than just describe their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Institutional Review Board

As required by Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program, this study complied with all applicable federal, state, and institutional policies and procedures for conducting ethical research. All paperwork was completed, submitted, and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Michigan State University on January 20, 2020. In addition, for those community colleges with Research Review Boards, applications were submitted, and

approval received, before contacting potential participants for the study.

Population and Site Selection

Few sampling strategies exist for phenomenological studies but first and foremost, it is essential that all participants have experienced the phenomenon and can communicate their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, the set of inclusion criteria for this study included both demographic homogeneity and geographical homogeneity (Robinson, 2014). The study required that participants were women of diverse ethnicities, including Caucasian, who hold mid-level administrative positions of director, assistant/associate dean, or dean in community colleges. To ensure the participants were mid-level administrators with line reporting up and down the organizational chart, community colleges with an enrollment of at least 10,000 students were selected in order to support such an organizational structure. To protect confidentiality of the participants, their colleges were masked in the transcripts. In addition, participants selected a pseudonym, and their position titles were not included in the final dissertation.

Participants were selected through criterion sampling, which is defined in phenomenological studies as locating individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. For this study, I sought participants who had been in a mid-level position for at least three years so they could articulate their experience of the phenomenon of being both a leader and a follower. Contact information was obtained through information posted on each college's website. As I identified potential participants, I located information about their professional experience on the career-themed social media site LinkedIn. Individuals who use the site often list their current and previous positions, along with details about various positions and length of time in those positions. Referrals for participants, known as snowball sampling (Seidman, 2006), were also

accepted if proposed participants met the participant criteria. In total, 37 mid-level administrators were emailed an invitation to participate in the study. Ten participants ultimately accepted the invitation and participated in the study. The recommended sample size for phenomenological interviews is 3 to 10 participants who have all experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014).

Data Collection

As a feminist researcher, I am concerned with unearthing the "subjugated knowledge" (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 184) of women's lives, which is often unseen and unarticulated. The in-depth interview is a method frequently used by feminist researchers because it strives to understand the lived experiences of the participants, often hidden, in order to grasp the subjective understanding that participants bring to a certain situation (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Reinharz (1992) explains why interviewing is commonly used by feminist researchers to access women's hidden knowledge:

> Interviewing offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher. This asset is particularly important for the study of women because in this way learning from women is an antidote to centuries of ignoring women's ideas altogether or having men speak for women (p.19).

Interviewing is also an effective method for a qualitative study that employs a phenomenological approach because a fuller understanding of the participant's experience evolves through the dialogue of detailed interviews, as the researcher and the participant "co-construct" meaning (Rossman & Rallis, 2014, p. 154). Phenomenological researchers focus entirely on the meaning of a particular view of experience, assuming that through dialogue and reflection, the fundamental meaning of the experience is uncovered (Rossman & Rallis, 2014).

Pilot Test

When conducting a qualitative study using a phenomenological approach, some researchers have argued for multiple interviews (Seidman, 2006). However, Thomas and Pollio (2002) maintained that this was not necessary as long as the interviewer conducted initial interviews to test the interview protocol. I drafted a preliminary set of interview questions based on my research question as well as grounded in the literature review and conceptual framework. I then conducted a pilot test of the interview protocol with mid-level women administrators in a community college to determine if the questions worked as intended and to ascertain if there were any revisions I needed to make (Maxwell, 2013). The pilot test allowed me to obtain a realistic sense of how long the interview would take and whether participants were able to answer the questions. It also allowed me to assess the usefulness of the protocol while conducting the interview as authentically as possible, following which the interview protocol was refined. The interview protocol is included in Appendix A. The final study did not contain the data collected from the pilot test nor did it include the pilot test participants.

In-depth Interviews

The primary method for data collection was two in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews for 90 minutes, spaced approximately one week apart, to ensure the highest quality of interview possible (Seidman, 2006). The phenomenological approach to interviewing involves exploring and gathering experiential narrative material, stories, or anecdotes to develop a fuller and deeper understanding of the human phenomenon under investigation. Therefore, it was important for me to keep the main research question in mind and stay close to the experience as lived by asking concrete follow-up questions, "When did this happen? What were you doing? Who said what? What did you say to them? What happened next? How did it feel? What else do

you remember about the event?" (van Manen, 2014, p. 316).

The first interview centered primarily on establishing the participants' early experiences with leader and following. The second interview focused on the participants' reconstruction of the details of their experiences as a leader and follower and reflection on the meaning that those experiences held for them (Seidman, 2006). As I conducted each individual interview, I documented my impressions and reactions through notetaking. Upon completion of each interview, I then wrote a reflective memo based on my notes to capture my initial thoughts and tentative interpretations.

My intent had originally been to interview each participant in her campus office for privacy and participant convenience. In addition, face-to-face interviews would have allowed me to observe each participant in her workplace environment as an additional component of data collection. However, the stay-at-home order issued as a result of Covid-19 early in the data collection process required me to transition all but one interview to alternative methods such as the use of Zoom or phone calls. As a result, I was not able to readily assess the overall mood of each interview through nonverbal cues. Nonverbal cues are critical in assessing the emotional climate of the interview and support the researcher in building rapport and trust during the interview to reduce some of the power dynamics that may be present between researcher and participants (Hesse-Biber, 2014). It is possible that some meaning was lost in the collection of the data because nonverbal cues were not present in the online or phone interviews.

Methods of Analysis

My study was guided by the principle of being true to the words of the participants while employing a critical feminist analysis of those words and the environments from which they originate. I began the data analysis process by bracketing, which is a methodological device of

phenomenological inquiry that requires the researcher to intentionally set aside her beliefs about the phenomenon under investigation throughout the study and particularly during data analysis (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013). I did my best to put aside my predetermined ideas about leading and following by mid-level women administrators to better understand the experiences of the participants in my study. I also worked to put aside assumptions that the community college culture is gendered. Through the use of reflexivity, I took a critical look inward to recognize, examine, and understand how my own values, interests, and assumptions may impinge upon the research process. This was ongoing and a process that I returned to as I analyzed each new data set.

I used a phenomenological approach for analysis to reveal the subjugated voices of women and investigated the data with an open mind, considering meaning and structures as they emerged (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). I wrote thematic memos throughout the data analysis process. Writing thematic memos is a crucial technique that enables researchers to bolster their analytic thinking and stimulate insights into the data (Maxwell, 2013; Rossman & Rallis, 2017, Saldaña, 2013). The memos helped me to reflect and annotate common themes and subthemes that aligned with the research question and theoretical framework. My thinking and insights were informed by the tenets from leadership identity construction theory along with the theory of gendered organizations and feminist standpoint theory to critically examine and understand the experiences of women mid-level administrators in the community college sector.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using TEMI, an automated transcription program. To aid in thematic memoing, ideas and key words were jotted down during initial playbacks of the transcribed interviews. In this way, I began the process of data analysis through the iterative process of collecting data and analyzing data simultaneously rather

than waiting until completion of data collection.

To ensure congruence with my research design, I used In Vivo coding (Saldaña, 2013) as a first cycle coding method because women's voices are often marginalized and coding through the use of actual words prioritizes and honors the participant's voice (p. 91). From this first cycle of coding, I developed an initial list of codes and then selected the dominant codes to categorize, gave them labels, and created a code book. I then uploaded the transcribed interviews to NVivo Version 12 software. I assigned the dominant codes that I identified from the first cycle of coding to the corresponding selections in each interview. The NVivo software allowed me to keep the data organized as I continued to add each interview data and corresponding codes.

Pattern coding (Saldaña, 2013) was used for the second cycle of coding in which similar codes were placed together to analyze their cohesion, create patterns, and develop themes that articulated a more encompassing understanding of some aspect of the lived experience of mid-level leadership for the participants. This inductive process illustrates how I worked back and forth between the themes and the data, informed by my theoretical framework, until I established a broad set of themes (Creswell, 2014). According to van Manen (1990), this process involves interpretive invention, reflexive discovery, and disclosure of meaning. Themes "give shape to the shapeless" by giving "temporary and exemplary form" to the experience (p. 88). I also sought to validate my analysis of what was significant and thought-provoking by communicating my thoughts regarding themes with participants via email to see if they agreed, broadened, or questioned the findings (Rossman & Rallis, 2014). The themes were used to write a description of what the participants experienced as well as the context that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon.

Evaluating the Quality of the Study

Validation is a notable strength of qualitative research and is based on determining the accuracy of the findings from the perspectives of the participant, the researcher, or the readers of an account (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To guide the quality of my study, I engaged in four specific strategies: member checking, thick description, peer debriefing, and reflexivity. These strategies promote internal validity as the researcher endeavors to safeguard consistency between the findings and the experiences described by the participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).

A feminist perspective holds that there are multiple ways of knowing and therefore, research participants may be partners in the construction of knowledge with researchers and those relationships may empower, encourage, or enable participants to take action to improve their situations (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011). In co-constructing meaning with the participants, I sought participant validation, also known as member checking, throughout the research process. Considered to be "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 314), member checking involves the participants by asking them to react to what is portrayed and interpreted.

I conducted three types of member checks. First, I paraphrased what I heard during the interviews to give participants an opportunity to confirm, expand or correct my understanding. Second, I provided a copy of the interview transcript to participants and solicited their feedback. Almost all of the participants responded with additional feedback or clarifications, and I included their responses in the transcripts used for analysis. Finally, I invited all participants to review a summary of preliminary findings and provide their reactions via email or on the phone. Eight of the participants responded in writing and seven provided the following feedback:

> I see that the themes that have emerged are ones that I can relate to in my role as a woman of color. (Nichole)

The information seems to align with much of what I shared with you. I take comfort in that; it tells me that I may not be an outlier after all. (Rachel)

Almost everything I read in your summary really resonated for me personally. (Fern)

I am somewhat comforted that my reactions were not out of the ordinary, but also surprised that not much has changed over time. (Lucy)

In response to the findings in the Adverse Work Environment theme, Sheila said the following:

There's nothing that's surprising from my perspective and I don't think anything is missing either. What's not surprising is section 4 (unfortunately).

In response to the findings in the Navigating the Work Environment theme, Sheila and Rhonda responded accordingly:

I feel hopeful when reading section 5, though, that everyone is dealing with their experiences in the ways you've uncovered -- that seems positive (and it makes me want to get to know the other participants). (Sheila)

It's encouraging to see that people still enjoy their career despite their serious concerns. (Rhonda)

An additional response about what may have been lacking was provided by Amanda:

I would have liked to have read some additional information that women of color face in this environment. Although women in general have these experiences if you look at the statistics for women in Community Colleges there's a disproportionate balance of Women of Color in these positions and their experiences are not always the same.

In general, the participants seemed to understand and relate to the findings of this study.

Purposive sampling and the use of rich, thick description (Geertz, 1973) of excerpts taken directly from the transcripts to convey the perspectives of each of the participants support the findings of the study and aid in transferability. Thick description means that the researcher provides abundant details by collecting relevant information from texts such as dialogue, physical descriptions, memos, and artifacts collected on site. To ensure thick description, I used strong action verbs, quotes, and provided interconnected details from general ideas to more specific themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Corresponding to the use of thick description is the experience of peer debriefing, in which the researcher pursues an external check by "someone who is familiar with the research or the phenomenon explored" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129). My primary peer in this case was my dissertation advisor, who asked discerning questions about my meanings and provided feedback on my interpretations as well as perspectives on my reactions to the research. I used peer debriefing to explore potential biases and assumptions as well as to check for weaknesses in my reasoning.

To enhance the confirmability of this study, I engaged in my own reflexivity in order to remain open about my assumptions and ideas as they emerged throughout the study. To practice reflexivity means to acknowledge that "all knowledge is affected by the social conditions under which it is produced and that it is grounded in both the social location and the social biography of the observer and the observed" (Mann & Kelley, 1997, p. 392). Therefore, I recognized and examined how my own social background and assumptions can intervene in the research process through the writing of memos during data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation processes.

Positionality and Preconceptions

My experiences with and perceptions of leadership have evolved over the past twenty years through my experiences in K-12 education as well as in higher education. During the spring semester in 2018, the second year of my doctoral program, I began to study the literature on leadership and followership in higher education. I became intrigued with the concept of followership through the lens of mid-level leaders in higher education. After several mini-research projects in various methods classes, in which I conducted semi-structured interviews, I decided to focus my dissertation on women administrators in community college due to the

particular challenges they face with regard to leading and following.

I acknowledge that my own positionality and preconceptions based on my experiences, education, and identities create my subjectivity as a person and as a researcher. I am a feminist, White, cisgender, married with one stepchild, politically liberal, middle class woman, currently working in a community college. I was raised in the Midwest United States and grew up in almost exclusively White communities, raised by parents who did not attend post-secondary institutions. I earned a bachelor's degree, followed by two master's degrees, from public research universities in the Midwest. My parents stressed the importance of higher education and all of my siblings have obtained either an associate degree or a bachelor's degree.

My subsequent career in education began as a teacher of Spanish for ten years in all grades K-12. Upon completion of my master's degree, I moved into administration, working first as an assistant principal and then a principal for six years. I subsequently transitioned into central office positions, focusing on leadership development of teachers, principals, and superintendents for 13 years. These experiences fostered my intellectual curiosity and an appreciation for the importance of effective leadership in creating educational communities focused on student learning and academic achievement. Currently working in a community college, my goal of obtaining an PhD in Higher Education Administration will enable me to continue working in leadership positions while positively impacting student outcomes and supporting other women in their pursuit of a fulfilling career in higher education.

I acknowledge that my multiple identities put me in a position of simultaneous privilege and oppression. Rather than trying to ignore my own biases, I actively engaged them throughout the study. As I approached this research through a feminist lens, my assumptions were based on a belief that higher education institutions are gendered organizations and as such, women's

individual agency regarding their careers are limited by invisible structures and rules (Eddy et al., 2017). Therefore, when collecting data and analyzing it, I was cognizant of my bias toward the institutions in my study and worked to set it aside.

I believe that gender is an important aspect of identity that affects the ways people see the world and how they behave. As the one conducting the research, I was placed as an outsider to the experiences of the participants, even though we were of the same gender. As some of the participants were of a different race than me, it was important to be reflexive of these status distinctions in order to negotiate the differences within the interview situations. I also kept in mind that new insights can be obtained from the perspective of difference – how were these women different from me and from each other? Are any differences important to the research question and if so, in what way? Reflecting about myself and my relationship with the participants helped me to navigate similarities and differences not only during the data collection process but also when analyzing and interpreting the data.

Summary

In this chapter, I described the research approach and methods that were used to guide this study, taking direction from previous research in a manner congruent to the topic under investigation. As I wanted to understand the common meanings mid-level women administrators attribute to their lived experiences of leading and following in the community college, I selected a phenomenological approach for this qualitative study. Related to data collection, I described the corresponding research method of in-depth interviewing, which allowed me to access the voices of the women mid-level administrators through over 30 hours spent with the participants. I discussed the multiple levels of data analysis, including analyzing data for significant statements, meanings, and themes. The themes were then used to write a description of what the

participants experienced and how they experienced it relating to the phenomenon of leading while following. In addition, I validated the accuracy of my account using four procedures for validation. Finally, I concluded the chapter by providing a statement of my positionality. In the next chapter, I detail the results of the study. The data includes the themes and subthemes extracted from the detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences related to the phenomenon of mid-level leading and following.

CHAPTER FOUR:
RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore what meaning mid-level women administrators ascribe to the experience of being both a leader and a follower within the community college sector and the perceived meaning of that experience on their own leadership and followership practices. The overarching research question that guided this study was: How do mid-level women administrators make meaning of their identities as both leaders and followers? The aim of the study was to better understand women's experiences as mid-level administrators in the community college and how they make meaning of their experience as both leaders and followers. Responding to semi-structured, in-depth questions with additional prompting sub-questions enabled the participants to share a rich and detailed experiential account of their experiences, as lived through, allowing the researcher and each participant to co-construct meaning. In this chapter, I first describe the participants to help the reader understand the background of each mid-level woman administrator. Second, I present the findings from the study.

Participants

I interviewed ten women mid-level administrators for this study. Seven participants identified as Caucasian or White and three participants identified as African American or Black. Participants hold various administrative positions in student life, academics, instructional and academic support and were at different stages in their careers. They have held a variety of positions including director, associate dean, and dean and have been trained in a range of educational programs. Information about each participant is shared below. Participants are identified by self-selected pseudonyms.

Amanda

Amanda was born in the mid 1950s and identifies as African American. She was a first-generation college student and graduated from a community college. She has always been employed in the community college sector, both as an instructor and administrator, and has held various mid-level dean positions in academics and student life. In addition to her master's degree, Amanda holds a certificate in curriculum and instruction. At this point in her career, Amanda's focus is on the students and getting everyone around her to keep the needs of the students in the forefront of their minds and actions. She connects her leading style with that of a servant leader because, "I enjoy providing what you need to get your job done. I don't like dictating or questioning how you do your work." Amanda is not planning to retire for two to three more years because she feels she is needed and has more to contribute with creating an institution that educates students for success.

Bella

Bella was born in the early 1960s and identifies as Caucasian. She worked in the supply chain industry for twenty years before taking an executive assistant position at a community college as the liaison between the president of the college and the board of trustees. Over time, she was promoted into various operational positions at the college and obtained an associate degree, bachelor's degree, and a master's degree in organizational leadership. Bella was then promoted into various associate dean positions and is currently working on her doctorate in community college leadership. She may continue to work in higher education but is also considering retirement and returning to an industry position in a few years.

Fern

Fern was born in the late 1960s and identifies as White. Her childhood dream was to go

as far as she could with her education. After completing her bachelor's degree, she attended a community college specifically to obtain a paralegal certificate. This enabled her to work in a law firm for six years while she went back to school to obtain a master's degree. She then obtained a leadership position at a non-profit higher educational institution and earned a doctorate degree with an emphasis on leadership. Fern has since held a variety of mid-level leadership positions in several community colleges and likes being around people who are thinking and learning and creating new knowledge. She has no plans for retirement and is excited about her work and planned initiatives at her current institution.

Josie

Josie was born in the mid 1950s and identifies as White. After obtaining her bachelor's degree and realizing she did not want to teach in K-12, Josie took a job in the financial aid office of a four-year institution and continued to obtain positions of increasing responsibility. She was recruited by another university for a higher-level position in financial aid and eventually promoted to registrar. After many years, she decided to work in the community college sector and was recruited to take a mid-level position in curriculum and assessment. Josie appreciates that community colleges are student focused and have fewer organizational layers as compared to four-year institutions. While she may retire in a few years, Josie would like to continue to be involved in the community college, perhaps in a volunteer capacity.

Louisa

Louisa was born in the early 1950s and identifies as Caucasian/European. She was a first-generation college student and graduated from an R-1 institution. Louisa worked in business for twenty years while taking care of her family. During that time, she obtained two master's degrees, one in educational psychology and another in community counseling. After working in

private practice, she eventually took a part-time position in a community college, which led to a full-time position and mid-level roles of increasing responsibility, along with a doctorate in leadership. Louisa was drawn to the community college because of its open-door mission, where everyone can freely enter and find a future for themselves. She believes that servant leadership aligns most closely with her leadership philosophy. Louisa is on track to retire but doesn't envision a traditional retirement and may continue to be involved with community colleges in some way.

Lucy

Lucy was born in the mid 1950s and identifies as White. She began her career as an adjunct faculty member and taught in every sector of higher education – public, private, four-year, two-year, and business schools. Her first full-time position was in a community college, where she found her home and her passion. Along with teaching in the community college, Lucy became chair of her division, took on the role of the faculty senate president, as well as other leadership and committee roles at her college, and was hired as a dean at a different community college. Lucy has a master's degree and chose not to obtain a doctorate degree, focusing instead on developing her leadership skills through her work with an international organization for post-secondary institutions. For Lucy, the situation determines the type of leadership needed at any particular moment. Lucy is considering retirement in two to three more years and then possibly joining a consulting firm in higher education or doing work with the Higher Learning Commission.

Marie

Marie was born in the late 1970s and identifies as White. After graduating from a four-year institution as a first-generation student, she took a year off before returning to graduate

school to obtain her master's degree and PhD. Upon completion of her dissertation, she obtained a full-time faculty position at a community college, then moved into administration and now works as a dean in a different community college from where she began her career. Marie believes in the accessibility of the community college and the difference it can make for students from all walks of life. Because of the impact education had on her life, Marie selected a mid-level administrative career in the community college sector, where she can personally connect with students and serve the community. Perhaps one day, she will aspire to the role of community college president, but for the immediate future she plans to continue improving current initiatives at her institution related to learning outcomes, assessment, and transfer.

Nichole

Nichole was born in the mid 1970s and identifies as Black. She obtained her bachelor's degree from a private liberal arts institution and worked there for ten years before moving to take a new job at a community college. Nichole has held several mid-level administrative positions in student life, each with progressive levels of responsibility. She is a first-generation student and feels that mentors and professional development played a large role in her growth and development as a leader. Nichole believes that servant leadership is most reflective of who she is at work as well as outside of work. Currently enrolled in a doctorate program focused on higher education leadership, Nichole would like to continue to advance in higher education and one day hold a senior level position, either in a four-year institution or in a community college.

Rachel

Rachel was born in the late 1960s and identifies as White. She is a first-generation college student and graduated from a community college. After working part-time and starting a family, Rachel obtained an administrative assistant job at the college from which she graduated.

The college funded her tuition to obtain a bachelor's degree and she became an adjunct instructor. Over time, Rachel completed a master's degree, became a full-time faculty member, and taught for eight years. When a dean stepped down, Rachel was offered an interim dean position and eventually became the permanent dean. She has since held other dean positions at various community colleges and believes her experiences help her understand the plight of the community college student. Rachel describes herself as a democratic leader and has been encouraged to obtain a doctorate degree and seek a senior level administrative position. For now, Rachel feels that the work she is currently doing is truly meaningful and she enjoys working for a great institution with wonderful people.

Rhonda

Rhonda was born in the early 1980s and identifies as African American. She accelerated her graduation from high school to attend community college and always had a goal of going as far as she could with her education. Her master's degree is in clinical counseling, and she is currently enrolled in a doctorate program focused on higher education leadership. In addition to her own clinical practice, Rhonda worked at a non-profit higher education institution before joining the faculty at her current community college and then becoming a mid-level administrator. She appreciates the variety of students that attend community college and feels she can identify with them due to her own community college experience. Rhonda believes that transformational describes her leading style because of who she is and some of the struggles she has had to go through. She has no plans to return to teaching and may one day become a vice-president but doesn't want to box herself in regarding what the future may hold.

Findings

In this study I used an interpretive–hermeneutic process to explore and analyze the lived

experiences of the participants, focusing on the development of themes related to leadership and followership in the community college. "When we analyze a phenomenon, we are trying to determine what the themes are, the experiential structures that make up that experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 79). Five themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) leading interactions, (b) following interactions, (c) influences of cognitive development on leading and following, (d) adverse work environment, and (e) navigating the work environment. This chapter is organized by the five themes and associated subthemes, as they relate to the study's research question: How do mid-level women administrators make meaning of their identities as both leaders and followers?

Leading Interactions

Participants discussed a variety of interactions related to leading including why they choose to work in the community college, the importance of developing and supporting others, and how they accomplish their goals and objectives. They also discussed challenges in working with faculty and how they meet those challenges. These subthemes emerged from the conversations with the participants and are described and illustrated in the following sections.

Institutional Choice

Working in a community college is an intentional choice for many of the participants because of the focus on students. For example, having been employed in four-year institutions as well as community colleges, Josie says, "That's one of the things I really like about the community college. It's student focused." When speaking about her community college, Louisa shares, "We serve a lot of non-traditional at-promise students, and this is where I felt that I could probably make the most difference." Similarly, Amanda states "I believed that I could make a difference for a disadvantaged, underrepresented population of students." For Marie, "It's about

those stories and continuing to support the students who I think need us and serve our communities in that way. Just seeing that you can make a difference for students from all walks of life." Rhonda emphatically provides her point of view, "I am a student-driven, student learning type person. Like that is literally why we are here."

Others talked about personal satisfaction related to student success as to why they work in a community college. For example, Rachel explains:

To see people who may not have thought that they were community college or college material, like me, get to that point, it's very, very gratifying. I've said it before, and I'll say it again. I'll never work in a four-year school. I just love community colleges.

Lucy says, "Making sure that students can get that first two years and transfer very fluidly, very easily into any four-year institution has really been one of my career goals." Bella notes, "When a student gets it and they reach their goal and they graduate or they reach their goal and they move on, I mean, that's a good feeling, especially when you've helped that person go through the whole process." Reflecting upon her department, Fern comments, "It's that community college story that really touches me. I feel that all of us who work here can do the greatest good and have the greatest impact on that particular population." Because they can make a difference in the lives of students who attend their institutions, Louisa, Amanda, Marie, Rhonda, Josie, Rachel, Lucy, Bella, and Fern find working in the community college to be both personally and professionally rewarding.

Developing and Supporting Others

When talking about leading, many participants described the importance of developing and supporting their direct reports, faculty, or other employees. Rachel explained her view, "When I see people whom I've helped get rewarded or get promoted or become leaders

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themselves, that's very gratifying to me. (…) I do believe that the mark of a good leader is creating more good leaders." Fern shared a similar sentiment:

> I think where the leader can be most impactful is with how they develop the people around them. Whether that's to get them better skills for their positions so they can more proficiently do their job or develop them to the point where they leave their position and go on to a higher position.

Along with Fern, Bella also equated leading with supporting her direct reports:

> I view my leadership as helping them get past those roadblocks and being able to be successful in what they're trying to accomplish. That's how I view really a good leadership role. (…) Being a leader is helping your people accomplish what they need to get done.

Josie also talks about making sure that her staff has what they need and meeting regularly with them to stay informed so that she can take action if needed, "That's part of the reason for the weekly meetings, so that people can come in and I can keep an eye on, are you having trouble with anything? Is anything going on?" Rhonda points out that she is not a micromanager and that she likes to draw on the talents of her people, "If you have an idea, or if you want to lead something, I am fully supportive of that. I am not threatened by that. I want people to succeed. I want people to grow."

When it comes to complaints from paraprofessionals, lab assistants or the faculty, Lucy explains that she takes a step back with her support to allow them to solve problems on their own. She refers to these situations as "teaching moments":

> Okay, did you follow the right protocol? Follow the protocol first, copy me on it, but follow the protocol first. Then if you're not getting an answer in a satisfactory time, then I

will step in, but you've got to follow that protocol.

For some participants, their role as a mentor is a key component of developing and supporting others with whom they work because of the value mentoring had for them earlier in their careers. Marie co-leads a leadership program at her institution and works with two mentees. In describing her experiences with mentoring others, she says, "I find them rewarding because I've been so, just helped and served by the folks who I've had as mentors and sought out as mentors. I certainly want to give that back." Marie goes on to explain the importance of mentoring for women in academia:

> I'll see folks at different institutions that would make sure they got some sort of benefit, but they didn't do anything to help anyone else. That's one of the things that just kind of irritates me. So, I try to do that [mentor others] because I certainly didn't get here without anyone. I want people to feel the same thing I did and to just make things a little smoother because it's still amazing to me what barriers there are for different folks in the year we're talking.

Nichole also points out the importance of giving back:

> As long as I'm not compromising myself in a negative way, if someone comes to me as another woman, Black or whatever ethnicity, I'm going to be there to help out that person and pay it forward because I just believe so many other people, men and women have done that for me. I think it's important that we continue that mentorship.

For Rachel, Fern, Bella, Josie, Rhonda, Lucy, Marie, and Nichole developing and supporting others is an important component of their leading practice and includes mentoring, developing the talents of others, and supporting the success of employees with whom they work.

Influencing Strategies

Many participants talked about the importance of affecting change to better serve students in their institutions, most often through influencing strategies with faculty, staff, and colleagues. One influencing strategy used by several participants is to ask faculty to focus on the students' point of view. Amanda explains:

When I'm able to make some decisions, I'm always utilizing or using the concept of, "Okay, pretend you're the student." (…) As we have some conversations, understand the process that the student has to go through and what we're trying to provide for them. So, using the student perspective has been very effective for me as a leader.

When working with faculty to modify their classes for smaller numbers of students due to Covid-19 requirements, Rhonda points out, "I have to present everything from the student's standpoint of it's not safe." Rachel also utilizes the students' point of view when influencing nursing faculty to change a policy that forbids students who had failed the program to ever apply again.

It came from me asking a lot of questions about why do you do that? Help me understand. I think the attitude was, "It was tough for me; it's going to be tough for our students too." I tried to help them realize that, yes, we need to be tough, but sometimes grace needs to be the prevailing factor because we're talking about humans as well.

When talking to faculty about schedule building, Lucy asks them to remember what it was like to be a student:

The faculty would build a schedule for their purposes, not for the student's purposes because they would only want to be on campus for two days a week. They would want to have three- and four-hour classes all the time. And I'm just going, "Can you remember when you were a student, and you were in class for three and four hours? What did you

really learn? Let's think about that."

Josie also describes asking faculty to think about students when assisting them with assessment:

>The community college is more student focused and that has helped me, at least given me an in with working with assessment. "It's not about you, it's about the students. How do we help students out, let's all turn toward the student, get looking in the same direction."

Another strategy participants use to affect change with faculty and staff is the application of data as rationale for decision making. Fern explains the importance of data from a mid-level administrator perspective:

>Especially I think at this level because I'm not a VP, I can't just say, "because I said so" I'm at that midlevel. So, I have to say, "well we could do that, but here's the data." (…) Usually when I'm trying to influence, that's what I go back to – data.

When trying to resolve student challenges due to college policies Amanda tells her colleagues, "Look, these are the complaints we're getting. Here's the data that's showing this is not working for the majority of the students that we serve." Lucy explains the significance of data to her work with faculty:

>I say, "A picture here is worth a thousand words. Here's all of the information. Here's the chart. Let's take a look at these numbers." and try to convince them in that way as well. I look at data as my friend. (…) You have to have some rationale behind the decisions that are made, whether that's the data, whether that's the budget, the student numbers, all of that has to be taken into consideration.

Louisa talks about the importance of using data to determine student eligibility for resource funding, "Bring the data, what's the data say? It isn't always about data, but for the most part, you've got to show you've got some criteria to follow."

Focusing faculty, staff, and colleagues on the students' point of view and using data to support an argument are two key strategies used by Amanda, Rhonda, Rachel, Lucy, Josie, Fern, and Louisa to influence decision making in their community colleges.

Getting Stuff Done

Several participants talked about working through others to accomplish goals and objectives. They describe how getting buy-in and building relationships are essential to working with others. For example, Nichole highlights the importance of buy-in when she asks others to participate with her on an interview committee:

> That would be one example where I think having that buy-in and building on those relationships again, for me, which is so important, helped me do the work that I needed to do and to build a great team at that campus.

Fern also talks about the importance of getting everyone in her department to agree to move forward on an initiative:

> You have to have that buy-in, and you have to make people feel like they're all going in the same direction. That's really the only way I can achieve things is through relying on others and getting others to work together on all of that.

In a similar vein, Amanda points out that buy-in can be achieved through committee work, "I found that it has been easier to get work done by committees than individuals. It takes a longer process sometimes, but you get a better buy-in." She also emphasizes the importance of relationship building, "This is most important, and I will continue to say this throughout my whole career, you have to build a relationship with the individual to get things done." Rachel voices a similar sentiment, "It's about building and nurturing relationships and then leveraging those relationships to achieve goals. That's how you get stuff done."

Strong relationships with colleagues are also an important factor for participants in accomplishing goals and objectives. For example, in speaking about support from the associate deans and deans, Rhonda says, "We work very well together as a group. (…) If I need to call somebody about something, absolutely. There's no problem there, none. We're there for each other." When talking about attending leadership team meetings, Fern shares, "I feel like there's this hack that you have when you're an administrator that you can talk about things and do things and it's like a safe zone." When working with her peer group of deans, Marie explains there may be differences of opinion, but they usually come to consensus because of the positive relationships they have built with one another:

> We can be very candid with one another in terms of when we disagree on things, when
> we agree on things. (…) I think they all know my style is pretty collaborative and that I
> sometimes am kind of quiet. I think they realize when I speak up, it's not just to hear
> myself talk.

For Lucy and Nichole, strong relationships with peers were critical to ensuring consistent implementation of college policies across departments. Rachel communicates the same perspective, "I only had one or two other deans that I could really talk with, had great relationships with them. They had very different disciplines and we were just trying to maintain consistency across the entire college." Where relationships with peers are not strong, some participants rely on senior leaders. For example, when Josie cannot get someone in another department to comply with her request, she may go directly to their boss, "I don't want to do that, but I will, and I've done it." Louisa describes a situation in which she could not get the data she needed:

> There was one Dean that I said, "Look, you don't want me to get my boss. You don't, I

know you don't. So, can you please just give me what I need and I'll get out of your

hair?" So sometimes that works pretty well.

Lucy shares an example of mediating between two departments that are often at odds with one

another, one that she oversees and the other managed by a different leader:

"If you guys are going to act like children, I'm going to sit you down and I'm going to go

to those people above you. I have no problem calling the people above you." They just

went, "Oh, okay." I don't deal with that kind of infighting very well.

The participants in the study discussed the importance of getting buy-in and building

relationships to effectively work with others in accomplishing goals and objectives. When buy-in

and relationships are not in place, some participants refer to senior leaders.

Faculty Challenges

The final subtheme, *faculty challenges,* describes various strategies participants use to

address challenges they encounter when working with faculty. As mid-level administrators, these

leaders must find the balance between directives from senior leaders and the requirements of

faculty who need their support and assistance. Strategies employed by participants to find that

balance include listening, being patient, referring to policies, and utilizing others who have good

relationships with faculty.

Bella discussed impact of the union on her relationship with faculty and how she

addressed the dynamic of an "us versus them mentality" which she worked to overcome:

The one thing that I always did was I listened to them and I told them, "I may not always

be able to change something, but I will always listen to your frustration." I think that

really broke the ice and started making everything run much smoother.

Josie pointed out, "Most of the time you have to be so patient with the faculty members who

need individual help because you've got to take them where they are." Amanda shares that, "leading and being in this position, the challenge is reminding faculty that we are not competing amongst each other. We are one institution." Rhonda talks about the challenges of holding faculty accountable, "I'm whipping out policies that have dust on them and saying, 'Now, this is what it says. I'm going to hold you to that.' It's the accountability thing. I think people are not as resistant as people think."

However, holding faculty accountable is not always a successful strategy. Lucy shares that her relationship with the faculty "has been the most challenging", unlike other community colleges where she has worked. "I hold people accountable, and they do not like being held accountable. I walk by their classroom, and I say, 'Wow, what's going on in here today?' and I'm not welcome." So instead, Lucy relies on her associate dean to move the faculty in a particular direction:

> She has a very good, a better relationship with the faculty because she was one of them. I was never one of them. And so, there is that disconnect, which I struggle with because there doesn't have to be. But in faculty minds, it's there. And in their mind, it's always an "us versus them" kind of situation, which just really frustrates me. (…) She doesn't experience the "us versus them" as much as I do (…) so she becomes the conduit.

Working through others is also a strategy used by Fern:

> I have a really good rapport with two of my full-time faculty. (…) I'll ask them to reach out to their faculty colleagues with an idea for something instead of me being the one to do it. That's the more acceptable way to do things (…) because it's a union environment and it seems to have a very strict separation of groups.

Louisa talked about how she worked with some faculty members while ignoring others to

implement a new student coaching program:

> The only way this was going to work was to get the faculty on board. So, we aligned ourselves with those that supported it, and folks that didn't, we didn't waste a whole lot of energy trying to convince them otherwise. You have the ones in the front of the boat that are really, really all enthusiastic and they're on board. Then you've got the ones that are in the middle that maybe, maybe not, and then the ones in the back. I don't waste my time with people in the back. It's the ones in the middle, those are the ones you really want to work with and then you use the ones in the front to help align.

In some situations, participants felt there were simply no strategies available to them because of union negotiated contracts. Rhonda did not want to offer a course to an adjunct faculty member who had been lax in completing required job responsibilities but because she had seniority, Rhonda had to offer it to her anyway. She laments, "There are things that absolutely should be in place and for whatever reason, usually union related, we cannot do it." Lucy narrates a similar situation related to an obsolete faculty review process:

> It's in the contract. They have to be reviewed every three years. (…) For me, it was a great opportunity to learn who they were and to understand what was important to them as a person. So, I really enjoyed that, but if I would have any constructive criticism about, "I really need you to follow these guidelines. This is what your syllabus should look like. These are the deadlines that we really need you to follow. I'd like you to join this committee, you have some good points here." None of that really meant anything. It was just words on a piece of paper, and it went in their file, and we didn't have any… It had no meat to it and no consequences.

In some cases, participants were not able to address challenges they encounter when working

with faculty due to union regulations. Other participants discussed successful strategies they use in dealing with faculty-related challenges including listening, being patient, referring to policies, and utilizing others who have good relationships with faculty. In this section I discussed the first theme, leading interactions, which consists of five subthemes: *institutional choice*, *developing and supporting others*, *influencing strategies, getting stuff done,* and *faculty challenges.* In the next section I discuss the second theme, following interactions.

Following Interactions

In addition to leading, mid-level administrators spend time interacting with their supervisors and other senior leaders in their roles as followers. In the first subtheme, *relationships with supervisors,* participants discuss following interactions associated with both positive and negative relationships with their supervisors. In the second subtheme, *upward persuasion,* participants describe following interactions related to how they provide feedback to their supervisors or senior leaders on directives and initiatives with which they do not agree. These subthemes emerged from the conversations with participants and are described and illustrated in the following sections.

Relationships with Supervisors

Many participants describe the positive support they receive from their supervisors and the impact of that support on them personally and professionally. For example, Louisa says of her vice-president:

I've always had amazing support from my VP. She knew the challenges we were having (…) and there are issues we still have that need to be addressed but she's been a very, very good friend and very supportive to me when I came into this position.

Rhonda talks about how support from her dean increases her confidence to enact leadership:

What I have learned about her is that she has been very supportive on my behalf behind

the scenes. That was something that I didn't know until now. (…) She has continued to

be that way because I think she knows my personality and what I bring to the role. (…)

She's like, "Go for it. Do whatever you think needs to be done. I trust you. Do it."

Nichole describes the vote of confidence her vice-president has in her leadership abilities:

My current vice-president is a White woman, and she has nominated me to participate in

a state level leadership cohort because she sees something in me. She believes I could be

the next vice-president when she's out of here. (…) She sees me as a leader at the college

on that topic and makes suggestions to the president of our institution or other people at

the college, "Please engage Nichole because she is a key person around this topic and

would have some great ideas."

Other participants shared support they received from supervisors in the form of coaching. For

instance, Fern shares her interpretation of feedback from her supervisor:

He really touted my listening skills. I take that as kind of a backhanded compliment

because quite often in higher ed you get the most points for the most things you say in the

meeting, and it doesn't have to be quality stuff. You just get points every time you open

your mouth and I'm not one of those high scorers in that regard. I'm at the bottom of the

roster as far as points, but when I do open my mouth, watch out. So, what he said was

that I am always the levelheaded voice in the room.

Lucy talks about how a previous supervisor instructed her as a young dean to work with faculty:

She would tell me, "Just lay back for a little bit, just chill out for a little bit. Let's see

where this goes. I highly respect the standards that you have, the process that you have.

But let's take a look at their viewpoints a little bit and let's play it out. You're doing the

job that you need to be doing."

Other participants shared negative experiences. Even though she wasn't supported by a supervisor with whom she had worked in the past, Louisa did manage to learn from him:

> If he had an issue with me about something, he didn't have his facts together, which didn't look good. So that taught me you've got to have your act together before you sit down with somebody and discipline them or sit down and have a little conversation about what's happening. Another piece that I learned from this particular individual was that you've got to try to be transparent and give your folks as much information as you can. Sometimes you can't always do that but try to do it as much as you can and not go over people's heads. He would constantly go to my people to do things and not through me and that didn't grow me.

Josie describes the impact a former supervisor had on her own leading practice:

> My boss at the time took me aside, really read me the riot act and it just about killed me, but I was really grateful, you know? I think that's what I try to do and be, is one of those people who will take you aside and say to you, look, this isn't going to work.

Other participants who were not supported described difficult relationships in their roles as followers. For example, Rachel pointed out that while her previous supervisor offered encouragement, "You can, without a doubt, be a community college president if that's what you want to do", she didn't get much feedback from her until something went wrong.

Rhonda's supervisor had a history of explosive behavior, which negatively impacted their relationship over time. Rhonda describes one such incident related to a curriculum issue:

> I'm talking through it, and she just slams her mouse down and says, "Damn it, Rhonda, go back to where you came from!" Now do I think she meant my previous institution?

Yes. Do I think it's inappropriate to ever say that to somebody? Yes. Especially

somebody that's Black? Yes. (…) After that, her boss came in and she said, "I said

something I shouldn't have said." Her boss bought her flowers, and nobody ever

apologized to me.

After a major upheaval at the top level in a previous community college, Lucy's supervisor was

abruptly dismissed, which placed her in a precarious position with the president:

I was the only dean that was left except for the dean of nursing, so I was dean of

everything. It was very stressful at that particular point, reporting directly to the president

at that institution who said "Your life is in my hands. You can be here tomorrow, or you

can't be here tomorrow." (…) I knew I had to find something else as quickly as I could. I

didn't know what she was going to do.

Fern discusses the importance of her supervisor relationship in determining if she stays or leaves

a position:

If I have a great relationship with my supervisor, I'm not going anywhere. But if that

relationship with that supervisor is at all something about which I'm uneasy for a variety

of reasons, for any reason, then that's when I start looking. That's what happened in my

previous institution. When they fired my boss and then I reported to a new VP, it was just

too much. That was a stressful situation for me. I never really felt that I would fully trust

and have that supervisor relationship.

Most participants in this study describe positive relationships with their supervisor and feel

supported both personally and professionally. Other participants shared experiences about

previous supervisors who were not positive, causing them to feel apprehensive and unsupported.

Upward Persuasion

In the follower role, mid-level administrators are often given directives by supervisors or asked to provide input or feedback on college initiatives sponsored by senior leaders. Many participants in this study described interactions in which they worked to persuade supervisors or senior leaders to change directives or initiatives with which they did not agree. For example, Louisa provided feedback when the president asked for her input regarding his intended communication to the student body. A group of students was protesting about their visibility on campus and the president planned to send out an email recommending they seek counseling about their feelings on the issue. Louisa was able to convince the president to change his message:

> I sent out an email immediately, saying this was not an appropriate way to respond to the students. "You're accusing them of having some kind of flaw when the reality is they are responding to an oppressive event." (…) I sent this to the President's assistant, and I outlined the whole thing and I said here's what you would probably rather say about this. (…) Blaming somebody, telling them that they need counseling for an issue that is an environmental climate issue, is a race issue, not a personal issue. You're saying, "You're flawed in some way, and you need help with therapy because you're a person of color." I don't think they really looked at it that way. White people don't, they don't look at it that way and they're White people. The president said, "I never looked at it that way."

When providing unsolicited feedback to the college president about how he handles student requests, Amanda takes a straightforward approach:

> I need you to understand that when you send a note to someone and say, "It sounds like a good idea, let's make it happen", then they come to me and say, "The President said we

can do da-da-da-da-da." I need you to understand that what would work best for us when we're in these positions is that you direct that email back to your direct reports over that area so that they can review to determine if this is a best resolution or solution." (…) And he said to me, "Amanda, you know, you're the only one that will come to me direct."

Lucy describes an experience in which she didn't agree with a proposed change that senior leaders wanted to make regarding one of her departments. She wrote a one-page argument to persuade them not to make the change. To make her case, she pointed to the faculty's success with implementation of their curriculum and how they were on the path to continued success, which she felt would be negatively impacted if the change was implemented. A week after receiving Lucy's response, senior leaders decided not to move forward with the proposed change.

Some participants described following interactions in which their input was not well received by senior leaders. For example, Rachel describes a meeting in which she was not allowed to intervene on behalf of others:

Certainly, there have been some senior leaders who were very autocratic and when I have tried to kind of assist with telling the story or getting the message through, I've been shut down. I didn't take it personally. (…) I'm not saying I'm always right, but there are times when certainly things have not been going well, and I've tried to intervene, and my help was not wanted. I'll retreat back. The people in the room will see that I tried to advocate for them, and I think they still appreciate it. But the person who shuts me down, it says far more about them than it does about me.

Bella described how she tries to persuade without being too direct. In talking about lessons learned, when working with supervisors who she thinks may be making poor decisions,

Bella reflects:

> I don't outright tell my boss, "You know, that's questionable." I did that once before and
> it didn't turn out well, a long time ago. I don't outright say, "Hey, this is not a good
> decision." But I would say, "I have concerns about the backlash and what could happen
> when it just turns out to be a snowball effect."

Some participants in the study believe it is important to be a team player and provide input to senior leaders when appropriate. In describing herself as a follower, particularly during the pandemic, Marie provides insight into this perspective:

> I've been completely fine with speaking up when I need to, but I also certainly appreciate
> that I'm not the one in charge in a lot of the rooms I'm in. If I really feel strongly about
> something, I will speak up and say my piece, so that folks have the information. I also am
> very open, and I hope the folks I report to would say I can take direction. There are some
> days, especially in this situation, that I don't need to be the one making all the plans or
> having all the answers. I'm perfectly happy to take a pretty clear plan of action and help
> make it happen.

For some participants, their input or persuasive feedback brings about the preferred change in senior leader behavior. For others, their response does not produce the desired outcome. In some situations, participants provide input as needed and are happy to follow through on directives from senior leaders. In this section I discussed the second theme, following interactions, which consists of two subthemes: *relationships with supervisors* and *upward persuasion.* In the next section I discuss the third theme, influences of cognitive development on leading and following.

Influences of Cognitive Development on Leading and Following

The third theme, influences of cognitive development on leading and following, is composed of two subthemes, *education* and *impact of mentors.* These subthemes emerged from the conversations with participants and are described and illustrated in the following sections.

Education

Mid-level administrators often choose to pursue additional education to expand their knowledge, achieve life-long learning goals or obtain credentials to advance in their careers. In this study, participants described the roles of informal learning, professional development, and additional degrees in supporting their work as leaders in higher education. For example, Amanda points out why informal learning is critical to her personal growth, "At my age, I thought learning and educating myself would have long been over. Once I got my degree, I don't need that. But I recognize how important it is for me to read, to get information, to share information." Fern talks about the importance of an informal learning group for connecting and receiving support from other midlevel female leaders:

> It was almost like a book discussion group, and we had lunch together, once or twice a month, whenever we could, and it was leadership focused. We would read leadership books; we would talk about leadership and share our experiences at our level within the organization. (…) Once that group started meeting, and it was weird, I just felt like we all had each other's backs. It was really a safe space where we could share experiences.

Other participants looked to organizations outside of their institution for provision of professional development. As Lucy transitioned to mid-level administration, she utilized her work with an international honor society to develop and hone her administrative skills. She describes how that experience helped prepare her for the role of dean:

That week of faculty development and then the four conventions that I would have to

organize, help the students organize, just all of those administrative organizational pieces.

I was doing all of that while I was teaching before I became a dean. So, balancing all of

that, it just was a very easy, normal transition I think for me.

Nichole describes how she was able to demonstrate her expertise to colleagues and senior

leaders:

Because of my experience as a president of a statewide organization and sitting at those

tables, I was able to bring a research and knowledge base back to the institution in my

role and share that with people at my level and above my level. To show that I had a

knowledge base centered around the work that I do and that I had goals for advancement,

not to be stagnant in the role that I was hired for.

Other participants discussed the impact on their roles as leaders when acquiring

additional degrees. For instance, Bella obtained a master's degree in organizational leadership

and said it helped her "get a really good grasp" on being in a mid-level administrative role, "It

helps you understand a whole lot more of what was going on and why some decisions were made

and why not." In determining whether to return to school, Rhonda explains why she decided to

pursue a doctorate in education:

I know I'm passionate about my job. I pay very, very close attention to the leadership that

I see and interact with. One, I thought there's no reason why I can't do that. Two, if you're

going to spend this much time critiquing the leadership, then maybe you might want to

learn more about it. (laughter)

Louisa talked about the significance of her doctoral program:

I think it probably gave me more credibility as a leader. I think looking at issues like

Higher Learning Commission and things that happen at a higher level than what I was accustomed to helped me to understand a little bit about how the organization as a whole was operating.

For other participants, earning a doctorate degree was something they had considered at one time or another. Amanda had started her PhD but was not able to finish, "The financial piece of it I really couldn't afford, even with scholarships." Lucy reflected on the value of her experience compared to the value of a doctorate degree:

> If I were going to move into a VP position, I know that I would have to have those credentials behind me, even though I think my 40 years in education should mean something. I kind of resent that a little bit. I think experience speaks just as well as the degree that you have.

Rachel shared that while she has been encouraged to obtain a doctorate, she doesn't find it necessary, "Oftentimes the other deans and vice presidents have their doctorates and I do not. But that doesn't mean I can't be a leader."

In addition to more degrees, professional development, and informal learning, several participants described experiences of learning on the job, which helped them to become more self-assured in their leadership roles. Marie explains that she learned early on not to make promises for things she cannot control:

> I learned very quickly. I put a goal in, which was a great goal. It was to increase the number of honors classes offered across the college, but the week after I entered it, I realized that my position couldn't really impact the number since that decision was a campus-based one and not one that I could fully impact at the district level. We actually met the percentage and exceeded it, but I never put a goal in like that again, that I couldn't

directly impact.

Other participants described experiences in which they improved their interpersonal skills when working with faculty and staff. Lucy explains about learning to be more diplomatic:

> I get an email from a frustrated faculty member, and it's not very encouraging in any way, shape, or form. And it's like, I'm just going to let that sit for a while unless it needs an immediate response, or the immediate response is "I'll consider this, and I'll get back to you tomorrow." (…) Realizing that some things take some time, some things you have to react to immediately, and usually that's many of the smaller things. (…) I think being more diplomatic in that sense is some of the things that I've learned over the years in the different positions that I've had.

Rachel describes her preferred style of learning through questioning to better understand her role as dean:

> I was now their boss; I was asking them lots of questions. What do you think? How would you go about this? What if we did this? What would the repercussions be? And I think that's okay. I think that's how I learn best. I am not a dictator by any means. Looking back at it, I probably did not inspire a lot of confidence because I was asking questions. It was more about understanding how I fit in as a dean to support what they were doing.

Reflecting upon her first mid-level administrative position, Rhonda shares what was most significant, "I learned the importance of just being engaging and being supportive. Honestly, I learned the importance of having policies and procedures and following those policies and procedures." Having recently started a new position, Rhonda makes clear that learning on the job is ongoing for her:

Once I feel like I've cleaned up some things, then I can focus on what we want. What do

we want to add? What do we want to bring? Where are we weak and where can we

improve? It's all still a big learning process.

In reflecting on the many positions she has held over the years at her institution, Bella explains

how she has benefitted from the knowledge gained:

The diversity in the roles that you are handed is amazing. You learn so many different

things, from clerical stuff all the way up to higher level leadership management things.

I feel like I could probably go anywhere and work anywhere successfully because the one

thing that the community college will do is keep you on your toes.

Formal as well as informal education have played significant roles in how participants learn,

grow, and advance in their profession along with refining their leadership skills and

competencies when working as mid-level administrators on the job.

Impact of Mentors

Participants discussed the impact that mentors had on their development as leaders and

followers. For Amanda, Lucy, and Rachel, their mentors were the college president. For

example, Amanda describes the mentorship she received from the first female president at the

community college where Amanda worked:

We quickly became really strong colleagues. I didn't always agree with her. She could

have a conversation with me and tell me why it's okay that I didn't agree with her. (…)

Her leadership style assisted me with recognizing how servant leadership for me is one

of...I can define myself as that. (…) She has mentored me and continues to do that.

Amanda also describes the mentorship of the first Black president of the same community

college where she worked:

I was able to observe and watch how he would model his behavior and listen and be able

to compromise. He always taught me that you need to know more than everybody sitting

around your table in order to get things done.

The president of her first institution was influential in Lucy's decision to become a mid-level

administrator:

I had a great mentor in the college president at my first institution. He recognized some

things in me, pushed me into some leadership roles. (…) He told me a long time ago, "I

see you as a vice president."

In talking about the importance of mentors Lucy explains, "I think it's very important to have

someone respect your ideas, encourage you, challenge you, but then also recognize and then

push you into doing something out of your comfort zone." Rachel describes the impact of

working under two female presidents whom she considered to be mentors:

They took me under their wings and encouraged me. They told me I was bright. They

told me that they saw potential in me. They gave me opportunities to kind of push me out

of my comfort zone. They made me feel valued and that was something that always stuck

with me. They were incredible mentors for me – about how you treat other people, how

there's no one person who is more important than anybody else in the organization, that it

takes a whole lot of people, that you listen, that you don't go in and make changes right

away, that you build networks and that you build a community inside the college but also

outside the college.

Rather than the president, other participants view their supervisors as a mentor. For

example, Marie describes actions her supervisor took that indicated she believed in Marie's

ability to learn and grow:

In many ways she was a boss, but also a mentor. (…) She was also kind of interesting because she put me in situations where she admitted to me later, it was just meant for my learning. It was on the ground, often running, learning. (…) It was something we laughed about before she left in terms of that was like my initiation, but I think I appreciated that she knew I'd learn along the way and could handle it.

Louisa described why she views her supervisor as a mentor and the gratitude she feels as a result:

I think she's a good mentor by her just being a role model and the boundaries and expectations that she sets. She is pretty thorough, detail oriented. (…) Being politically savvy. In that sense, I think she's certainly provided me an opportunity that I know I probably would not otherwise have gotten. I'm very grateful that she gave me the opportunity.

Not all participants in the study had a mentor. Rhonda didn't see the value in mentorship for herself until a conversation with the president of her institution convinced her otherwise:

I just kind of blew it off. Like I don't have mentors. I don't need that. And he said something very blunt that I appreciated, "Basically you think you're better than the mentor? You think you're too good to have a mentor?" And it was like, "Ooh, I do think like that." (laughter) It was like, "Do I actually think that I had it all together that I can't gain something from having a mentor?" I think that's really what I thought. So that was like a reality check.

The majority of participants in the study described the role of mentors and the impact they have had on their leader and follower development. In this section, I discussed the third theme, influences of cognitive development on leading and following, which consists of two subcategories: *education* and *impact of mentors.* In the next section, I discuss the fourth theme:

adverse work environment.

Adverse Work Environment

Participants described several components of their work environment that negatively impacted their leadership and followership practice. These components are described in the four subthemes that follow. The subthemes include *career impediments*, *community college ethos*, *the complexities of race and gender*, and *the impact of Covid-19*. These subthemes emerged from the conversations with the participants and are described and illustrated in the following sections.

Career Impediments

When talking about career-related experiences, many participants describe impediments they confront in their work. These impediments range from low pay to inaccurate performance evaluations to substandard work-life balance to a lack of support from colleagues and supervisors. Several participants talked about taking on additional work with no additional pay. Speaking about a campus at her current institution, Bella shares, "I was there for three years, and I was asked if I would take a lateral move to go to a different campus to do the same type of work, but also to do curriculum development." When asked if her pay was increased as a result, Bella replies, "Unfortunately, no, but it was closer to home and I wanted to get some experience in curriculum development, so I took it."

Other participants discussed experiences in which their performance evaluations were not accurate or reflective of their work. For example, Fern describes a recent experience with her current supervisor who "is really gung-ho on supplemental instruction, but he's convinced that we're really not doing any." Fern explains that she and her direct report speak about supplemental instruction and provide updates at every meeting they attend but the topic came up at her annual performance evaluation anyway:

So, we've been sharing information, but yet again on Tuesday my supervisor said, "if we're talking goals for next year, maybe supplemental instruction because I'm really excited about it, and I wish we were doing that here" and I had to remind him again.

In addition to impediments related to pay and performance evaluations, several participants asserted a substandard work-life balance. When describing her relationship with a previous supervisor, who was not married and did not have children, Rhonda explains that she chose to work late on days when her children were less likely to need her, "She's the type of person that wants to see me here. She wants to see you here late. So, I would have days of the week where I knew my kids were at football or gymnastics and I would stay late." For several participants, expectations related to work hours were unrealistic. Rachel explains:

It was not unusual for my boss to email me at six o'clock at night, at one in the morning, at four in the morning, on weekends. There was an expectation that I was working 24/7 and it got to be a lot. (…) I'll happily give 50, even 60 hours a week to my job. I get that that's part of it, but that was never enough. It was just more…harder, faster, more.

Amanda expresses a similar concern related to work-life balance:

I was really torn between the work that I had to do, making sure that I was a good mother and making sure my children had access to education and access to be able to do some things. I was really trying to have that balance of being the leader in the institution and the leader of my family.

Some participants spoke about the lack of support they receive from peers or senior leaders who feel threatened by their work. Fern describes the perception of others toward her:

I want to do things that I feel are best for my area of operation, but that benefit students too. So, I'm not going to hold back on any of that stuff just because I might be looking

like a hot shot or like I'm trying to show someone up. But you're also in the middle, so those who are at your same level might feel a little bit threatened. Those above you are a little confused. When you do things like that, people think you're trying to take their job. They see you as, "Here comes Fern, she's doing X, Y and Z right out of the gate, she's on fire. She's gunning for my job."

Rachel discloses what it is like to work in a community college in which "there were women who were not for other women":

I never felt truly supported. I honestly felt that in some ways my supervisor was jealous or threatened, maybe because I do have such positive, good relationships with my people. Maybe because I am bright, and I do good work. I'm not sure. I never felt she was an ally. I felt that she was always waiting for me to screw up so she could say, "gotcha". If I didn't have a strong sense of self, that would bother me a great deal.

Fern enjoys leading from the middle but fears she may be viewed as lacking ambition if she isn't trying to advance to a higher-level position. Fern describes the reaction of a previous supervisor:

That was one of the things that came out in our conversations together, that "you've got a certain number of years yet to work and you're just going to stay at this same level for that entire time?" He didn't specifically say anything particularly derogatory, but I definitely sensed it from him. That tarnishes you as a leader because you can be seen as having a lack of ambition if you don't have that goal to be a VP or president.

When asked if she felt there is a lack of support for midlevel leaders unless they want to move up into a VP role, Fern replies:

There is certainly confusion as to "Okay, well now what do we do with Fern if she's interested in ONLY (emphasis) being a mid-level leader?" (…) There's definitely kind of

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an overall suspicion I feel and a little bit of disrespect.

When speaking about their careers as mid-level administrators in the community college, Bella, Rhonda, Rachel, Amanda, and Fern described various impediments they have encountered, including low pay, inaccurate performance evaluations, substandard work-life balance, and a lack of support from colleagues and supervisors.

Community College Ethos

When discussing the ethos of their community college, participants describe institutions that marginalize women as leaders and followers. Their experiences include situations in which they are not recognized for their work, they are talked over or ignored, and they are judged by their appearance and communication styles. For example, Nichole states there have been times when she shares ideas with her supervisor and "He'll take that idea up the chain and not acknowledge that I initiated that conversation or thought process. I won't say he has done that all the time. Just sometimes he does not give credit for ideas." Amanda discloses a similar situation with a direct supervisor whom she views to be a member of the "good old boys" network:

> He would meet with me often and I felt that I just had a privilege that nobody else had. He would take information and say that he will be working with staff to implement this idea, implement that idea and come back to me and say, "You know, Amanda, I want to talk more about this. How do you propose we go about doing this and that?" And I said, "Oh yeah, we should do that, and we should do this." The next thing I knew, I got a memo saying that the college will be implementing this piece college-wide under the direction of my direct supervisor.

Other participants shared concerns related to the challenge of being seen and heard in different settings with their colleagues due to their gender. For example, Marie talks about how women

are treated in her institution:

> Among my peers and colleagues, I definitely see women treated differently, myself
> included. It is that talking over. Women have to ask for something three times where this
> person sends you one email, and they expect you to jump. (…) That's where I just,
> sometimes again when I see it, I just keep talking. (…) They don't even know that they're
> treating women differently.

Bella shares her experience related to bringing forth ideas at meetings:

> I've been in meetings where I said, "Well, why don't we do it this way?" And somebody
> would say, "No, we can't do it that way" for whatever reason. Then, the next meeting or
> 20 minutes later, somebody will say, "well, let's go back and let's do it this way." And it's
> very similar or the same as what I just said and I just kind of look at them, like seriously?

Other participants shared experiences in which they must be cognizant of their appearance and communication styles to avoid negative consequences. Nichole reveals, "Because I wear my thoughts on my face, I've been told that I don't look friendly until people get to know me." Lucy is careful not to display emotion or anger:

> I try not to react. I'm very methodical in that particular way. Because sometimes I don't
> want any of that emotion or maybe anger, and I can't even think of an angry situation, but
> some of that reaction to come out, unless of course it's in a very safe environment where I
> don't have to fear any of those kinds of repercussions. I really kind of, I mean, my face
> will show it many times.

Rhonda said that women do not like her straightforward communication style and that it works better with men. Rachel describes a similar culture at her institution which prompts her to modify how she speaks to women in comparison to men:

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I tend to have more of a male communication style. It is very challenging for me to be bubbly and stand in front of people and meet new people. It's also challenging for me to say, 'How are you doing? How are your kids doing?' But I recognize that those are important things in relationships, so when I communicate with females, I do those things more often than I do with males. I don't have to ask males, 'How was your weekend? How are your kids feeling?' I can kind of cut to the chase a little bit faster with men than I can with women. We can just kind of get to it.

Fern offers her assessment of challenges unique to women leaders:

We had a female president, and I was really discouraged how often people were talking about her as a person, not a leader. What I mean by that is they were talking about her level of bitchiness, where I don't hear any discussion about men as far as, "Oh my goodness, was he the most bitchy today or not?" People would talk about what she was wearing, her clothes. You know, a male president, I don't hear about that either. I felt like she had more to overcome because of that, in order to get people's attention pulled away from what she was wearing and how bitchy she might've been on that day. Whereas a man walks in the room and there's no work to be done there. He has everyone's attention off the bat.

Nichole, Amanda, Marie, Bella, Lucy, Rhonda, Rachel, and Fern describe experiences that negatively impact their ability to lead and follow due to a community college ethos that seems to support an implicit bias in favor of men.

Complexities of Race and Gender

For Amanda, Rhonda, and Nichole, their efforts to lead and follow as mid-level administrators are complicated by race as well as gender. They describe experiences related to

leading White men, being categorized as an angry or scary Black woman, and being asked to raise the awareness of White colleagues on issues related to racial injustice.

When an associate dean, a White male, refuses to work for Amanda after she becomes the dean of the department, the college makes allowances for him. Adding insult to injury, the college does not fill his position when he leaves. Amanda expresses her frustration:

I couldn't get work done through him because he felt that I only got it [the deanship] because I was a Black female. So, I had to deal with that because I couldn't get work done. I couldn't get him to get the work done. So, they restructured some things because he would only do the work that he felt…And when I would write him up or go to the union or go to HR, he became angry. (…) He retired but they felt that I didn't need an Associate Dean because I was doing the work anyway.

Amanda emphasized that while her institution has been intentional about hiring more Black males, she is the only Black female at her level. Above her, there are only White males and females. In speaking about the opportunities that she had to affect change over time, Amanda reflects:

I was still a little uncomfortable because helping people at a certain level recognize your opinion becomes a challenge when you're the only voice. I became a mad, you know, I became an angry Black woman. I didn't display that, but the frustration was great as I sat around the table assisting with determining policies and processes for students.

Rhonda describes her experience in working with White men at her community college that was similarly challenging:

My experience with the men on campus is that they really do think they run the show. Middle-age White men, period. They run the show. Here comes this little Black girl

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who's like, "No, you don't run the show. You don't." (…) My experience with that is you have to prove yourself. You just have to constantly over and over again, prove yourself. You can't be afraid. You can't show fear. I've been like that my whole life, so dealing with that doesn't feel new. That just comes from being Black, honestly. It's just another added layer, you know?

Rhonda also discusses challenges related to affecting change:

I sometimes feel, and honestly, I feel like this more with older, White women. They are offended by me doing my job or surprised, and then it becomes like a threat, like a problem. (…) People become intimidated by me. If that is something that happens, and depending on who it is, then I become like the scary Black woman. Now you were the one that was treating me a certain way and you've somehow turned the tables. Now I'm the problem and I didn't do anything.

People of color often experience conditions in the work environment in which they are situated by White colleagues as the sole subject matter expert for a racially marginalized group. Nichole, Amanda, and Rhonda shared experiences in which they were placed in a position to explain, defend, and validate current events and environmental factors. In response to the killing of George Floyd by a White police officer as well as other racial acts of violence during the time of this study, senior leaders at her institution invited Nichole and other employees of color to a special meeting to obtain their input on the college's planned response for faculty and staff. Nichole reiterated to the president and others at that meeting that it wasn't just about faculty and staff because students were concerned as well:

I gave the example of our police officers on our campus sites. None of them are Black or people of color for that matter. Majority White male. I said, "You have to think about our

students, whenever we do return back to campus, because of the influence of media and or their experience with law enforcement. How are we going to prepare for that interaction ahead of time, as opposed to waiting for an incident to happen on one of our campuses with law enforcement and the student? We have to be proactive with training, sensitivity training and things of that nature."

Amanda sat on a search committee for a new senior level position, explaining that some positions were filled by appointment rather than by a standardized interview process, which often leads to the exclusion of people of color in the candidate pool. She recounts a conversation the committee had with the president:

We helped him to understand that there are people of color that have the same skillset. "Just like you went and schmoozed that person, you can schmooze someone of color." But his circle and his environment were not such that he was exposed. It didn't even dawn on him that that's what he was doing until he looked at his cabinet. The majority of them were White males and females.

Rhonda, along with other Black faculty and staff, was asked to attend a town hall at her community college to discuss racial injustice. At the meeting, Rhonda spoke about the conversations that Black parents have with their children:

When you talk to your sons, do you have to give them a speech when they leave the house about where they can ride their bike and not to wear a hood and not to look suspicious? And don't put your earbuds in just in case. Don't go down that street or if they go to a store, they have to get a receipt, even for a pack of gum, because you don't want anybody to think you were stealing. Do you have those conversations with your son? No. No, of course not.

Rhonda stated this was groundbreaking information for her White colleagues, many of whom had never heard it before. She didn't want to talk about it even though others did. She explains:

> It's kind of like PTSD. It's like, you start talking about it with people that don't experience it and it's different. Then you feel like you have a responsibility. I feel like it's my burden that I have to now educate you on what it's like to be Black in America.

Nichole shares a similar sentiment:

> Some days it's exhausting and I said to the President, "Some days we are just tired of being tired and being that voice." But at the end of the day, if you don't, who will? Someone did it before me and I'm here to do it for the next group to follow after me because we're not equally represented in every space, on our Boards or on our executive level management.

For Amanda, Rhonda, and Nichole, their experiences as leaders and followers in their roles as mid-level administrators clearly differ from those of White women. They must work twice as hard to be considered as equally competent as White colleagues. In addition, it is often presumed they will help move their institutions forward and educate peers about the lived experiences of persons of color.

Impact of Covid-19

During data collection for this study, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in stay-at-home orders throughout the United States to prevent further spread of the coronavirus. In this section, participants describe the impact COVID-19 had on their leading and following. Several participants discuss the heightened stress they encountered. Others describe challenges related to maintaining relationships with direct reports and supervisors while working remotely. Others point to some positive outcomes as a result of working from home.

Bella talks about her stress related to the pandemic even before lockdown was put into place:

> We would have 40%, 50% of our staff call off because they were scared. They didn't want to come. They didn't want to be out in public. But we still had students that were coming to campus because nothing was closed yet. We still had a lot of things going on that had to be covered. That was very, very stressful.

For others, health and wellness during the pandemic were a concern. Amanda states, "The challenge that I've been facing during this pandemic, for the most part, is not being able to do a lot of self-care, which I find is challenging for me. Because I sit here."

Some community colleges laid off employees right away and directed deans to tell faculty they were being let go. In addition to managing the stress of the unknown caused by the pandemic and the shut-down order, several deans had to terminate faculty with whom they had built a trusting relationship. Rachel pointed out that as a leader it was important for her to be strong yet vulnerable with her faculty. She shares how she talked to them about it:

> Leading through crisis is challenging. People were scared for their health, for their safety, for their family. I was consistent in letting them know that we would get through this. (…) When I told them that they would have to be laid off, I said, "I don't take this lightly. Some of you are single incomes. You are the sole income source for your families, and it scares me for you. It breaks my heart that I have to put you on halftime or complete unemployment."

Several participants discussed challenges of having to suddenly work remotely and how they adapted in order to maintain relationships with their direct reports. Rhonda points out, "work and personal started to merge a little bit. When you start working from home and then you

realize that you're working all day long, it's like, I had to set some boundaries with my work."

For Marie the reliance on email as the primary form of communication during the pandemic is a challenge:

> I'm a very one-on-one person. I think where I get drained from all of this is the fact that I do really prefer to talk to people in person. (…) Being so email reliant at the moment is draining to me. I try to remember that right now that's how we have to work. (…) I think it's just me learning better to manage my time. (…) But it's also, again, me checking myself too and remembering, okay, if I'm sending a bunch of emails, let's not forget the pleasantries and greetings, keeping as normal as possible.

Louisa said that staying connected with her direct reports and making sure they had what they needed to serve students from home was important to her. She was also concerned that students would not want to return to the college if they could not enroll in face-to-face classes. She explains her concern related to the impact lower enrollment could have on her staff's jobs:

> I also worry about the enrollment and that we have a college to go back to. I might be overreacting but one of my part-timers said, "Well, I don't think we should be doing anything right now. People are just still processing". And I said, "You want a college to come back to? You better start thinking about how we're going to do this". So that's a real worry, I think.

Almost overnight, the stay-at-home order forced community colleges to direct employees to work from home, often without providing support in the way of office phones, computers, copy machines, scanners, or printers. To reassure her supervisor, as well as other senior leaders that work was still being done in an unsupervised remote location, Fern felt the need to report to her supervisor more frequently. She provided data on a weekly basis regarding the number of

students her department was serving even while working remotely, "to make him feel more confident in my leadership, that I'm keeping this team going remotely. All is well." Rachel also talked about the need to respond to inquiries about her team doing their job, "Everyone's checking in like, 'Is everyone good to still work?' I'm like, 'Absolutely, everything's getting done well, no complaints.'"

On a personal note, Nichole points out some positive outcomes of the pandemic for her, "I do enjoy not having to get up at the crack of dawn anymore because I'm not a morning person by any means. I've been able to work out every day. (…) I'm very proud of myself." Also upbeat, Rhonda loves that she was able to keep her job and work from home. From a leading perspective, "I feel like I've had more meetings and talked to more people at my institution than I ever have before since we've been off. (…) It did give us all an opportunity to get out of our comfort zone." At the same time, Rhonda also speaks to her weariness in constantly dealing with the fallout from the pandemic:

> I think as far as work, leading, personal, I'm tired of talking about it. You can't NOT
> think about it in this field, like you can't, because that's all I do is talk about it all day
> long. What are we going to do if…? What's your plan for…? It's like, I can't avoid it.

Participants described the impact COVID-19 on stress levels, their ability to maintain relationships with direct reports and supervisors while working remotely, and some positive outcomes related to working from home. In this section, I have discussed the fourth theme, adverse work environment, which includes career impediments participants encounter, cultural challenges related to how women are treated differently than men in the workplace, the intersection of racial bias with gender bias experienced by women of color, and the impact of Covid-19. In the next section, I discuss the fifth and final theme, navigating the work

environment.

Navigating the Work Environment

To navigate their work environments, participants discussed several courses of action they use to aid in leading and following successfully as mid-level administrators in the community college. These actions are described in the three subthemes that follow. The subthemes include *combating gender stereotypes*, *choosing to stay or leave*, and *managing health and well-being*. These subthemes emerged from the conversations with the participants and are described and illustrated in the following sections.

Combating Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes of women presume they must demonstrate traditional feminine traits such as being friendly, caring, warm, and collaborative in order to successfully lead. Conversely, when women exhibit stereotypical leadership qualities associated with men, such as being assertive, decisive, or self-reliant, they may be perceived as lacking in interpersonal skills and therefore, not considered to be effective leaders. To combat these stereotypes, some participants described intentional actions they take to demonstrate they are pleasant or personable. For example, Fern explains how this strategy has worked for her:

> I try to make it my M.O. That's a terrible term but my approach as a leader is to first of all be really likable and someone that people respect and trust and enjoy being around. (…) I think that's really served me well. I've been able to do that right off the bat. When I change jobs and go into a new organization, I do whatever I can to come across as that person who's just very approachable, likable, and pleasant to be around.

Nichole shared that she still sends "Happy Birthday" or "Happy Hump Day" texts to her staff at her previous position even though she has now moved on to a higher level, "They're very

thankful and say, 'Wow, you still think about us!' Just being personable. (…) That type of

relationship building is important to me." Josie talks about possible consequences if one is not

personable in relation to others, "Some people don't want to be personable or personal and I get

it, I do. But you damn well better be kind or people will turn on you. They'll eat you alive if they

have the chance."

Other participants use a softening technique when directing others. For instance, when

she needs help from colleagues, Bella prefers to put her request in the form of a question:

> Everything I do, I do as a question. I'll approach one of them and I'll say something along
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> the lines of, "I need assistance with this, this, this, and this. Do you think you'll have time
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> to fit it in by such and such a time?" (…) I'm asking them if they can do it without
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> actually telling them to do it. Nine times out of ten, they say, "Oh, sure I can get that." I
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> haven't had anybody say, "Oh no, I can't do that yet."

Other participants no longer feel a need to be personable to combat gender stereotypes.

Marie shared that when she first worked in an administrator role, she was "worried about looking

like that woman who's nudging, the nerd or whatever, some of the negative stereotypes of

women." Now however, she feels differently, "these days I'm just like nah, like we just need to

get stuff done. I don't care if you think I'm annoying."

People are often influenced by traditional gender stereotypes of women leaders based on

their own biased assumptions of how they think women should and should not behave. However,

the more one knows about a particular woman, the less likely one will judge her based on those

biased assumptions. Participants discussed different strategies they use to provide information

about themselves when working with others, which may have diminished the assignment of

traditional gender stereotypes in their experience. For example, Fern approaches other mid-level

administrators with ideas about publishing papers, doing posters, or presenting at a conference and explains the benefits:

> I consider myself to be a fairly creative thinker. So, I'd come to them with what I thought were kind of compelling ideas where it would make them look good and make me look good. "Let's try this because this is one of our goals and this is a different approach. We don't know of anyone else who's doing it. Then all of our bosses will think that this is wonderful".

Lucy described several times when she talked to faculty about her role and how she could support them. For example, she explains what she told faculty when she had to take on the engineering department due to the departure of another dean:

> I don't have any engineering background here at all, but I can truly help you teach the students and help the students understand your concepts and give you a quality student who understands what engineering is. I can take you through that process.

Taking the initiative on Covid-19 related issues, Rachel became the de facto leader of a cross-divisional mid-level administrator workgroup:

> I have 43 pages of notes that I've taken over the course of the last few months. Every Monday, Wednesday, Friday, I set up the Zoom meetings. I send the notes out. It's just been really, really, helpful for everyone and everyone's been very kind and said, man, we really appreciate that you did this (…) So now in the meetings, I'm cheery and I bring energy and facilitate the meetings.

As a mid-level administrator, Nichole believes that she can hear firsthand about creative and innovative ideas to improve the college from students and staff and then share that information with senior leaders. By doing so she says:

You're gaining trust not only with those who report up to you, but also those who you report up to by showing them that at the end of the day, it's about improving processes for our students who are ultimately the customer, but also not losing sight of our internal customers.

Louisa often advocates for students and the services her department provides. For different projects or assignments, she will go to different leaders in the college and say, "if you need a home for this project or if you need a home for this initiative, we can do that." As a result of her leadership, her department always has a good reputation. Louisa shares, "We tried to maintain and grow that reputation so that we were a value added to the college, a value added to the students." The participants in this study use a variety of strategies to combat gender stereotypes related to women leaders in the work environment. Several participants chose strategies of being likeable, pleasant, or personable while others chose strategies to highlight their expertise and competence.

Choosing to Stay or Leave

Navigating the community college environment as a mid-level administrator is not without its challenges. For some participants, choosing to leave their institution is necessary to advance or grow in their careers. Others chose to leave rather than continue to work for difficult supervisors in untenable situations. Still others manage to stay. Amanda shared that it can be frustrating and "you have to bite your tongue or leave." She narrates her story:

My anger got the best of me sometimes. (…) I applied at two other community colleges and was offered both positions. But at the time I was a single parent. (…) I didn't think that would be best for my children to move and I needed that support, you know, my family and friends. (…) I didn't want to uproot my children and move to another city, so I

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turned down the positions and concentrated on getting my doctorate degree.

Lucy knew she would have to explore other options to advance in administration because her institution did not promote people to higher positions from within the college. She explains the difficulty in accepting a dean position at a different community college, "We were well established within the community, all of that kind of thing. It was a very difficult decision, but in order for me to grow in that particular role, that's really what I needed to do."

In a previous position, Rhonda reported to a supervisor who had a poor reputation and a history of mistreating employees. Rhonda shares:

She just gave me a really hard time. I did a good job, but she IS the reason, honestly, that I decided to apply for the position I have now, which is totally kind of out of my comfort zone. I went to a totally different division, and she is kind of the reason. She was the motivation for that.

For Rachel, several factors contributed to leaving a previous institution. The harder she worked, the more that was expected. Rachel feels the core values of the college were not upheld by senior leaders and in her experience, "this place isn't for me because they don't appreciate who I am and want me to change who I am to make other people comfortable." She believes she made the right decision and reflecting on her current institution, Rachel reports, "I'm really enjoying the space where I'm at right now, with a good work life balance. I work for a great institution with wonderful people and I'm just very, very grateful."

During her administrative career Fern has usually spent seven to ten years in each position. This is the typical amount of time it takes for her to implement new procedures and services and develop a highly functioning team, at which point she often makes the decision to leave:

When I start to see my ideas being put in action by the people who decide what things to

focus on, that's been really rewarding. I've seen that happen a couple of times in my

career and that's usually another one of my clues to move on to another organization

because I feel like I've done everything I can.

Thinking about what the future may hold for her, Bella is considering leaving higher education

altogether:

Everybody's looking for good leaders right now and they're looking for good managers.

I'm just looking for something that can be rewarding professionally, but also personally,

and give me time to have more of a work life balance, I guess. I want to make good

money, but I don't necessarily want to work 80 hours a week anymore or 60 hours a week

anymore. If I do start to look, I'll do what I've always done, work and do what I do to the

best of my ability, but I also want to look at having more family time as well.

As illustrated above, navigating the work environment can be problematic for women leaders. In

addition to implementing strategies to combat gender stereotypes, mid-level administrators may

leave their institution because it is no longer a good fit, or they want to take a new position where

they are challenged and can grow as a leader.

Managing Health and Well-being

Covid-19 and the stay-at-home order brought a new kind of stress to the workplace and

participants described different ways of coping to lead more effectively during that time. In the

early days of the pandemic changes were being made almost daily and faculty and students were

inundated with information, often conflicting messaging. To cut down on some of the resulting

confusion and rising anxiety levels, Lucy developed a weekly newsletter about important

changes, and always included some inspirational quotes and words of encouragement. Fern and

Nichole were more intentional with supporting the mental health of their staff. Before the pandemic, Fern focused on the career aspect of each employee with respect to their wellbeing. During the pandemic, she broadened that focus, "Now it's more the whole person like, 'Are you eating well? Are you getting sunshine?', that kind of thing." Also focused on employee wellbeing, Nichole discusses the importance of checking in with her staff:

> Right now, the mental stability of everyone is important. Everybody's home setup is different, and everybody has different types of distractions than you would have in the office. So, it's been important for me just to make it intentional. Reach out to staff and just say, "Just checking in on you."

Lucy describes how mid-level leaders supported the mental health of each other during the height of the stay-at-home order:

> We began to have Deans' meetings three times a week because the information was just flying and changing day to day. Sometimes it was hour to hour. (…) And we just said, let's at least begin to meet and talk about these things (…) but we always started the meetings out, "Okay, how's everybody doing? What's happened in your life? Walks, what things have you seen on your walks?" So, we've done that sort of mental health check, and we've also encouraged one another to take those mental health COVID days. (…) I think that really has helped with handling the crisis, but then also handling our own mental health.

> Finding a way to keep a boundary between work and personal life when working from home has not been easy for some participants. Marie describes her situation:

> We have a culture of meetings at our institution and committees. I wasn't used to really sitting at my desk hours in a day and not moving a lot. I was used to always being busy.

(…) I think it is that having a routine and kind of being disciplined about closing the workday, in a way that you physically leave the campus building. Having a target time for me to end the workday and just not constantly be feeling like everything needs to be addressed.

Amanda takes a similar approach:

I wake up to meetings and responding to emails. I try to remove myself mentally and leave my space and it has been a challenge because I'm working 10 hours to respond. (…) When I'm done, I just want to unwind my head. So, I go, and I try to fix something healthy to eat, but I'm mentally drained.

Unrelated to Covid-19, participants also discussed several strategies to address their own health and well-being. Both Rachel and Nichole take "mental health days." Bella described doing recreational activities such as swimming and bike riding. She also talked about the importance of deep breathing exercises and having someone to whom you can vent and "get it out of your system." Lucy said that she learned to stop taking her work home on the weekends so that she can have a break, "On Fridays at five o'clock, I kind of shut everything down. I monitor my emails, but I try not to answer any of them. I try not to do anything on the weekends." Whether it's being more intentional with checking in on the well-being of employees, keeping boundaries clear between work and home, or taking mental health days, most participants described specific strategies for addressing work-related stress.

In this section, I have discussed the fifth and final theme, navigating the work environment, which consists of three sub-themes: *combating gender stereotypes, choosing to stay or leave* and *managing health and well-being.* In the next chapter, I present a summary of the study, findings related to existing literature, and conclusions of the study. Study limitations,

implications for practitioners and leaders, and recommendations for further research will also be

discussed.

CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore what meaning mid-level women administrators ascribe to the experience of being both a leader and a follower within the community college sector and the perceived meaning of that experience on their own leadership and followership practices. The overarching research question that guided this study was: How do mid-level women administrators make meaning of their identities as both leaders and followers? In this final chapter I first review the key findings of the study. I then discuss the findings through the participants' voices, including some selected data to illustrate common experiences that emerged from the themes. I explore the relationship of findings to prior studies and end the chapter with a discussion of study limitations, implications for practitioners and leaders, and recommendations for further research. I conclude the chapter with a final summary of the study.

Key Findings

Findings from this study revealed five significant themes and their corresponding sub-themes, as discussed in Chapter Four. First, the study provided insight into leadership interactions of mid-level women administrators related to strategies they use to influence, how they do their work, and challenges they encounter when working with faculty. It also provided insight into why the participants work in the community college sector and the responsibility they feel for developing and supporting others. Second, the study revealed followership interactions related to how participants manage relationships with their supervisors and senior leaders and how they provide feedback to them. Third, the study findings demonstrated the impact of education, professional development, and informal learning, along with the influence of mentors on participants' cognitive development as leaders and followers. Fourth, it revealed

the adverse work environment of the community college pertaining to job-related obstacles, cultural challenges associated with how women are treated differently than men, the intersection of racial bias with gender bias experienced by women of color, and the impact of Covid-19. Finally, the study provided insight about how mid-level women administrators navigate their work environment.

I next discuss the participants' experiences as conveyed by the themes. I focus on experiences related to leadership purpose, pursuing and bestowing leadership and followership, and the impact of the community college environment on leading and following from the middle.

Leadership Purpose

Few participants in the study began their careers in higher education with the intention of becoming a community college mid-level administrator. Bella, Fern, Louisa, Rachel, and Rhonda had careers in other fields before transitioning into higher education. Nichole, Josie, and Lucy first worked in four-year institutions. Only Marie and Amanda started their professional journeys in the community college. Yet, all participants have developed a compelling sense of purpose centered on making a positive difference in the lives of community college students through their work with direct reports, faculty, colleagues, and supervisors.

Echoing sentiments of other participants, Nichole described herself as an ambassador for students, removing barriers and "making sure their voice is heard". Reflecting upon her philosophy as a leader, Louisa shared that she believes in "serving communities and the individuals in those communities, especially folks who are the most vulnerable." When talking about helping students to persist and meet their educational goals, Amanda said, "My purpose has been to assist individuals with making sure that you have other options, and you don't have to settle."

When leaders speak about their purpose, they make known what they most value and by doing so, they speak to a principle that is larger than themselves. For the participants in this study, that principle is service to students, which was often represented in their leading actions with faculty when, for example, participants asked them to view situations from the perspective of the student. By connecting faculty to a purpose centered on making a difference in the lives of students and thereby effecting a positive change in the world, mid-level administrators support faculty to discover a greater meaning in their profession.

Participants further indicated that in addition to making a difference in the lives of students, they also view their purpose as making a difference in the lives of employees with whom they work. Over half of the participants indicated that developing the talents and supporting the success of their direct reports, faculty, and other employees is an important component of their leadership practice. Like other participants, Fern felt that "leadership has really turned out to be all about building others." Referring to how she supports her faculty, Rhonda said, "I'm an empowerer."

For many participants, making a difference in the lives of employees was often accomplished through mentoring. Marie and Nichole stressed the importance of mentors in their own lives and believe that through mentoring, they can pass along the benefits they received as mentees and help others to navigate their careers in the community college more easily. Lucy described a two-way mentoring relationship in which she is learning from her Associate Dean as well as teaching her, "She is so technically savvy. She's teaching me about a lot. It really is a nice yin and yang kind of thing. The mentoring really does go back and forth."

The study revealed that without the purpose of serving others, leadership has little meaning for the participants. The mid-level administrators in this study make meaning of their

leading identities not based on any particular administrative position they hold but rather on the difference they can make in the lives of students served by the community college as well as in the lives of direct reports, faculty, and other employees. As a result of connecting to purposes larger than themselves, on which they place a high value, the mid-level administrators in this study give meaning to the experience of being a leader by making a difference in the lives of faculty, staff, and other employees.

Pursuing and Bestowing Leadership and Followership

The theory of leadership identity construction used in the conceptual framework of this study was conductive to interpreting participant experiences and meaning making related to leading and following. As presented in Chapter 2, DeRue & Ashford (2010) propose that identity construction is an integration of the three elements of self-concept formation: individual internalization, relational recognition, and collective endorsement. The findings contribute to a clearer understanding of how both individual internalization and relational recognition contribute to the mid-level administrator's leader identity construction. The study provided insights into how mid-level leaders in administrative roles of directors, associate deans, and deans associate their work most closely with leading followers – faculty and direct reports. When leading their followers, participants described experiences in which they took actions to pursue leadership. These actions often related to affecting change to better serve students. When these actions were supported by faculty and direct reports, individual internalization contributed to the construction of a leader identity for the mid-level administrators.

Rachel described her actions in leading nursing faculty by striving to understand their positions through ongoing dialogue with them. Explaining how she knew her leading actions were supported she said, "Some things they came to recognize and said, 'Wow, that really does

come across in a way that we didn't want.'" Rachel attributed faculty support for her leading

actions to sharing enough information that faculty understood where she was coming from, "I

always try to give examples to support my requests or my ask." This was consistent with other

participants in the study who indicated they pursued support for their actions related to affecting

change by asking faculty to focus on students' point of view or by using data to support their

positions. Further, when participants took actions to pursue leadership, leadership was often

bestowed by followers because participants created buy-in, built relationships, and worked

through others. Thus, for the mid-level administrator, a leader identity is relationally recognized

by faculty, as well as direct reports, who accept the reciprocal role identity as follower.

However, the study also revealed that participants' leading actions were not always

supported by their followers, despite various influencing strategies and attempts to create buy-in,

build relationships and work through others. When leading actions were not supported,

construction of a leader identity was not internalized by participants nor relationally recognized

by faculty or direct reports. Referring to her nursing faculty, Rachel admitted, "Sometimes they

stood strong and said, 'This is the way that it needs to be.'" Lucy felt her leading actions were

not supported at times because the same faculty had been in place for 30 years, "They've had it

their way for so long. They don't think they need any assistance in anything." Some participants

indicated that union-negotiated regulations negatively impacted their ability to obtain support for

leading actions. Rhonda made the point, "As an Associate Dean, I have to walk that fine line of

when am I just going to tell you that your class is going to be online? And after I tell you that, I'll

be waiting for the grievance." As these examples illustrate, when participants took actions to

pursue leadership and their followers did not bestow that leadership upon them, participants were

sometimes discouraged from taking further actions to pursue leadership, thus negatively

impacting the construction of their leader identity.

Participants do not view themselves as operating in a follower role as much as they do a leader role. Following experiences were mostly limited to taking actions to pursue leadership or to persuade upward. Fern described what it was like to see her ideas put into action, "It's been rewarding for me as a leader to be able to manage up or to be able to influence my supervisors, my bosses into implementing initiatives that were important to me." At other times, mid-level administrators find that senior leaders not only support their attempts to assert leadership but depend on them to do so. Rhonda described one such experience in which she wanted senior leaders to provide direction during the pandemic. Instead, she had to determine how to transition faculty from face-to-face instruction to online teaching without the guidance she was looking for:

What's coming from the top? They never want to touch this stuff to be honest, because they don't want to deal with whatever the fallout is going to be. I do think part of that is I came from a place that was very top down, so I'm not used to that. Just make the call. Let's go. I'm going to do whatever you say. I'm at a place that's like, 'Oh, Rhonda, you figure it out. Let us know how that works.' Or 'What did you do? Because you got people to go online. Let's do that. Let's do whatever she did.' (laughter)

When actions to persuade upward were not relationally recognized by senior leaders, construction of a leader identity was not internalized. Bella notes the difficulty she had in persuading her supervisor to consider a different strategic initiative:

Sometimes they listen and sometimes they don't. It's really dependent on the situation. I've had some success with things that really involve operations at the campus, but other things I have not had as much success in. (…) When we were filling out our strategic initiatives for our individual areas, I wanted to do something a little different and he

really was not interested in it. It's like, "Okay, well, it was a thought."

These examples indicate that senior leaders sometimes bestow leadership upon their followers, and at other times, they do not. A topic for future research would be to include the perspective of senior leaders to better understand their roles in relational recognition regarding the construction of a leader identity for administrators leading from the middle. In addition, the third element of self-concept formation, collective endorsement – when the broader social group perceives the individual to be a member of the leader group, was not present in this study. Future studies could also include members of the mid-level administrator's department to determine how collective endorsement contributes to the leadership identity construction process.

In their role as followers, most participants described the positive relationships they had with their supervisors and senior leaders, which increased their confidence to affect change in their institutions. Fern talked about the value senior leaders ascribe to her overall leadership abilities as the reason for putting her on various committees and task forces. Marie mentioned that even though she had the minimum years of experience required for her role, her supervisor, "hired me for a reason." Bella described how she felt when the President called her at home one night to offer a promotion, "It was nice, and it was fun, and it felt really good." Findings from this study suggest that mid-level administrators are affirmed in their identities as leaders when supervisors or other senior leaders bestow leadership by placing them in leading positions or giving them additional leading responsibilities.

The study indicated that for many participants, a positive self-concept as a leader was also reinforced by the support they received from mentors, which increased their confidence. In describing her experience with a really good mentor, Bella stated, "She'd sit and talk to me and give me advice and recommend how to handle certain things and situations." From mentors early

in her career, Rachel said she learned how to treat people, how to lead with confidence, and how to be strong and assert herself no matter who was around the table. Nichole shared, "Having mentors to help me understand how to find my voice and how to be confident in what I know, and my experiences came with time." Nichole also related the impact of mentors, professional development, and validation from others:

> Leading is important to me. Although again, I had to grow into accepting that I'm a leader. I didn't just become a leader because I became a dean. I'm a leader because of the voice that I share at the table. But I had to get comfortable with sharing that voice and that just didn't happen automatically. I think it happens because of mentors that I've had, exposure that I've had, professional development that I've had and others seeing things in me that I didn't see in myself and allowing me the opportunity to grow into the leader that I am today.

For the participants in this study, several of whom transitioned into leading roles later in their careers than others, the journey to mid-level administration was not a direct one. Without the guidance from mentors and support from supervisors and other senior leaders, they would not have successfully navigated their career pathways to leadership, which were non-traditional for most. In addition to guidance and support from mentors and others, participants became agents of their own professional development in determining and executing their leadership training. Participants' education backgrounds include three participants with a doctorate degree, three participants enrolled in a doctorate program during the time of the study, and the remainder holding a master's degree with no plans to seek further education. In addition to formal education, some mid-level administrators sought leadership development through state organizations and informal learning experiences. This finding suggests that administrators in the

middle contribute to the collective leadership capacity of their institutions, seeking and participating in personal and professional opportunities to grow and learn, rather than waiting to be selected by the organization as worthy enough to obtain a terminal degree or attend leadership training.

This study focused on those administrators who work in the middle, who lead while following. It is not surprising that almost all participants made more meaning of their identities as leaders than as followers, given that they spend most of their time with their direct reports, faculty, and staff and far less time with their supervisors or senior leaders. Participants' experiences related more to leading down than to leading up (following) or even leading across with their colleagues. Nonetheless, some participants astutely recognized the interrelatedness of following to leading. Rachel shared how her followers impact her own identity as a follower:

> It is just as important to be a good follower as it is to be a good leader. I know the challenges that I have as a leader, when I have someone who asks too many questions and I wish they were more independent thinkers, or I have somebody who is just always pushing the envelope. I try not to be that person for any of my people who I report to.

Echoing Rachel's comments about leaders and followers, Marie stated, "I think there's certainly a need for both and I try to be reliable for both." Nichole pointed out the need to surround herself with people who can guide her when she needs to be led, "As a leader, that does not mean that you have to know everything, but you need to know how to seek out that help and that information in order to make the final decision."

Some participants viewed followership primarily from the lens of their direct reports and faculty who report to them. They did not see themselves as followers unless it was to question and persuade upward. Others, such as Bella, did not see themselves in the follower role at all:

I don't look at them as my bosses. I look at them as my equals. Their position may be a little higher, but we still have to go together to get this done and we have to work together. I don't see it as following. I see it as working together for a common goal.

The challenges of simultaneously leading while following were recognized by several participants. As a mid-level administrator, Marie pointed out the burden of responsibility not only for the department she leads but the entire organization, "You're responsible for one unit but you also have to advise someone else and that balance between taking orders and also having to guide someone, so they don't make a mistake or the whole unit doesn't make a mistake." Similarly, Lucy talked about building up the skills of younger leaders while working with seasoned leaders who may be set in their ways or who need some direction as well, "You have to bring along those who are much younger than you are, but then you also have to respect those who are ahead of you and help them out in some ways." Rachel discussed the challenge of exercising her agency as a leader:

> It really is a difficult place to be because in one regard, people are looking at you for all the answers, right? Your direct reports. But I'm also waiting for people above me to kind of give me a little bit of guidance too. And there's that balance between doing something and asking for forgiveness or permission, because I don't want to ask my boss every time I have an idea.

These experiences provide insight into leading while following. For the mid-level administrators in this study, the influence of their supervisors and senior leaders was often in the background as they strived to make a difference through their leading actions with followers. Sometimes that influence precluded them from taking their desired leading actions with direct reports or faculty. As previously discussed, the women in this study exhibited agency in their intentional seeking of

degrees and professional leadership training. However, if personal agency involves the individual capacity and authority to act independently and make free choices, along with the responsibility to do so, do mid-level leaders really have agency in their roles as leaders and followers? While the participants in this study clearly demonstrate ability and intentionality in their leading and following experiences, they often described specific strategies employed to induce others to action, suggesting their agency is limited.

Impact of the Community College Environment on Leading and Following

In her theory of gendered organizations, Acker (1990) argued that because gender is an integral process of organizations, any analysis requires an intentional examination of how gender norms are upheld or suspended by existing organizational practices. The community college is a less esteemed sector in terms of the labor market pyramid in post-secondary institutions (Anderson, Mattley, Conley, & Koonce, 2014) and yet the women in this study continue to make an intentional choice to work there. In line with their purpose of making a difference in the lives of others, the participants subscribe to the belief that community colleges are welcoming to all students, faculty, and staff, regardless of background and ability (Meier, 2018), and therefore success for all must follow. Still, it is this very environment that often impedes their ability to thrive and experience positive leading and following interactions as mid-level administrators. Through the constructive lens of gendered organizational theory, the study revealed an undercurrent of implicit bias in the community college which damages the belief that women are as naturally fit for roles as leaders as their male counterparts. As I will discuss in more detail, this environment is made even more problematic due to the intersectionality of race with gender for women of color.

When discussing their work as leaders and followers, participants described work

environments in which they feel pressure to prove their capabilities time and again in order to be viewed equally as competent as others. In some examples, participants put in more time, took on other positions, or supervised more people. Bella explained why she worked long hours, "Right now, I'm doing things that are a level or two above mine. I'm an Associate Dean. The last person that did what I'm doing at our campus was a Vice President." During a period of reorganization, Louisa took on two more roles in addition to the one she was currently doing. In reflecting upon her current position, Rhonda exclaimed, "I have the most faculty and I have so many, I don't even know how many I have."

In other examples, participants felt obligated to go the extra mile to prove their competence, whether it was responding to voicemails, additional committee work, or spearheading initiatives. Marie shares the expectations she thought were suggested in certain employee perks and how she handled requests before the start of her day:

> They provided a cell phone stipend in your pay implying that, especially with smartphones, you'll be reachable at all times whether or not you're at a conference, whether or not it's the evening. (…) I just made sure before I did my hour-long commute that I responded and didn't let it go too long.

Nichole feels compelled to assist with problem-solving, "I'm definitely that person that says, 'I see an issue. I think I have some possible solutions, or can I be a part of your committee to help address that issue?'" Rhonda brings forward processes for streamlining across several departments and explains that she must be the one to make it happen, "If I bring it, I gotta be ready to do the work because once it's on me, it's on me."

The participants' experiences illustrate that women are critically assessed on their achievement rather than their potential. As a result, many feel pressured to put in long hours and

take on additional roles and responsibilities to prove they are competent in their leadership positions. Not everyone felt the same, as Rachel pointed out, "I just feel I have to work hard because it's my responsibility. I don't feel I've had to work harder because I am a female." For women of color, implicit bias in the community college may have more to do with race than with gender. In talking about working with White faculty, Rhonda affirmed, "I am used to always having to prove myself, always. It doesn't feel that different. It's just like, it's just the bias. It's the thing I gotta make you get past so we can move on".

Implicit bias related to gender stereotypes of women leaders is reinforced by actions that are observed and retained whereas information that contradicts this kind of bias is often overlooked and disregarded (Williams & Dempsey, 2014). The findings of this study show that the work of mid-level women leaders continues to be undermined by prevailing beliefs in the superiority of men as leaders. In the leading and following experiences of the participants in this study, gender and racial inequalities are often indirect and unspoken. Bella shared that while her community college has both men and women in senior management, she finds that men are given more leading opportunities. She referred to a colleague who was overlooked for a position even though she had 15 years of experience:

> But instead of even considering her, which they have not done, they gave it to another guy who was asking for it. He's got like five different caps on and they're all senior level caps and none of them, none of them are being done well.

Rhonda talked about how women are often underestimated, especially Black women. In preparation for her first one-on-one meeting with the president of her college, she sent him an agenda along with questions that she planned to ask so that he could think about them in advance. She expressed disappointment at his response:

He just couldn't stop talking about it. (…) That's another kind of White man thing. I think that they don't expect it. So, when you do stuff like that, it's like, "Oh." But it's like, "Come on. I'm a woman. We're organized. We have our stuff together." I don't even know why this is still shocking.

Bias against women often translates into conflict among women due to a gendered environment that supports hard work only if others are not threatened by it. Nichole was discouraged when she learned that some women on her interview committee decided she should not have the job because of her personal situation, "There's nothing I could do about it, but I was passed over for that job for those reasons, not because I couldn't do the job. That was disheartening for me, that other women would do that for whatever reason."

Women may also be perceived as threatening when they are assertive in their leadership approach. Rhonda shared an experience in which she had to go into a classroom and direct the instructor as well as the students to put on their face masks as required in order to be on campus.

The one woman in the class said, "Well, excuse me. And how you doin today?" "I'm fine, but I'll be better when you put your mask on." Nobody else had a problem. The only woman in the room had something to say. Everybody else just put the mask on. That is regular. It just happens a lot.

On reflecting about challenges women face related to stereotypes of how leaders look and sound, Fern pointed out:

A man walks in the room and there's no work to be done there. He has everyone's attention off the bat. (…) You can't walk in the room as a female leader and be a leader first. You've got to do all this housekeeping business to get people squared away and ready to accept you as that leader.

This study revealed the community college environment to be one that sustains a gendered culture in which women leaders must constantly navigate stereotypes that women are not the best fit for leadership roles. This institutional environment supports a norm of critically assessing women on their achievement rather than their potential, leading women to prove themselves over and over again in order to be viewed equally as competent as men in their institutions. In addition, when women are subjected to an organizational culture supportive of gender stereotyping, they may criticize other women or decline to support them. Thus, gender and racial inequalities are constructed and maintained in the community college through integrated practices, processes, actions, and meanings as argued in Acker's (2006) theory of gendered organizations.

Feminist standpoint theory (Acker, 1990) was also central to understanding the accounts of the women mid-level administrators in this study. Their experiences and meaning making of their identity construction as leaders and followers in the middle brought to light the inequities and social injustices that affect their lives. Through the lens of feminist standpoint theory, this study revealed how community colleges promote gender stereotypes for women in leadership and followership roles and the implicit bias in favor of men as leaders. Despite a gendered institutional culture that is detrimental to the construction of leading and following identities for women, this study found that many participants work to contest the negative stereotypes that they are not fit for leadership. When engaged in leading and following interactions, the participants in this study combined their competence with positive social behaviors. For example, Rachel often advocates for others while assisting senior leaders to better communicate their message:

I'm pretty good at reading the room and listening to the questions that are being asked

and knowing what the questions are that are not being asked. I've taken it upon myself then to kind of be a facilitator to say to the person who's higher than me, "help me understand" and kind of being a voice for the people around the table who feel intimidated or who are unsure of themselves.

Fern explained her approach when first working with faculty or colleagues, "One step at a time as I met people, I made sure to leave them better off than I found them. If there was anything I could do to be helpful or just put an emphasis on pleasantness." Nichole prides herself on keeping everyone organized and moving forward, "I'm detail oriented. I always have a to-do list. I'm always following up and sending out friendly reminders. Or I'm thinking ahead of "This is coming down the line. We need to start getting things ready and organized."

Another way that participants challenge negative stereotypes and ensure their talents do not fade into the backdrop of the community college is to emphasize a particular expertise. For example, in putting together the accreditation report, Lucy worked with every college group – assessment, curriculum, facilities, the Board of Trustees. She explains, "I think the work that I did with the HLC accreditation and writing that report, gathering all of that information has also helped me build a stronger network within those levels around the college." Rhonda leveraged her technology expertise with other administrators, "There's a lot of technology things that I bring to the group and I'm able to support why we should do X, Y, Z. That seems to be appreciated." Based upon her role within the college, Marie often makes it a point via email or when speaking at a meeting to say, "Here's the way we may need to do it because of the policy or accreditation standard that comes into play, or that there's another angle to this."

Here again, agency might be posed as a possible explanation for the resiliency demonstrated by these participants and their abilities to successfully navigate the gendered

institutional environment of the community college. On one hand, I could say they hold a limited agency, one that is restricted by the wider institutional and social conditions in which they work. On the other hand, the concept of agency offers hope and the possibility for engaging with and overturning fundamental and established inequalities. An area for future research would be an examination of how mid-level women administrators can activate agency to influence their work, given the administrative and academic constraints of leading and following from the middle of the community college.

This study showed that race adds another dimension to the community college culture that makes it more challenging for women of color to navigate than for White women. Amanda shared that she was often called upon to assist with changing policies and procedures. Even so, she uses these opportunities to ensure the group is focused on the needs of students:

> It's ironic that when I sit around the table and look at who I'm looking at, they don't realize that I'm the only one, but I do. I don't make it all about who I am as a Black female, but I try to make it about who I am as an individual for students, because students are not sitting around the table.

In speaking about racial injustice and the burden placed on people of color to constantly explain what it's like to be Black in America, Rhonda explained that she often doesn't deal with the microaggressions that she experiences. She internalizes much of the trauma that comes with the stress, "I can't deal with it when it happens all the time, because I would never get anything done. I would never move forward. (…) I just, I recognize it and I kind of move on."

The experiences of Amanda, Rhonda, and Nichole demonstrate how they are subjected to racial microaggressions and racism present in their institutional environments, resulting in ongoing physical, mental, and emotional fatigue. To cope with this type of stress, they report

engaging in self-care activities related to exercise and healthy eating. Another positive coping mechanism they described was focusing on their purpose of making a difference in the lives of students. At other times however, these mid-level administrators described working harder to prove others wrong or shared that they suppressed or internalized their feelings related to experiencing racism. For Amanda, Rhonda, and Nichole, making meaning of the identities as leaders and followers in their institutions is impacted first by racism, then by gender.

In this study, I utilized a theoretical framework that considered the interrelationships between feminist standpoint theory, gendered organizational theory, and leadership identity construction theory. By critically examining the experiences of the participants through this lens, I have come to better understand that identity construction is a complicated and multidimensional concept, related to the way an individual perceives herself with respect to the environment and influenced by social interactions with those with whom she works. Leadership identity construction for women is greatly impacted by the gendered nature of the community college as well as the undercurrent of implicit racial and gender bias that constrain or enable individual women to internalize positive leader and follower identities as mid-level administrators.

Summary

The overarching research question that guided this study was: How do mid-level women administrators make meaning of their identities as both leaders and followers? The mid-level women administrators in this study make meaning of their identities as both leaders and followers beginning with the core purpose of making a difference in the lives of others. Making a difference first starts with the lives of students who attend their community colleges. Participants clearly articulated their belief in the mission of the community college and affirmed their role in

that mission to ensure students persist and obtain a certificate, a degree, or transfer to a four-year institution. Second, this core purpose extends to making a difference in the lives of others – the participants' direct reports, faculty, and other employees. As leaders, participants believe they have a great responsibility to ensure those who report up to them are supported and successful in their various roles. This higher purpose helps the participants clarify what they most value in their positions as mid-level administrators and provide an inner strength from which to draw upon when faced with challenges, issues, or significant adversity.

The mid-level women administrators in this study make meaning of their identities as leaders by pursuing leading actions with their followers, who may choose to bestow leadership upon them or not. Participants feel that leadership is more likely bestowed upon them when they use influencing strategies, create buy-in, build relationships, and work through others to affect change. In addition, the relationship between mid-level women administrators and their supervisors also impacts how they make meaning of their identities as leaders. Participants were more likely to experience increased confidence and therefore were more motivated to pursue leading actions when supervisors promoted them into leading positions or gave them additional leading responsibilities. Finally, mentors also had a significant positive impact on how participants in this study came to view themselves as leaders. Through teaching, coaching, and mentoring provided by their mentors, participants better understood how to steer their careers, find their leadership voice, and identify strengths and competencies needed to be successful in their roles as mid-level administrators.

The mid-level women administrators in this study make meaning of their identities as followers by pursuing actions of leading from their leaders, who, like followers, may choose to bestow leadership upon them or not. Most participants in this study make meaning of their

identities more as leaders than as followers. Participants gave thought to their roles as followers when fulfilling directives or when reacting to senior leader actions with which they did not agree. Participants' identities as leaders are complicated by their identities as followers and the simultaneous roles they play in leading both their followers and their leaders.

For the mid-level women administrators in this study, the undercurrent of implicit leadership bias in the institutional environment places unwarranted pressure on the construction of their identities as leaders and followers that would not be present if women were believed to be naturally fit for leadership roles. The participants described gendered experiences that required constant maneuvering to outflank stereotypes which support the belief that women are not suited for leadership success. For the women in this study, making meaning of their identities as both leaders and followers often involved working the stereotypes to their advantage by combining positive social actions with their competencies. For women of color, this study showed that the everyday experience of gender bias for women administrators is second to that of racial bias. Giving voice to their narratives is important for understanding an alternative view of the impact of racism on the experiences of mid-level women administrators of color in the community college.

Findings Related to the Literature

The results of this study revealed the essence of the lived experiences of women in mid-level administrative positions in the community college. I interpreted the lived experiences of the mid-level administrators as they shared their narratives through interviews. The following section describes how the findings of the study relate to existing literature. The findings are organized by the participants' experiences related to leadership purpose, pursuing and bestowing leadership and followership, and the impact of the community college environment on leading

and following.

Leadership Purpose

Apart from Marie and Amanda, who started their educational careers in the community college, all participants had experiences of leading and following in various organizations before obtaining roles as directors, associate/assistant deans, and deans in their current institutions. Nevertheless, all participants have developed a compelling sense of purpose centered on making a difference in the lives of the students served by the community colleges in which they work. In addition, participants in this study felt that supporting the success of their direct reports and faculty, as well as developing the talents of others through mentoring, is an important aspect of being a leader.

The findings of Cejda (2008), Fochtman (2011), and Fine (2009) related to the importance of the community college mission, a duty to mentoring others, and wanting to make a positive contribution to the world all support my study. The community college was the institution of choice for women leaders because they were committed to the mission it serves (Cejda, 2008). Fochtman (2011) found that women leaders felt it was their calling to pay it forward and mentor the next generation, while the women leaders in Fine's (2009) study believed that leadership has no purpose without service.

Pursuing and Bestowing Leadership and Followership

The findings of previous literature support my research regarding the importance of mentorship, professional development, and learning on the job for women leaders. Comparable to what Cejda (2008) found, the participants in the current study discussed professional advice and guidance they received from their mentors as well as personal and emotional support. The participants emphasized the impact of mentorship on their development as leaders and viewed

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their mentors as role models and supporters as well as teachers. Cejda (2008), found that women chief academic officers (CAO) serving in the community college noted that a mentor or role model helped them develop the skills necessary to be a successful CAO.

Participants in this study shared how professional development and learning on the job influenced their cognitive development as leaders and followers. They also spoke about the importance of advanced degrees, leadership training from state and national organizations, and peer learning groups to supporting the growth and development of their leadership skills and competencies. Similarly, Cejda (2008) found that formal professional development activities for CAO success centered upon earning degrees, attending conferences, seminars, and workshops, and informal professional development included reading and observation.

Participants in the current study often spoke of being pushed or encouraged into leadership roles by their mentors or supervisors. Participants also related experiences in which they discovered how to manage expectations, improved their interpersonal skills, and learned from their mistakes while working as midlevel leaders. In the same way, Eddy (2012) found that encouragement by mentors or senior leaders to seek advancement often served as a catalyst for presidents, vice presidents, and deans to move into a leadership position. Eddy (2012) also found that most presidents, vice presidents, and deans honed their leadership skills through learning on the job.

Impact of the Community College Environment on Leading and Following

Participants in this study talked about an adverse work environment in which they had to confront career impediments and navigate gender stereotypes. Some reported taking on additional job responsibilities with no additional pay and others described unrealistic work hours and several talked about other women who felt threatened by their work. Some participants

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shared experiences of being talked over by men and having their ideas discounted and others described modifications they make to their communication style to be accepted as the leader. The findings of Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) supported the findings of this study as they found that women leaders experience numerous professional barriers and obstacles related to leading. These included salary inequality, work-life conflict, women failing to help other women or preventing their promotion, and control of women's voices.

Participants in this study described experiences of racial bias related to the professional barriers Black women leaders face along with the double jeopardy of being both a woman and a person of color. In the current study, one African American participant reported she had to do the work of a White direct report who refused to do the work assigned to him. Two African American participants reported working to overcome the stereotype of an angry or scary Black woman. All three participants shared experiences in which they were expected to contribute to the education of their White colleagues about the lived experiences of persons of color. Clayborne and Hamrick's (2007) findings were consistent with this study as they found that the bind from the intersection of gender and race resulted in African American women leaders having to work harder than White women leaders to be recognized as successful.

Study Limitations

There are four primary limitations to this study. First, participants were selected from the Upper Midwest region of the United States. It is possible that regional differences in culture could impact the leadership experiences of mid-level women administrators in other parts of the United States. Further, no participants lived or worked outside of the United States. It is also likely that national differences in culture could affect how women experience leading and following in mid-level administrative positions.

Second, this study included both Caucasian and African American women. The primary focus of this study was on gender, but I summarized findings specific to African American participants in Chapter 4. I found there were differences in how African American participants made meaning of leading and following. It is also possible that other women of color may have different experiences and perspectives of leading and following.

Third, participants were selected from those who responded to an e-mailed invitation to participate. These participants were willing to discuss their experiences with leading and following in mid-level administrative positions in community colleges. It is possible that some women who did not respond to the invitation may have felt uncomfortable in sharing their experiences or may have preferred to keep their experiences private. These women may have a different experience or perspective on leading and following than women who participated in the study.

Fourth, this study utilized two in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews to collect data. The first interview focused on participants' early career experiences with leading and following. The second interview centered on the details of participants' current experiences as a leader and follower and reflection on the meaning that all leading and following experiences held for them. The inclusion of a third interview may have allowed participants to make more intellectual and emotional connections between their leading and following experiences in the community college, possibly revealing additional aspects of how participants have come to view their leadership and followership practices over time.

Recommendations for Further Research

Findings from this study illuminate several areas for future research. This study used data collected from interviews with ten mid-level women administrators at community colleges in the

Upper Midwest in order to explore the meaning they ascribe to the experience of being both a leader and a follower. First, future research may benefit from investigating how mid-level administrator identities as leaders and followers shape the context of the organizational culture over time. Alternatively, an important question is whether leader and follower identities evolve to match the organizational culture of the institution or whether incongruity between leader and follower identities and the institutional environment cause a mid-level administrator to exit.

Second, a qualitative study including voices of senior-level administrators might offer alternative perspectives on leading and following from the middle within the community college. Including the perspective of senior leaders to better understand their roles in relational recognition of a leader identity for administrators in the middle may confirm my findings and add to the extant research.

Third, an area for future research would be an examination of agency and how mid-level administrators activate it to influence their work, given the administrative and academic constraints of leading and following from the middle of the community college. Studying whether and how agency is employed by women as well as men may lead to a deeper understanding of how agency contributes to leadership identity construction.

Fourth, researchers should consider the multiple identities that leaders bring to their leadership and followership roles beyond gender and race. Taking an intersectional theoretical approach to leading and following from the middle might lead to different findings and interpretations. In addition, more research is needed with LGBTQ mid-level administrators as well as other administrators with non-majority identities, particularly in the community college sector where they have not been studied previously.

Fifth, although this study focuses on community college mid-level women administrators,

a comparative study examining women mid-level administrators in different higher education institutional settings might shed light on similarities and differences based on institutional type. This research is needed within a variety of understudied institutional types such as community colleges in other parts of the United States, historically Black colleges and universities, minority-serving institutions, and women's colleges.

Implications for Practice

Findings from this study point to several implications for higher education practice. The remainder of this section describes three key areas in which community colleges can focus: leadership development, implicit cultural and organizational gender bias, and cultural competence.

First, when planning leadership development, community colleges must pay attention to how senior-level administrators can more effectively engage with mid-level administrators to co-construct leadership and its outcomes. Most institutions approach leadership development from a leader-centric perspective and the underlying assumption that the purpose of such training is solely to advance administrators to more senior levels (DeRue & Myers, 2014). The findings from my study suggest that some mid-level administrators support senior leaders by identifying problems along with solutions, providing feedback, and presenting new ideas for projects or change initiatives – all with the aim of partnering to attain mutual goals. Leadership development must include a focus on how mid-level and senior-level administrators can partner in ways that enhance leadership outcomes for all rather than providing it to the privileged few deemed worthy of succession or promotion.

Second, community colleges must recognize the existence of implicit cultural and organizational gender bias and implement actions to address it. The first step to recognition is to

interrogate how implicit gender bias is embedded within the institution's normal routines and practices. Acker (2006) argued that an organizational gendered substructure is created in the inequalities that are built into job design, wage determination, distribution of decision-making and supervisory power, and explicit and implicit rules for behavior at work. In the community college, this gendered substructure is established in procedures that place unwarranted performance pressure on women, the lack of organizational practices that support women's lives, and a prevalence of gendered roles and responsibilities. Once everyone is aware of how implicit gender bias manifests in the organization, faculty, staff, students, and administrators will become less predisposed to its effects. Following upon identification of areas for change, strategies to implement and manage such change must be implemented.

Third, faculty, staff and administrators must engage in cultural competence to recognize the existence of racism in the workplace and address its effects on the psychological well-being, self-concept, and interpersonal relationships of people of color (Young & Anderson, 2018). Community colleges can begin by educating all personnel on the meaning, identification, and impact of microaggressions. They then need to support faculty, staff, and administrators with organizational and individual strategies and skills for the reduction and removal of microaggressions. This is an ongoing process in which the institution must also engage the community in diversity, equity, and inclusion education to improve organizational climate over time.

Summary

This qualitative study explored the phenomenon of leading and following by mid-level women administrators in the community college sector. The study utilized in-depth interviews to unearth the subjective understanding the women bring to their lived experiences of leading and

following. Findings of this study concluded that mid-level women administrators lead and follow from a core purpose of making a difference in the lives of their students, faculty, and staff. They make meaning of their identities more as leaders than as followers by utilizing influencing strategies, creating buy-in, building relationships, and working through others to affect change.

Mid-level women administrators in this study experienced increased confidence when supervisors promoted them into leading positions or gave them additional leading responsibilities. In addition, mentors had a significant positive impact on how participants in this study came to view themselves as leaders. Finally, the undercurrent of implicit leadership bias related to both gender and race, places unwarranted pressure on the construction of identities as leaders and followers for women mid-level administrators in the community college.

While much has been written about women in higher education, less research has addressed mid-level women administrators, specifically within community colleges. Through this study, I sought to give voice to women who do not find themselves well represented in the literature. Research such as this study is needed for women and their work to be valued and for future professionals to become engaged in mid-level leadership and followership in the community college. There is a need to identify and understand the personal, professional, and organizational challenges faced by these administrators as well as the significant contributions they make when leading and following in their institutions. By better understanding the unique challenges of women, community college administrators can work toward ensuring that community college environments, which have long been organized based on patriarchal hierarchies, are diverse, welcoming, and inclusive.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

To Do:
- ✓ Review protocol and answer participants' questions.
- ✓ Note that the participant give consent before beginning the interview
- ✓ Choose a pseudonym

Interview I

The purpose of this study is to better understand how mid-level women administrators, defined as directors, assistant/associate deans, and deans, make sense of their roles as leaders and followers in the community college. I am especially interested in understanding your experiences as you lived them and as you are currently living them through stories, anecdotes, and narratives. To facilitate the interview, I have developed an interview protocol for Interview I will ask the following:

- First, I will ask you to tell me about yourself. During this segment, I will ask you basic background questions related to your age, racial/ethnic identity, socioeconomic status, and familial composition.

- Second, I will ask you to reflect and discuss your career in higher education, work history and your current work here at this institution.

- Third, I will ask you to tell me about your role as a mid-level administrator and your areas of responsibility here at the college.

Interview 1

Questions
Background questions relations to age, racial/ethnic identity, socioeconomic status, and familial composition.
Tell me about your career in higher education.
How did you come to work at this institution?
Tell me about your role as a mid-level administrator and your areas of responsibility here at the college.

<u>Interview II</u>

Building upon your answers from the first interview and to assist the researcher with a clear understanding of your experiences, the following four segments of questions will take place:

- Tell me about any projects in which you and your direct reports are currently engaged.

- Describe what it's like to work with your direct supervisor and her/her/their colleagues or supervisors.

- Based on your responses in both interviews and reflecting upon your experiences, tell me how you understand leading and following in your life.

Interview 2

Questions
Tell me about any projects in which you and your direct reports are currently engaged. Describe what it's like to lead them in these initiatives.
What's it like as a mid-level leader to work with your direct supervisor and her/his/their colleagues or supervisors?
Given what you've said about your life before becoming an administrator and what you've said about your work now, what meaning does leading and following have for you?

Research Participant Information and Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a research project. Researchers are required to provide a consent form to inform you about the study, to convey that participation is voluntary, to explain risks and benefits of participation, and to empower you to make an informed decision. You should feel free to ask the researchers any questions you may have.

Study Title: Leading While Following: Mid-Level Women Administrators in the Community College
Researcher: Jodie Beckley
Department and Institution: Department of Educational Administration – Michigan State University
Address and Contact Information: beckleyj@msu.edu

1. PURPOSE OF RESEARCH:
You are being asked to participate in a research study on women's leadership experiences in higher education. You have been identified as a potential participant because you are a woman working at a higher education institution in a leadership role. Jodie Beckley, a doctoral candidate in the Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education program at MSU, is conducting this study as part of her dissertation research supervised by Professor Marilyn Amey, Chairperson of the Department of Educational Administration at Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan. Please read the information contained in this document carefully before agreeing to participate in this research.

2. WHAT YOU WILL DO:
Your participation in this study consists of two recorded interviews of 90 minutes in length for each interview. Your participation is voluntary, meaning that there is no legal or formal obligation to participate. Your name will not be used. Only the person conducting the interview will have access to your name, as masking techniques will be applied to protect your identity in the transcript and final study. Your consent allows the interview to be recorded and gives the researcher permission to store the audio recordings in a password protected computer. Once the audio recording is transcribed, the recording will be destroyed, and the researcher will work only with the transcribed record.

3. POTENTIAL BENEFITS:
You will not directly benefit from your participation in this study. However, your participation in this study may contribute to the understanding of how women administrators perceive their leader identities.
*No financial compensation, course credit, or other forms of compensation are being offered to the participant.

4. POTENTIAL RISKS:
The potential risks of participating in this study are minimal. There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study.

5. PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY:
Information about you will be kept confidential to the maximum extent allowable by law. Only the researcher will have access to your identity and your name will not be used. While the results of this study may be presented in the classroom, the identities of all research participants will remain anonymous.
Audio recordings are required in this project. Please mark "yes" or no" below and initial:

I agree to allow audiotaping/videotaping of the interview. Yes   No

Initials_____

6. YOUR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE, SAY NO, OR WITHDRAW
Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You have the right to say no. You may change your mind at any time and withdraw. You may choose not to answer specific questions or to stop participating at any time. You will be told of any significant findings that develop during the course of the study that may influence your willingness to continue to participate in the research.

7. COSTS AND COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THE STUDY:
You will not receive money or any other form of compensation for participating in this study.

8. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS: - not applicable
9. THE RIGHT TO GET HELP IF INJURED: - not applicable
10. CONFLICT OF INTEREST: - non associated

11. CONTACT INFORMATION FOR QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS
If you have any questions about this study, such as scientific issues, how to do any part of it, or to report an injury, please contact the researcher or her professor:
        Jodie Beckley beckleyj@msu.edu
        Marilyn Amey   amey@msu.edu

If you have any questions about your role and rights as a research participant or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Director of MSU's Human Research Protection Programs, Kristen Burt, J.D., at 517-884-6020, FAX 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@ora.msu.edu, or regular mail at: 4000 Collins Rd., Suite 123, East Lansing, MI 48910.

DOCUMENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT.
Your signature below means that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

_____ _____
Signature   Date

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