

MOVING UP: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE CAREER EXPERIENCES
OF SENIOR WOMEN LEADERS IN NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

A Dissertation
by
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Abstract

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With expected vacancies created by impending mass retirements, community colleges may hold great opportunities for women who aspire to senior leadership. Women, given their preferences for the community college setting as well as their strong representation among students, faculty, and staff, are poised to fill the leadership void. Using narrative methodology, this qualitative study explored the lived experiences of women in pipeline positions at North Carolina community colleges. Seven women who work in senior leadership positions were interviewed using a semi-structured format. Because all seven participants successfully navigated the advancement process, determining how and why they were successful was a focus in data analysis.

The major themes that emerged from data analysis were: formative experiences, perceived barriers, success strategies, and gender influences. Findings indicated that there are significant early personal, professional, and institutional experiences that impact the career upward mobility of women. Findings also illustrated that women face unique and specific

barriers in both their personal and professional lives as they seek advancement. Nevertheless, they have developed multiple strategies and skills to help them be successful women senior leaders. These findings, in combination with additional research findings, may have implications for leadership development programs, the agencies that administer them, support networks, and community colleges, particularly in the manner in which the challenges of multiple role expectations are addressed.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the important women in my life; most importantly I dedicate this to my mother, who provided a great example of the value of hard work and believed in the boundless opportunities provided through knowledge and education, but never had the opportunity to fully benefit from her own academic potential due to the circumstances of her time. To my two beautiful daughters, Adrienne and Allayah, who continue to amaze me with their intellect and determination. I see in them the great possibilities for women.

I also dedicate this work to the important men in my life. First to my husband Charles, who has provided steady encouragement and gentle prodding since the very beginning of this journey. Next, I dedicate this work to my son, Michael and my brother Ron, neither of whom ever lost confidence in my ability to complete this journey. And finally, to my dad who would have been so proud. This work is for all of us. Thank you for seeing me through.

*“Every truly great accomplishment is at first impossible”
Unknown*

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Researchers have long predicted a community college leadership crisis as more and more senior leaders approach retirement (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2006; Duree, 2008; Evelyn, 2001; Hockaday & Puryear, 2000; Little & Rubin, 2002; O'Banion, 2006; Shultz, 2001; Wiesman & Vaughan, 2007). In their report commissioned by the Kellogg Foundation, Hockaday and Puryear (2000) concluded that at least 600 of the nation's approximately 1,200 community college presidents may retire by 2010. Similarly, Amey and VanDerLinden (2002b) found that four-fifths of incumbent community college presidents were planning to retire by 2011. The authors of a 2012 AACC report noted that three-fourths of current presidents surveyed planned to retire in the next ten years, and asserted, "The result is a looming leadership gap unlike anything community colleges have ever seen in their history" (AACC, 2012, p. 1). In the last two years, nearly 200 community college leaders have left their college presidencies (AACC, 2012). While the retirement rate may have slowed somewhat in a depressed economy, community college senior leaders are still retiring at a high rate, putting college administrators under pressure to find well-prepared replacements, and creating increased opportunities for women (Kuharski, 2009).

While women are making strides in securing senior leadership positions in community colleges—33% of presidencies are held by women in community colleges as compared to 23% in 4-year institutions—other disparities exist (Touchton, Musil, & Campbell, 2008). For example, women are also underrepresented in positions that

traditionally lead to senior leadership (AACC, 2012). Also, even though approximately twelve million students each year attend community colleges, with over half of the enrollments being women, this demographic is not reflected in the leadership (AACC, 2010).

Demographics at North Carolina community colleges reflect these national statistics. According to the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) data office (2014), 261,818 students were enrolled in the system's degree granting curriculum programs; 62% were women and 38% were men (Ralls, 2014). The NCCCS workforce had over 12,000 employees that included 312 senior administrators. Of these senior administrators, 66% were male and 34% were female, a ratio of almost 2:1 (NCCCS, 2014).

Why is it that women do not advance to senior leadership at the same rate as men? For women who compete with men for senior leadership positions, the often unchallenged traditional standards of effective leadership have proved to be a problem. For example, women have suffered from situations such as: narrowly defined leader image, gender stereotypes, double standards, exclusion from informal networks, negative attitudes, and lack of work-related assistance or mentoring (Chliwniak, 1997; Growe & Montgomery, 2007; Munford & Rumball, 2000).

Why My Focus on Women in Leadership

My personal story prompted me to focus on experiences of women in leadership in North Carolina community colleges and mirrors the challenges raised by the literature. I am the vice president of a North Carolina community college. In discussions with peers from across the state of North Carolina about professional development and career advancement, I

have come to understand that my personal experiences of professional development and mentoring are not typical of women who take on higher levels of leadership responsibility within the NCCCS.

I am a member of the “I’m every woman” generation. The phrase comes from the 1980’s rhythm and blues song made famous by Chaka Kahn (and later, Whitney Houston) epitomizing the woman who can do it all: higher education, a husband and children, and a professional job that pays well and includes leadership responsibilities. As the mother of three children, I returned to school to pursue an advanced degree. Simultaneously, I cared for my elderly mother and worked full time.

In 2003, I made the decision to move from my faculty position into an administrative leadership position. There were no obvious paths to prepare for this decision, so I began by trying to find a mentor. The first two people I asked declined; neither felt adequately prepared for this role and neither believed they had time for the task. After a few more unsuccessful attempts to find a mentor, a senior faculty member agreed to “try to help me out.” The relationship was informal, but my association with her paid huge dividends towards my success. She suggested that I join specific influential college committees and volunteer for difficult assignments. Although challenging, this four-to-five year period was instrumental in developing my career as a senior administrator. It was my mentor who also suggested I start working towards a doctoral degree and apply to attend the community college statewide leadership program. I took her advice and heeded both.

Reflecting on my own experiences and talking with other women, I know firsthand the personal challenges women face. These challenges are made more difficult for me by an inconsistent promotion process within my institution. Most of the women with whom I spoke do not feel they have been given opportunities to advance, nor do they feel supported by their institution.

While the development of future leaders in NCCCS is supported through the North Carolina Community College Leadership Program, there is no clear path for career advancement at the local level in most community colleges in North Carolina. I was unaware of this program until the near completion of my sixth year of employment with the community college. I had no previous knowledge or understanding of the application or successful selection process. I applied three times and received no explanation as to why my application was declined twice before eventually being selected. I found this experience to be frustrating and discouraging. I believe this negative experience could have been avoided had there been more professional and institutional support in place.

My focus is to document the experiences of women who have successfully advanced to senior leadership positions in the NCCCS for the purpose of modeling a path for successful advancement of women leaders in community colleges. An additional value of this research is to provide useful and specific information to those charged with designing and delivering career development programs for women leaders in community colleges.

Context: Leadership and Gender

Over the past several decades there have been numerous studies on effective leadership (Bennis, 2007; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Chliwniak, 1997; Collins, 2001; Kotter, 1982, 1988; Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Many researchers have provided insight about the characteristics of effective leaders. For example, Chliwniak (1997) says that effective leaders help articulate a vision for an organization, set standards of performance for workers, and create focus and direction. A related characteristic is the ability to communicate a vision effectively (Clifford & Cavanagh, 1985). Commitment and passion are other leadership qualities identified in several studies: good leaders care deeply about their work and the people with whom they work (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Peters & Austin, 1985). Additional words and phrases describing effective leadership traits include: risk taking, self-confidence, good interpersonal skills, intelligence, and courage (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Lipman-Blumen, 1996; Northouse, 2001).

Except for vision, passion, and focus, there is little overlap in the common attributes of an effective leader as identified in research. According to Bolman and Deal (2008), “In general, there is no one characteristic that is universal; however, vision and focus show up most often” (p. 314). While some research suggests that leadership styles are gender based (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Gilligan, 1998), research does not support the idea that men are better leaders than women (Catalyst, 2009; Chliwniak, 1997; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Growe & Montgomery, 2007). Effective leadership depends more on behavior than gender (Chliwniak, 1997). Traditional scholars of leadership theory tend to view leaders as

genderless (Birnbaum, 1992; Growe, Schmersahl, Perry & Henry, 2001; Mintzberg & Westley, 1992).

Overcoming Barriers

Numerous studies have shown that women in higher education senior leadership face both professional and personal barriers (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Chliwniak, 1997; Tiao, 2006; Touchton, Musil & Campbell, 2008). To successfully advance in this field, women must be able to overcome these barriers (Tiao, 2006). One effective strategy for overcoming both professional and personal barriers that women administrators face is finding a mentor (Tiao, 2006). Mentoring is defined as a dynamic, reciprocal relationship in a work environment between a more experienced individual (mentor) and a younger or newer employee (mentee) (Lanna-Lipton, 2007). The relationship benefits both (Dunbar & Kinnersley, 2011; Healy & DeStefano, 1997; Lanna-Lipton, 2007). According to Johnson (2009), educational and emotional support systems are more critical for women than men in attaining job status and increasing earnings; a mentoring relationship can provide a powerful tool to overcome professional and personal barriers (Tiao, 2006).

Despite these findings, women remain underrepresented in higher education senior leadership. Increasing our understanding of how women advance to senior leadership and the factors that impact their success, may support and inform the development of new constructs for accelerated leadership advancement.

Statement of the Problem

Many experts are predicting a future leadership gap in all areas of higher education (Skinner, 2011), or even an imminent crisis (Appadurai, 2009; Eckman, 2010) as a large number of leaders reach retirement. Due to this potential crisis in college leadership, higher education administrators are under pressure to find well-prepared replacements. As a result, now is the time for a deliberate exploration of the career experiences of women in senior leadership positions. The findings may help to prepare more women to take advantage of future vacancies. Several trends in higher education leadership point to the potential opportunities for women to advance: aging college presidents (AACC, 2012; American Council on Education [ACE], 2007; Shultz, 2001), current status of women as college presidents, and their increased degree attainment and number in the workforce.

Trends. The seventh edition of the college presidents study commissioned by the American Council on Education (ACE), and conducted every five years since 1986, provides insight into current and future challenges related to college presidencies (Cook & Kim, 2012). The seventh edition is based on responses from 1,622 college and university presidents that cover a wide range of issues including demographics, previous experience, and educational backgrounds.

One notable trend from this study is the aging of college presidents. In 1986, just 13% were over the age of 60; in 2011, 58% moved into that age bracket. The average age of presidents in the survey was 61, higher by one year than in the 2006 study (Cook & Kim, 2012). This is another indication of the coming wave of mass retirements.

A possible reason for this trend was cited as the “increasing complexity of leading a postsecondary institution” (p. 12). Cook and Kim (2012) observed that as colleges and universities faced a growing number of internal and external challenges members of governing boards and search committees were increasingly likely to look for leaders with several years of experience, as well as leaders with life and career experiences beyond higher education. In 1986, only 40% of sitting college presidents also held a presidency or vice presidency in their previous job; in 2011, 54% of current presidents were also presidents in their previous positions. This trend suggests the importance of prior experience as a senior leader—whether as a president, vice president, chief academic officer or other positions considered to be a pipeline to the presidency, and further supports moving up through the ranks as an advancement strategy within higher education (Weisman & Vaughan, 2006). Having prior senior leadership experience continues to be an important prerequisite for advancement in higher education. As a result people are entering the presidency later in their careers, which subsequently impacts retirement patterns.

Although ascending through the ranks continues to be the preferred route to senior leadership, trends reflect additional possibilities and are gaining acceptance. An increasing number of higher education senior leaders have professional experiences outside of higher education (Cook & Kim, 2012). This trend could potentially result in fewer opportunities for those who may seek to advance by moving up through the ranks to become senior leaders. Additionally, this trend threatens the traditional route to senior leadership. Weisman and Vaughan (2006) concluded from their study of the community college presidency that “the

most traveled pathway to the presidency is through the academic pipeline” (p. 5); however, according to Cook and Kim (2012), this may not hold true, as “there are developing alternatives to the traditionally rigid paths for those who want to advance as community college administrators” (Riggs, 2009, p. 1). Cook and Kim (2012) note the average length of service for college presidents has fallen from eight-and-a-half years in 2006 to seven in 2011.

These data provide evidence that presidents are older, the pathway to community college senior leadership is changing, and presidents are serving fewer years. It would greatly benefit women aspiring to senior leadership positions to better understand the career paths, barriers, and success strategies of women who currently serve as community college senior leaders so they may have opportunities to rise above the current trends.

Status of women as college presidents. Another trend noted by Cook and Kim (2012) was the previous rise and current leveling off of the number of women college presidents. From 1986 to 2006, the proportion of women presidents of all colleges and universities more than doubled, from 10% to 23% (ACE, 2007). The most recent data showed the percentage of female presidents continued to increase, but more slowly, with a slight (3%) increase since 2006 (23% to 26%) as noted by Cook and Kim (2012). Despite significant gains, the rate of change has slowed dramatically, and the number of women in higher education senior leadership is still low compared to that of men (Cook & Kim, 2012).

Women in the workforce and degree attainment. The phenomenon of gender inequality in higher education persists, despite trends that show the increasing influx and dominance of women in the workforce and earning advanced degrees. In a report from

researchers at the Bureau of Labor Statistics (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013), women are 46% of the current workforce. The number of working women is projected to reach 92 million by 2050 based on a 0.7% annual growth rate. Women in 2050 are expected to comprise nearly 48% of the entire workforce (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013).

For the first time ever, the number of women earning advanced degrees is higher than that of men. Women in the United States earned 60.6% of all master's degrees and 52.3% of all doctoral degrees (Catalyst, 2011). By 2018, women are projected to earn 62.0% of master's degrees and 54.9% of doctorate degrees (NCES, 2009).

The number of women who advance to the highest levels of college leadership, however, is relatively low compared to the number of all women in full-time faculty and senior administrative positions (ACE, 2007; Ryu, 2010). Women comprise nearly 50% of all college employees, but they tend to be employed in lower and middle management (NCES, 2010). Of the 1.11 million faculty members in higher education, 42.1% are female, 38.4% of all full-time faculty are women, and 46.6% of all part-time faculty are women (NCES, 2010). In community colleges, nearly 42% of chief academic officers are women, as are 45% of the faculty (Shultz, 2006). These rates are holding steady and in some cases, increasing (Riggs, 2009). While these rates demonstrate an adequate career path for women becoming senior leaders in higher education even with increases in workforce participation, educational attainment, and sufficient numbers of positions available, women still face barriers and remain disproportionately represented as college senior administrators (AACC, 2000; ACE, 2007; Amey & Twombly, 2001; Cook & Kim, 2012; King & Gomez, 2008; Shultz, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

Tiao (2006) used a qualitative phenomenological study to interview nine senior women leaders at four-year universities to better understand what it takes for women to succeed as cabinet-level higher education administrators. Several major themes emerged from this research, including: effective leadership strategies, earning your place at the table, tests and trials, maintaining focus and political savvy, changing rules and gender as a two-edged sword. The results revealed that in order to succeed as top-level executives, women must consistently over-achieve, maintain good relationships with others, expand themselves constantly, and utilize strong mentor relationships (Tiao, 2006). Tiao (2006) cautioned that her research focused on a small sample of senior women at four-year institutions and the findings and outcomes could not be generalized about women serving in other types of higher education or to all women in higher education administration. She suggested additional studies be done that included senior women leaders at other types of institutions of higher education that could add to our understanding these women's experiences. Conducting research by observing and interviewing women senior leaders currently serving in the NCCCS will provide more information to better understand the experiences that have helped and hindered their advancement, the personal and professional barriers they faced, as well as the strategies they used to advance. My study, while similar in design to Tiao (2006), only included current women senior leaders at North Carolina community colleges since the purpose of the study was to inquire into and offer a basis for understanding the lived experiences of these women senior leaders in community colleges and not at four year

universities. Further, the study was intended to explore the perceived barriers these women may have encountered and the strategies they employed to succeed and overcome challenges.

The following research questions were designed to explore the lived experiences, challenges, coping strategies, and gender influences on the career decisions of senior women administrators:

1. What are the personal, professional, and institutional experiences that contribute to the upward mobility of women as they advance into senior level positions in North Carolina community colleges?
2. What do women perceive as the barriers to upward mobility within their institutions?
3. What coping strategies or skills have women senior leaders employed to overcome these barriers?
4. In what ways does gender influence career advancement for senior level women in North Carolina community colleges?

Methodology

Hermeneutic phenomenology was used as the research method for this study in order to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of women who have advanced to community college senior leadership positions. This methodology allows for an interpretive paradigm and places the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Maxwell, 2005).

Phenomenological research is designed to develop a rich or dense description of the phenomenon being investigated. It allows the researcher the opportunity to explore, in-depth,

the experiences of the participants using multiple methods of data collection, including interviews, observations, and documents (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). It is ideal for research that addresses complex problems within intersecting layers of gender, class, and power (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, 2011; Merriam & Simpson, 2000). The rich and detailed descriptions that are generated through phenomenological research assist the researcher in gaining a better understanding of the multiple realities experienced by the study's participants. Hermeneutic phenomenology goes further and allows for the exploration of participant experiences with interpretation by the researcher based on the researcher's theoretical and personal knowledge (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). Hermeneutic phenomenology enables access to a phenomenon that is often subconscious and provides a means of interpreting participants' experiences of their personal learning journeys (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007) such as early life experiences that have impacted participants' career development.

Women who have advanced to senior-level administrative positions have done so through several layers of both complex personal circumstances and organizational structures. I am not interested solely in a description of these women's experiences; I also want to understand the feelings, thoughts, concerns, and worries they had during the process of attaining their current position, as well as their outlook for future advancement. Hermeneutic phenomenological research methodology, discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, provides the means to explore the journeys of these women as they advanced to senior leadership positions.

Significance of the Study

This study was significant for several reasons. As previously noted, there is a potential deficit of qualified senior administrators due to an anticipated large number of retirements among senior level administrators and presidents in NCCCS, as well as at community colleges in the rest of the nation. In 2004, the board of the North Carolina Association of Community College Presidents (NCACCP) commissioned a study to assess the anticipated attrition rate of personnel. The researchers reported that 52% of community college presidents had 25 or more of service. In other words, over half of North Carolina community college presidents are eligible to retire now or in the near future. Moreover, researchers have argued that the NCCCS still has equity problems, particularly in the low representation of women in senior leadership positions (Ballentine, 2000; Burke-Leatherwood, 2007; Lesslie, 1998; Smith, 2003; Vanhook-Morrissey, 2003). This was demonstrated by Lesslie (1998), who conducted two sets of interviews, 15 years apart, to determine whether progress had been made regarding the advancement of women, and salary disparities between men and women in similar positions in the NCCCS. The findings showed that more women were obtaining senior level positions in student services, human resources, and financial services; however, presidencies and vice presidencies were unlikely to be held by women. Further, women were still not earning equal pay with men (Lesslie, 1998). Other issues that surfaced were a lack of proper mentoring, a lack of networking opportunities, and gender discrimination. Lesslie (1998) concluded that women continue to experience inequality in promotions to senior-level administrative positions in the NCCCS.

Due to current conditions that offer greater opportunities for women combined with women's low representation in senior leadership, there is a need for studies focusing specifically on the female experience additional research would provide new knowledge that will benefit aspiring leaders and motivate institutions to develop leadership programs. A strategy for program development may be valuable in recruiting, retaining, and ensuring the success of more women who desire to be senior administrators, and may help change institutional structures and practices that keep barriers in place.

Second, the majority of the research on this phenomenon is dated and focuses primarily on women presidents at four-year colleges and universities (Barnett-Johnson, 2009; Latimore, 2008; Williams & Clowney, 2007). Additional research on the lived experiences of women in senior leadership in community colleges is needed so a more complete picture can be constructed.

Third, a review of the literature revealed that many of the previous studies on women in higher education focused primarily on presidents. AACC researcher, Christopher Shultz, (2001) pointed out that it is not just presidents who plan to retire, but senior officers as well. He further noted that impending retirements affect not only current leadership but also the "leadership pipeline" (p. 5). Amey and VanDerLinden (2002b) identified six pipeline positions that lead to community college presidencies: chief academic officer, senior student affairs officer, chief financial officer, continuing education director, occupational or vocational education director, and business and industry liaison. Building on this awareness, this study will include presidents as well as the larger pool of pipeline positions.

Riggs (2009) wrote, “Because most studies done on community college leadership focus primarily on the college presidency, they fall short of helping us better understand why so few women are entering the community college administrative career path, or why many choose to exit this career path early” (p. 1). Riggs stated that there are several important areas that need to be explored regarding how community colleges can improve both the quantity and quality of available leaders at all levels. These include developing a better understanding of ways to support promising administrators as they move through the leadership pipeline; developing alternatives to the traditionally rigid career paths for those who want to advance as community college administrators; and improving organizational practices for selecting administrators (Riggs, 2009).

My research addressed both concerns raised by Riggs (2009). By examining a wider sample of subjects, this study provided a deeper understanding of the experiences of women senior leaders. The resulting data may support new administrators by suggesting strategies to overcome obstacles as they seek to advance. It may also provide insight as to why some women seek advancement and others do not. This would provide useful information to help those charged with developing pathways to senior leadership at community colleges. Examining both the positive and negative experiences of women in pipeline positions will increase understanding of their journey to senior leadership.

Finally, according to the literature, mentoring is an important experience in the career advancement for women in higher education (Brown, 2002); yet, for several reasons, mentors and role models in academic environments are rare. Reasons noted for this shortage include

lack of women in top leadership positions, hesitation of male leaders to mentor women, the unwillingness of women to assist other women, and lack of time and energy needed for mentoring (Tiao, 2006; Latimore, 2008; Munford & Rumball, 2000). Therefore, learning more about mentoring and other positive and negative experiences of women who have navigated this path will allow current and aspiring women leaders to learn from these examples.

Definitions

1. *Barrier*: A difficult situation or condition that hinders progress or the achievement of an objective (Tiao, 2006).
2. *Community college*: A 2-year institution of higher learning that is accredited to offer a comprehensive range of certificates, associate degrees, transfer credits, vocational programs, and programs for lifelong learners (AACC, 2008).
3. *Gender inequity*: The disproportionate ratio of women to men, favoring men, in an organization (Chliwniak, 1997).
4. *Gender theory*: The theory that suggests men and women have differences in leadership styles based on gender (Desjardins, 1989; Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992).
5. *Liberal feminist theory*: Liberal feminist theory is based on the idea that women and men have the same capacities and potentials; it is only a lack of opportunities, resources, and sexism that confine women and men to prescribed gender roles (Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Bass, 1999; Lorber, 2001).

6. *Representative bureaucracy*: A representative bureaucracy is one in which an individual leader advocates for the interests and desires of those she or he represents (Moser, 2003).
7. *Senior leadership*: In the NCCCS, the following are considered senior leadership positions: president, vice president, assistant or associate vice president, chief academic officer, and student services senior administrator or dean (NCCCS, 2012).

Summary

Presented next in Chapter 2, is a review of the relevant literature on the historical and socio-cultural contexts for women in higher education, the intersection of gender and leadership styles, barriers to success for women leaders in higher education, and strategies used by women senior leaders to overcome barriers and succeed. Chapter 3 explains the methodology and procedures used to conduct the research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The gender gap of women senior administrators in North Carolina community colleges is a microcosm of prevailing issues of gender inequity in senior leadership in higher education in the United States. Women are disproportionately represented in every area of leadership, particularly in higher education senior leadership positions, as they have historically faced institutional and societal barriers (Chliwniak, 1997; Touchton et al., 2008). The limited research on women employed as senior leaders in community colleges creates a knowledge gap about their experiences. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to inquire into and offer a basis for understanding the lived experiences of women who currently serve as senior leaders in North Carolina Community Colleges. Further, the study is intended to explore the perceived barriers these women may have encountered and the strategies they employed to succeed and overcome challenges.

This chapter includes a review of the relevant literature on this topic and is specifically comprised of the following sections; a historical and socio-cultural context of women in higher education, the evolution of community colleges in the United States, representative bureaucracy, leadership styles and gender, perceived barriers that women face as they aspire to senior leadership positions, and the strategies they employ to succeed.

Historical and Socio-cultural Context

Socio-cultural norms during the U.S. colonial period—from the time of the first European settlers until independence from England—required women to be daughters, wives, and mothers (Rudolph, 1968). Providing girls with an education was viewed as wrong; most

men considered educated women offensive. According to Rudolph, “Her place was in the home, where man had assigned her a number of useful functions,” (p. 308) like cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children. Women were also excluded from political, economic, and social activities and were limited to domestic responsibilities such as housekeeping, childbearing, sewing, and cooking (Chliwniak, 1997; Nidiffer, 2002). College education for women in the colonial period was not taken seriously since females could never become ministers, statesmen, physicians, or lawyers (Nidiffer, 2001, 2002, 2003; Thelin, 2004).

The American higher education system was originally designed to provide educational opportunities for men. Harvard College, the first American higher education institution, was founded in 1636, and patterned after the European university model (Rudolph, 1968). The entire higher education system remained completely male until 1855 (Chliwniak, 1997) when Oberlin College in Ohio became the first higher education institution to accept women (Chliwniak, 1997).

During the 18th century, more than 20 colleges were founded, but admission to these was limited to men (Lucas, 1996). Although women began to demand their right to higher education, their efforts were largely ignored. A few small women’s colleges, as well as some private junior colleges were started during this period. The primary purpose of these colleges was to train teachers (Blount, 1998). The two-year college transfer concept originated when William Rainey Harper, then president of the University of Chicago, agreed to accept students’ first two years of college work towards a bachelor’s degree. This agreement

allowed two-year college students to receive a general and vocational education, then transfer to a university for more specialized upper-level training (Ratcliff, 1994). Gillett-Karam (1994) concluded that Harper likely believed that women should have a separate learning institution from men. Harper, and others of his time, believed that women were better suited for domestic roles that did not require a four-year degree and thought that women would not be successful in higher education (Kuharski, 2009).

Women continued to fight for their right to higher education. By 1900, 60% of colleges allowed women as undergraduates (Ratcliff, 1994). Although the fight for women's rights resulted in significant gains in accessing higher education, inequities related to representation were still prevalent. For example, male students could choose to major in a variety of fields such as political science, economics, law, and medicine; most women were limited to teacher education, home economics, and social work (Nidiffer, 2001, 2003; Rudolph, 1968). Women were further restricted in pursuing higher education by those who claimed that a college education harmed American society because fewer college women married (Nidiffer, 2001). If women with higher education degrees did marry, many had fewer children, and more divorced (Nidiffer, 2001, 2003; Thelin, 2004). Higher education for women was considered a threat to the American values of home and family (Thelin, 2004).

As more women attended college, more opportunities to work as deans and faculty became available, particularly in the fields of teaching, home economics, and social work. College enrollment numbers for women fluctuated with historical events. For example, with many men enlisting in the armed services during World War II, more women were able to

enroll. However, when the war ended and the GI Bill became law in 1944, women were still allowed to enroll, but men were given enrollment priority (Chliwniak, 1997). Women who were employees of institutions of higher education routinely lost their jobs to men returning from war, but men in similar jobs were retained (Chliwniak, 1997).

Although anti-discrimination laws and regulations such the *Civil Rights Act of 1964* and *Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972* protected women's access to higher education, these laws were not routinely enforced. Similarly, efforts to protest against employment discrimination were almost non-existent until Bernice Sandler of the Women's Equity Action League filed the first charge of sex discrimination in 1979 (Chliwniak, 1997). It was during this time that women began to outnumber men as undergraduate and graduate students (Chliwniak, 1997), and also made significant gains as faculty, staff, and administrators in institutions of higher education (Glazer-Raymo, 2002).

Today, women can be found in every aspect and discipline of higher education as students, staff, faculty, and administrators. Since the 1980s, women have become the majority recipients of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees (Catalyst, 2009). While there is no disputing that the academic status of women today is vastly improved from 200 years ago, women still have not reached parity in higher education senior leadership. In the decade 2000 to 2010, women occupied just 23% of all college presidencies, 45% of all college senior administrator positions, 38% of all college chief academic officer positions, 36% of all college dean positions, and 49% of all college vice-presidencies (ACE, 2010).

The public community college is relatively new in the larger field of higher education, especially when compared to four-year institutions. More research is therefore available on women in four-year college and university settings. Hutcheson (1999) argued that the community college system should be studied separately. Hutcheson (1999) concluded that there was “no generally accepted national research agenda for community colleges, no consistently funded national agency charged with studying the institution as a unique entity, and few educational researchers directing their attention toward them” (p. 318). This proposed study will add to the literature that examines the unique experiences of women in senior leadership at community colleges.

U.S. Community Colleges

American community colleges are unique in that they provide adult high school education and general education transfer classes, as well as industrial and technical training for individuals who are beyond the age of traditional high school students (Ratcliff, 1994). These two-year institutions may be known by various names (community college, junior college, or technical college) and are distinct educational systems known to adapt to local needs in higher education (Ratcliff, 1994).

Joliet Junior College opened in 1901 as the nation’s first public junior college. However, two-year colleges became accepted as a higher education alternative and started to grow significantly in the 1960s. The majority of all such colleges were founded between 1960 and 1970 (Ratcliff, 1994). This 10-year span—when nearly one community college per week was built in the U.S.—is referred to as the Community College Movement (AACC,

1997). Now, more than 1,655 community colleges have been established across the country, enrolling a third (34.5%) of all higher education students in the United States (AACC, 2012). More than 100 million people have attended community colleges since their inception (Kuharski, 2009).

The growth of community colleges has not been steady, but has coincided with significant events and periods in history that resulted in greater demand for higher education (Ballentine, 2000). For example, one major expansion in community college enrollment occurred when the GI Bill paid for returning soldiers' college tuition after World War II (Ricketts, 2009). Another was, as previously mentioned, between 1960 and 1970. During that decade, community colleges had record enrollments for women in response to changing social and economic times (Kane & Rouse, 1999).

Women participating in the civil rights movement during the 1960s were instrumental in making higher education socially acceptable for women. Females had previously been discouraged from attending college and were sometimes subjected to quotas that limited their participation in higher education (Ballentine, 2000). The judicial successes of the Civil Rights Movement, which legally ended workplace and pay discrimination against minorities, inspired feminist groups to push for legislation and other legal remedies to improve gender inequalities in the workplace (Blount, 1998). In 1972, Title IX of the Education Amendment Act was passed, prohibiting sex discrimination in education programs and activities that receive federal assistance. This legislation also led to greater numbers of women choosing higher education (Blount, 1998). These milestone events led to greater numbers of women

wanting more education and entering the workforce. Due to their affordability, variety in course offerings, and flexible scheduling, community colleges were often the college of choice for women seeking higher education.

In 2010, women represented 57% of the students enrolled at community colleges (AACC, 2011). Currently, over four million women attend the nation's two-year public colleges. This is more than the number of undergraduate women attending either public or private four-year colleges or universities (AACC, 2011).

In North Carolina, 48% of all undergraduates attend a community college and 62% of those students are female (Completion Arch, 2012; Ralls, 2014). Community college administrators have continued to respond favorably to female students who seek greater opportunities. Nationally, gender disparities still exist in the senior leadership at community colleges and do not reflect the historical acceptance of women by these institutions (Touchton et al., 2008).

In a study of women and community college senior leadership, the number of women holding administrative positions was not proportional to the number of female students or female faculty (Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002a). Inequity was most prevalent in the office of the president, where women made up only 28% of all community college presidents (Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002a). A more recent study found that women occupied 33% of all community college presidencies, a 5% increase in nine years (Schmitz, 2011). While the increase of female presidents was dramatic between 1994 and 2002 (22%), the more recent growth of only 5% in almost a decade indicates that progress has stagnated (Schmitz, 2011).

Therefore, despite the tremendous growth of community colleges and the increased numbers of women as students and workers, women have not realized significant gains in academic fields and leadership positions traditionally dominated by men (Krause, 2009).

Representative Bureaucracy

Data on college presidents show that more women advance to senior leadership at community colleges than in four-year colleges (AACC, 2010). As previously stated, women make up 33% of all community college presidencies compared to 28% at four year colleges (ACE, 2012). This higher percentage of women presidents at community colleges demonstrates that community college administrators continue to support the advancement of women in higher education. As community college enrollments, faculty, and staff are significantly comprised of minorities and females, leadership that is more reflective of the overall college population may be beneficial (Krause, 2009; Kuharski, 2009). For example, female presidents of community colleges may be more inclined to make decisions that reflect the values of the majority of students (Krause, 2009). This assertion is supported by the theory of representative bureaucracy.

According to the theory of representative bureaucracy, students would benefit from having more women holding positions of senior leadership (Krause, 2009) because they tend to translate their personal values into college policy and make decisions that reflect the values and interests of the majority (Moser, 2003). The theory of representative bureaucracy is foundational to this research because it demonstrates that women as community college

senior leaders are more likely to represent the values of the majority of community college stakeholders, who are also women.

Krause (2009) posited that representation is an important symbol and may represent equality of opportunity. The absence of representation of leadership by certain groups of people (i.e., women) might be interpreted as barriers to their advancement. Individuals in specific social groups, such as women and minorities, may have perspectives based on their life experiences that differ significantly from other groups, such as White males (Smith, Vogelgesang, & Avey, 2009; Tiao, 2006). Adherents of the theory of representative bureaucracy support leadership that represents the racial, ethnic and gender composition of the majority population (Krause, 2009).

Advocates of representative bureaucracy theory identify two levels of representation: active and passive (Krantz, 1976; Kim, 1994; Moser, 2003; Meir & Nicholson-Crotty, 2006). According to Moser (2003), active/responsible representation occurs when an administrator advocates the interests and desires of the whole (or some segment) of the represented population. An example of active representation on a community college campus is the decision to invest in on-campus childcare. Women, as traditional primary caregivers, may have an immediate understanding and empathy for students who are parents of young children and may be more favorably disposed to any decision related to childcare assistance (Chliwniak, 1997).

Passive representation is more closely related to the individual, the degree to which s/he reflects the total population, and may have a positive or negative impact on students.

Again, a female college president could be considered positively as a role model for women who aspire to leadership or negatively as a token who reminds women of their limited access to senior management (Moser, 2003).

Women have life experiences that shape their views and interpretations of the world that are often different than those of men (Helgesen, 1990; Krause, 2009). Leaders that represent the demographic makeup of the population served—in this case women leaders reflecting the majority female student population of community colleges—may highly impact student success. Despite a narrowing gender gap, disparities exist in the number of women in senior leadership positions and the difficulties women encounter in their career upward mobility still remain. Women continue to face barriers and are disproportionately represented as senior leaders in community colleges.

Feminist Leadership

Why study feminist leadership? There is general agreement that women historically have more barriers to becoming leaders than do men (Eagly & Johannsen-Schmidt, 2001). However, much of existing literature on leadership has been created by men and studied men in leadership roles. This research study is intended to add to the body of knowledge on leadership with a feminist accent. According to liberal feminist thought, a subset of feminist theory, men and women are equal in their abilities (Avolio, 2007; Chliwniak, 1997; Gilligan, 1998; Jagger, 1983, Kark, 2004). Avolio (2007) posited that cultural worldviews, gender socialization, and different life experiences create gender inequity in the workplace, resulting in fewer opportunities for women to advance to senior leadership. More research could

heighten workplace awareness and broaden general understanding of feminist attributes that are beneficial and important components of effective leadership, ultimately helping expand opportunities for women aspiring to senior leadership.

Principles of feminist leadership include social justice and advocating for women and other minorities who are marginalized (Barton, 2006). Feminist leadership is built on a foundation of shared power, empowerment of others and authenticity (hooks, 1994). The model of 'feminist leadership', constructed by Astin and Leland (1991), was based on their qualitative research with 77 women engaged in feminist social change during the 1960s and 1970s. This model emphasized a type of leadership in which participants worked together to achieve shared aspirations (Astin & Leland, 1991). By constructing a model of feminist leadership within feminist theory and testing it with the real-life experiences of women, Astin and Leland (1991) developed a "promising conceptual model for the study of leadership" (p. 11).

The feminist leadership model was based on three theoretical feminist issues. First was the social construction of reality: beliefs about the concept of leadership were prejudiced by the way people viewed all aspects of their collective lives. Second was interdependence: recognizing the interconnections of people made it possible to view leadership "as a process of collective effort rather than as something one person does in a vacuum" (Astin & Leland, 1991, p. 8). Third was power as energy, not control: understanding that power in leadership is not about being in command over others but involving others to share in power (Astin & Leland, 1991, p. 8).

Astin and Leland's (1991) model is distinguished from other more recent perspectives on feminist leadership for which similar constructs were used because later models placed greater emphasis on the leader acting as a feminist—meaning a recognition of intentional oppression by one group over another and the need for ongoing actions for social justice. Feminist psychologists have argued for more research in this area (Chinn, 2004; Madden, 2005). For example, according to Chinn (2004), “although theories and models on feminism and leadership exist, there has been little study of the intersection of the two. The literature on feminist leadership is scant. Few have defined it and fewer still have researched it” (p. 1).

Leadership Crisis and Opportunities for Women

Data from the 2006 *Career and Lifestyle Survey* of 545 community college presidents showed that the majority were white (88%), male (71%), and older than in previous surveys - 57% were 58 years old or older (Weisman & Vaughan, 2006). Additionally, 62% had been community college presidents for more than five years (Weisman & Vaughan, 2006). These data aligned closely with that from the 2011 ACE survey, and showed that 87% of community college presidents were white and 67% were male. Between 2006 and 2011, the percentage of college presidents who were 61 or older increased from 49% to 58%. Community college presidents were slightly younger, at 59 years of age, with 57% having served in their positions for an average of eight-and-a-half years (Weisman & Vaughan, 2006).

Historically, White males occupied the position of community college presidency, as well as dominated its hiring body: the college's board of trustees (Weisman & Vaughan,

2006). According to Porat (1991), board members have a specific set of expectations concerning the traits associated with being a college president. They are reluctant to accept candidates who do not fit the typical profile, which includes being white and male.

In the early 1970s, more women gained membership on community college boards, which led to board members hiring more female presidents (Vaughan & Weisman, & Puryear, 1998). In 1987, 29% of community college trustees were female (Whitmore, 1987). In 1995, that number increased to 33% (Vaughan & Weisman, & Puryear, 1998). The number of female community college presidents increased dramatically between the 1980's and 1990's—from 7% to 22%—no doubt due in large measure to the increased number of female trustees (Weisman & Vaughan, 2006).

Today, 33% of community college presidents are female, compared to 29% in 2006 (AACC, 2013). According to Krause (2009), although women hold one-third of all community college presidencies, their numbers are still not proportional to the percentage of female community college students (58%) or female faculty (41%). This problem also exists in four-year institutions. In 2014, the North Carolina Community College System enrolled 261,818 students in its degree granting programs. Of this number, 62% were female and 38% were male (Ralls, 2014). Thirteen percent of the institutions had a female president, significantly underrepresenting the percentage of women enrolled as students. Unfortunately, the factors influencing the career advancement of women to senior leadership—whether in two-year or four-year institutions—have not been systematically studied (VanDerLinden, 2004).

Lesslie (1998) identified and examined factors affecting the advancement of women senior administrators in the NCCCS to determine if progress had been made by women seeking to attain these roles. Fifteen female senior administrators were selected for the study, representing all three regions of the state and institutions of varying sizes. Findings indicated that even though more women were securing senior-level administrative positions, most were in lower-level positions like faculty department chair or dean; the least likely positions to be filled by women were president and vice president. Also, men still earned higher salaries than women in similar jobs (Lesslie, 1998).

Smith (2003) conducted a qualitative study of three female presidents at North Carolina community colleges and found that their career paths were similar to the way males sought career advancement in higher education. However, he found that the participants in this study do lean to a particular style of leadership that is more feminine (Smith, 2003).

Leadership that reflects the majority population is a valuable perspective. Women, representing the majority population in community college higher education, should have broader representation as community college senior leaders and could be important for the future viability community colleges. According to Molly Broad, president of the American Council on Education (2012) “leadership that is not only effective but reflective of the world around it will be key to managing the challenges of today and unknown challenges of tomorrow” (p. 3). The full impact of female perspectives, contributions, and role modeling has yet to be felt. According to DiCroce (1995), women leaders are expected to change the

culture of the community college and improve opportunities for women in the following ways:

1. By reducing gender stereotypes.
2. By instituting a relational—as opposed to bureaucratic/hierarchical— culture.
3. By developing and implementing more gender-related policies and procedures to promote diversity.
4. By increasing awareness about gender issues.
5. By supporting women to take a proactive role in public policy issues beyond the local campus.

Each of these actions would support *all* stakeholders if more women were to become community college senior leaders (DiCroce, 1995). “If women and other minorities are absent from power positions where ideas and images are produced,” wrote Anderson (1993), “then their world views and experiences will not be reflected in the images those organizations produce” (p. 59).

The expected vacancies as more community college presidents reach retirement is a significant opportunity for women seeking to advance, and for college administrators and trustees seeking to hire replacements that reflect the diversity of the students they serve.

Gender and Leadership

Gendered roles. While the term *sex* refers to a human’s physiological self, *gender* refers to roles having to do with what is appropriate for males and females according to a particular culture or society (Ridgeway, 1997). The impact of gender is inherent in all human

relationships: families, work environments, and the social arena. For example, more women than men are stay-at-home parents; references to ‘women’s work’ and a ‘man’s job’ are still common.

Guteck and Morasch (1982) argued that stereotypical gender roles were especially prevalent in organizations, while Ridgeway (1997) maintained that gender provided an “implicit, background identity” to the workplace (p. 231). The pay received for the work, the value of the work to society, the level of responsibility, and the status of the work are all determined by gender (Eagly & Johnson, 1990).

As more women are moving into senior leadership positions and others are interested in obtaining these jobs, there is greater interest in understanding feminine leadership characteristics, and value in understanding how women contribute to the organization (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). Hierarchical structures that favor men and masculine leadership styles are common in institutions, including community colleges, making it more difficult for women to advance to senior leadership positions. Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001), go on to explain that the majority of women who work at community colleges are in lower-level support roles such as secretary, librarian, and faculty; most senior level positions such as president, vice president or chief academic officer are held by men.

Managers and others leaders occupied roles defined by their specific position in a hierarchy, but also functioned simultaneously under the constraints of their gender roles (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). This influence of gender roles on organizational behavior occurred, not only because people reacted to leaders in terms of gender

expectations—with leaders responding in kind—but also because most people have internalized gender roles (Eagly, Johanneson-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003).

Kanter (1993) noted that management and leadership were most often associated with masculine dominance, whereas clerical and support work had been feminized, concluding that bureaucratic structures gave power to men through the assignment of job titles and work duties. Acker (2004) coined a phrase for this—gendered organizations—to highlight how bureaucratic structures that favored men was advantageous to men in regard to the distribution of power and disadvantageous to women. According to Hatch and Cunliffe (2006), organizations are the “products and producers of gender-based power relations, and ... masculine ways of doing things are inherent in structural, ideological, and symbolic aspects of organizations, as well as in everyday interactions and practices” (p. 274).

Acker (2004) argued that two fundamental components of gendered organizations were the disembodied worker—a male whose life centered on his full-time job while a woman took care of his personal life—and the job. Expectations about doing the work itself were based on underlying assumptions about men and women; this was how organizations become gendered to favor men in leadership positions. Despite evidence suggesting a high level of support for women to become senior administrative leaders in community colleges, a significant structural imbalance similar to other organizations works against them (Chliwniak, 1997).

Leadership styles. In their article on the leadership styles of men and women, Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001), found that women faced more organizational challenges

than men in becoming senior leaders. This was especially true as women moved into leadership roles traditionally held by men or as they attempted to navigate an organizational hierarchy heavily influenced by a bias toward masculine approaches to leadership.

Leadership styles have long been associated with gender. For example, the democratic leadership style was associated more with women; an autocratic style was considered more masculine (Jogulu & Wood, 2006). Characteristics like empowering, networking, and persuading was thought to be male oriented, whereas a relational style (collaborating, mentoring, and helping) was thought to be more feminine (Twombly, 1993). Communal characteristics like compassion and collaboration were shown to be more related to women. And individual characteristics like assertiveness, competitiveness, independence, courageousness were more associated with men (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).

In each of these sets of leadership characteristics, those attributed to women were collaborative, inclusive, and caring; those attributed to men were assertive, decisive, rational, and strategic. If organizations, including community colleges, were more likely to support masculine styles, it is not surprising that despite the high percentages of women involved in all levels of community college work, women were generally not present in the senior levels of community college leadership (Phillippe, 1995).

Overman (2010) asked “Do women lead in a different manner and what is the impact on their effectiveness as leaders?” (p.13). Evidence from research by Eagly and Johnson (1990) concluded that there are few differences in leadership style between men and women with the exception of women having a tendency to be more participative and democratic than

men. A more recent meta-analysis of gender differences in leadership corroborated Overman's work (Eagly, Johanneson-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003). Bass (1990) defined feminine leadership qualities as caring, considerate, and compromising, with leaders displaying a sense of responsibility and attachment to followers. In their study, Eagly and Johnson (1990) found women to be equally capable of leading in a task-oriented style, and men equally capable of leading in an interpersonal way.

Feminine leadership style is considered to be more transformational than masculine styles, and also include more contingent reward behaviors than masculine styles, "all of which are aspects of leadership that predict effectiveness" (Eagly et al., 2003, p. 267). However, Northouse (2001) noted that documented differences in the effectiveness of leadership styles of men and women were not significant. Nevertheless, women do tend to use more of a participative, less autocratic style.

Research by Chliwniak (1997) was designed to uncover "differences in the leaders' values and leadership modes based on gender, age, institutional type, years of experience, educational background, and/or position" (p. 46). Findings indicated that leadership perceptions were not necessarily dependent on gender and that one's role or position was "statistically significant in the perceptions of survey subjects" (p. 49). Furthermore, Chliwniak (1997) posited that "the gender gap in leadership has more to do with inequity than with variation in how leadership is perceived" (p. 49). This is further evidenced by the fact that while more than half of students enrolled in higher education institutions are female, 80% of four-year colleges and 66% of two-year schools are led by men.

The critical issue facing women who wish to advance to senior leadership roles is that most organizations, including community colleges, are fundamentally male-centered (Acker, 2004; Chliwniak, 1997; Eddy & Cox, 2008; Northouse, 2001). Women must therefore overcome societal and cultural patterns of gender norms that include preconceived notions regarding the effectiveness of their leadership styles (Chliwniak, 1997).

Barriers

Increasingly, women are pursuing leadership roles that have been traditionally held by men, but often professional and personal barriers adversely impact their ability to advance. Although the kinds of barriers and the levels of their impact may differ among individuals, similar constraints are present in the career development of most women.

Professional barriers. Woman leaders in higher education still operate in an environment in which the majority of college presidents and other senior leaders are male (ACE, 2012). Women in senior leadership are not only in the minority, but are often seen as outsiders within their own institutions (Tiao, 2006). Tiao (2006) identified three main categories of professional barriers for women: structural, cultural, and political (see Figure 1). Taken together, these barriers are sometimes referred to as the *glass ceiling*, a metaphor originally used by Gay Bryant in 1984 to describe invisible barriers that exist within organizations that prevent women from advancing to senior leadership positions (Tiao, 2006).

Structural barriers include hiring practices favoring men for senior leadership positions and inequities in salaries, with men earning higher wages than women for

performing the same—or more challenging—work. Unequal work assignments, marginalization (treating women as insignificant or peripheral), and a lack of female role models and mentors are all examples of the structural barriers contributing to the institutional glass ceiling for women in the workplace (Tiao, 2006).

Women may also experience cultural biases at work such as gender stereotypes and negative attitudes about women in leadership positions (Tiao, 2006). In a 1996 qualitative study by Jablonski (1996), seven female college presidents described the negative impact that the traditional masculine leader image has on female leaders. According to Jablonski (1996), women presidents used a participatory leadership style, but male-dominated board members and faculty – including males and females did not support such a style because they expect strong, assertive traditional leaders (Jablonski, 1996).

Finally, political barriers arise as women advance to senior leadership, especially in their exclusion from well-established business associations among men, sometimes referred to as *old boy networks*. The informal, exclusive system of mutual assistance and friendship through which men belonging to a particular group exchange favors and connections is often a hidden part of workplace politics. This male-to-male network impairs women's access to influence necessary to get the resources and support they need (Tiao, 2006).

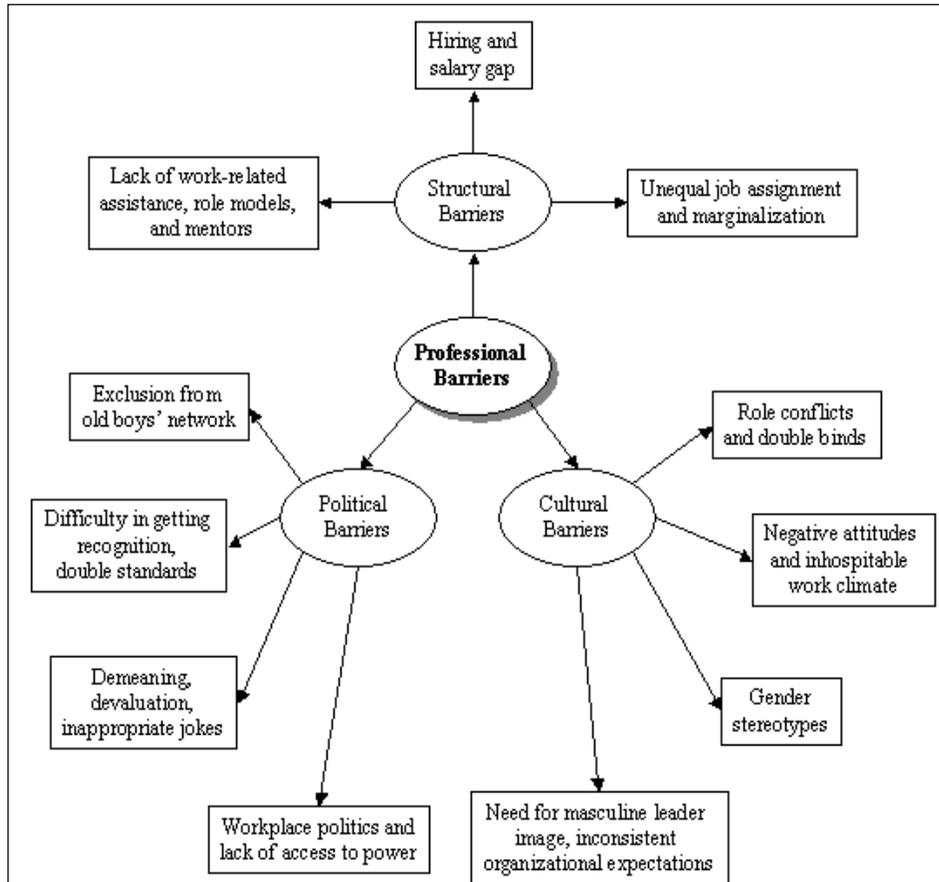


Figure 1. Professional barriers of women in the workplace (Tiao 2006, p. 44).

Personal barriers. Two additional categories of obstacles faced by women in senior leadership relate to the individual and have been identified as psychological and family barriers (Tiao, 2006). Psychological barriers are those arising from within the individual based on self-doubt, self-imposed limitations, fear regarding success and failure, and a tendency towards loneliness and isolation. Although self-imposed, psychological barriers are equally powerful in preventing women from advancing to senior leadership (Tiao, 2006). A

term used to describe these personal patterns of thinking is the *sticky floor* (Shambaugh, 2012).

Another type of personal barrier is part of gender socialization; women generally feel obligated to assume more family responsibility than men (Chliwniak, 1997). Female presidents are considerably less likely to be married or have children (72%) than their male counterparts (90%) (ACE, 2012). Twenty-six percent of women respondents in the ACE (2012) survey indicated that they altered their career progression to care for children, a spouse, or an elderly parent, whereas only 19.8% of men answered in the same way. Also, 21% of women indicated that they altered their career progression for their spouse or partner's career compared to 9.5% of men. These statistics reveal the impact of gender socialization in terms of work/life balance for women when pursuing senior leadership and a college presidency.

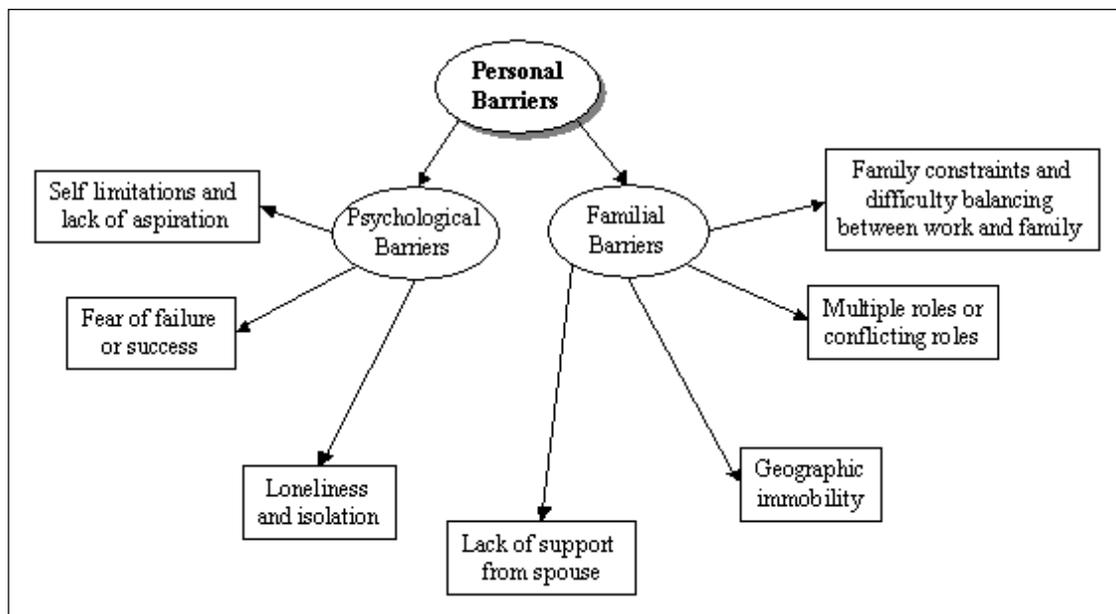


Figure 2. Personal barriers of women in the workplace (Tiao, 2006, p. 38).

Social norms place women in the role of primary caregiver for their children. This implies that women will have more frequent absences from work for family reasons (Carta, Atwater, Schwartz, & Miller, 1990). This single, but highly relevant, barrier has limited advancement opportunities for otherwise-qualified women to advance to more senior positions (Tiao, 2006).

In a 2003 qualitative study on women presidents in North Carolina community colleges that was intended to gain a better understanding of female community college presidents' career development processes and the experiences that influenced their decisions to become community college presidents, the researcher found that socialization experiences, lack of female role models in nontraditional roles, lack of mentors, formal and informal learning experiences, self-efficacy related to the performance of complex job responsibilities, and multiple role challenges were all factors impacting (and usually impeding) a women's career development (Vanhook-Morrissey, 2003). The five case study participants all indicated that their desire to become community college presidents evolved over time. During the process of advancement, they learned to overcome challenges and continue on their path (Vanhook-Morrissey, 2003).

It is important to understand how women who *have* advanced to senior leadership learn to respond effectively to these professional and personal barriers. This research has been designed to add to the body of knowledge about women seeking to advance to the

presidency of a community college, and may be valuable for designing effective leadership development programs for women.

Strategies to Overcome Barriers

The openness of the community college culture helped women cope emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally with their careers (Dunn & Jones, 2010). A further analysis, however, showed that women were much more likely to perform traditional feminine roles, such as teachers, librarians or secretaries, rather than senior leadership positions such as vice-presidents, chief academic officers or presidents (Dunn & Jones, 2010). These lower-status, traditionally female positions were identified as a barrier for women seeking to advance to senior leadership (Tiao, 2006); however, many women developed strategies to cope with career obstacles and successfully advanced to senior leadership despite these barriers.

In a qualitative study, Ballentine (2000) examined three former women presidents who were the first to serve in a southeastern community college system. Through in-depth interviews, they shared self-perceptions of their career development experiences and identified factors and circumstances that influenced their decisions to pursue the presidencies of their institutions. Ballentine (2000) found that a combination of family support, educational nurturing, developing self-confidence and self-esteem, and having the resilience to succeed in spite of challenges, were important influences in their career successes. The participants noted that gender stereotyping and overwhelming participation of males as board members and hiring managers were barriers for women. The author concluded that

mentoring and role modeling relationships could have a significant impact on women's access to senior leadership positions (Ballentine, 2000).

Educational and emotional support systems were more critical for women than men in attaining senior level leadership positions (Ballentine, 2000). Successful role models and mentors to provide this additional level of support were not often available for women because the highest ranking faculty members and administrators have traditionally been men (Johnson, 2012). Yet, many researchers have identified mentoring as critically important in the career development and achievement of women in higher education (Armenti, 2004; Catalyst, 2009; Gibson, 2005; Kellerman & Rhode, 2007; Madsen, 2008; Touchton et al., 2008). According to McCauley and Douglas (2004), "A mentoring relationship is typically defined as a committed, long-term relationship in which a senior person (mentor) supports the personal and professional development of a junior person (protégé)" (p. 92). Mentoring has emerged as one strategy for women to achieve advancement in senior leadership positions (Eagly et al., 1992).

Research by Tolar (2012), however, revealed that while helpful to some, mentoring had some negative aspects. There were five areas of concern: (a) lack of time for mentoring, (b) poor planning, (c) poor pairing of mentee with mentor, (d) lack of understanding about the process and, (e) lack of mentors for minority individuals. Difficulty developing cross-gender mentoring relationships was also noted as a problem for some women. However, women able to maintain a mentoring relationship with a male mentor often reported significant benefits, because the male perspective varied from the female's (Tolar, 2012).

Adequate educational preparation was considered vital for women seeking to advance into senior level administrative positions at community colleges; a doctorate was identified as an important asset, though not a prerequisite (Townsend, 1996). In 1984, 76% of community college presidents held a doctorate, rising to 89% in 1996, and 88% in 2001 (Weisman & Vaughan, 2001). Recently, that number has slipped to 81% (ACE, 2012). A terminal degree has long been considered a personal advantage in acquiring top-level administrative positions (Burke-Leatherwood, 2007; Jones, 1986; Krause, 2009).

Leadership training was also considered important preparation for senior leadership (Burke-Leatherwood, 2007). These programs must reflect an awareness and understanding of how race, ethnicity, gender, and social class affected individual experiences and perceptions (Townsend, 1996). Members of the League for Innovation, in cooperation with researchers at the University of Texas at Austin, designed an executive leadership development program specifically for potential or transitioning community college presidents to analyze their abilities, reflect on their interests, refine their skills, and engage in leadership discussions with faculty and leaders at their respective institutions (Krause, 2009). Similar programs around the country have been developed to prepare women for senior leadership at community colleges (Krause, 2009).

Conceptual Framework

Maxwell (2005) defined a conceptual framework as a “model of what is out there that you plan to study” (p. 33). The conceptual framework should inform the design, goals, questions, and analysis of the research to provide form, foundation, and boundaries while

also allowing flexibility to explore unforeseen opportunities for discovery (Maxwell, 2005). The conceptual framework is constructed from historical and current literature and the researcher's experience and knowledge.

A review of the literature led to the development of a preliminary conceptual model for this study based on the work of Tiao (2006). The first component of the model, formative experiences, addressed the personal, professional and institutional experiences that contributed to the interviewees' upward mobility. The second component, barriers to upward mobility, identified any perceived barriers (personal and professional) to upward mobility that the participants may have faced. The third component (strategies for success) was used to elicit specific tactics the women used to succeed in their careers. The final component, leadership style and gender, addressed participants' leadership styles and the impact of gender on their career advancement.

The model was used to illustrate the personal and career experiences of the women participants, taking into account the multiple influences that resulted in personal and professional barriers, challenges, and their strategies for success. The model was also used to organize information collected from in-depth interviews and present and interpret key understandings that emerged from this research.

Summary

This chapter provided a brief history of both women in higher education and the evolution of community colleges with a focus on women as their foundational core. Also discussed was the context for effective leadership and its relationship to gender.

Transformational leadership was identified as the style most frequently employed by women and also the preferred style of the successful 21st century community college leader. It identified representative bureaucracy theory and feminist leadership as fundamental frameworks for understanding the complexity of gender inequity in higher education senior leadership.

A further review of the literature on women as senior leaders at community colleges highlighted the inadequate representation of these women and their career experiences. Although research was presented in this literature review to examine the status of women in community college leadership (Burke-Leatherwood, 2007; Krause, 2009; Latimore, 2008; Lesslie, 1998; Smith, Hardy, Arthur & Hardy, 2009; Vanhook-Morrissey, 2003), it is limited and not current. This study has been designed to add to current scholarship regarding the experiences of NCCCS women who have advanced to senior leadership positions to determine their self-perceived barriers and areas of support that helped them reach their career goals.

Additionally, this research included a study of the experiences of women in pipeline positions. According to Riggs (2009) this is an area that needed more inquiry, because most studies done on community college leadership focus primarily on the college presidency, they fall short of helping us better understand the experiences of women who are entering, or are already in, the community college administrative career path. This research was designed to fill that gap by focusing on the experiences of women who are in pipeline positions. Next, Chapter 3 presents a discussion of the research design used for this study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

How have some women managed to advance to senior leadership positions in community colleges despite the many professional and personal difficulties noted by researchers? What were their strategies for success? What specific problems did they encounter and how did they overcome them? What insights and advice about women in senior leadership can they offer to others? Given the open-ended, exploratory nature of such questions, hermeneutic phenomenology was chosen as a suitable research approach for this study.

The goal of hermeneutic phenomenological research—a form of qualitative inquiry—is to develop rich and deep textual descriptions of participant experiences while also allowing for an interpretive element of the data based on the researcher’s theoretical and personal knowledge (Maxwell, 2005). Through dialogue with research participants, this study was designed to understand the lived experiences of women in higher education leadership. In Chapter 3, details and discussion of the research methodology is presented in four sections: (a) research questions, research design and rationale, (b) site and participant selection, (c) research procedures, and (d) issues of ethics and validity.

Research Questions

The ACE (2007) found that the percentage of women community college presidents more than tripled over a 20-year period, from 8% in 1986 to 29% in 2006. However, over the past 5 years that growth has slowed to 2% (AACC, 2010). Women have still not achieved

equity when compared to men as senior leaders at community colleges (AACC, 2010). Why have these earlier gains slowed so dramatically?

The purpose of this research was to inquire into and offer a basis for understanding the lived experiences of women who currently serve as presidents, vice presidents, assistant or associate vice presidents, chief academic officers, student services senior administrators or deans at community colleges in North Carolina. I sought to identify barriers women in these positions may face and strategies that helped them to succeed. The research questions that guided this study are:

1. What are the personal, professional, and institutional experiences that contribute to the upward mobility of women as they advance into senior level positions in North Carolina community colleges?
2. What do women perceive as the barriers to upward mobility within their institutions?
3. What strategies or skills have women senior leaders used to overcome barriers?
4. In what ways does gender influence the experiences of career advancement for senior level women in North Carolina community colleges?

Open-ended interview questions were developed based on each of the four research questions to elicit detailed descriptions of the background and processes used by women in community college senior leadership (see Appendix B).

Research Design and Rationale

Hermeneutic phenomenological research allows the researcher to explore, in depth, the experiences of participants through various means such as interviews, observations, and

documents (Merriam, 2002). It is ideal for research addressing complex problems situated within intersecting layers of gender, class, and power (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, 2011; Merriam, 2002). The rich, in-depth descriptions generated through hermeneutic phenomenological research help the researcher gain a better understanding of the multiple realities experienced by the study participants and allows for an interpretive approach based on the researcher's own knowledge and experience. In this type of research, findings emerge from the interactions between the researcher and the participants as the research progresses (Creswell, 2009). Hermeneutic phenomenology values subjectivity as an important investigative paradigm by acknowledging that individuals are incapable of total objectivity, primarily because they are in a reality constructed of subjective experiences. What is useful, meaningful and relevant depends on the situation. Significant elements are often embedded in the context of the experience and cannot be captured if they are reduced to or measured by a quantitative research design (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007).

Women who have advanced to senior administrative positions have navigated through several layers of complex personal and professional experiences. In addition to describing the experiences of these women as they progressed in their careers, it was essential to identify their feelings, thoughts, and concerns as a result of their experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, 2011).

Among the five categories of qualitative research identified by Creswell (2009), hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry was most suited to this study because it was developed to “investigate the meaning of the lived experience of a small group of people

from the standpoint of a concept or phenomenon” (Schram, 2003, p. 70). The goal of the researcher using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach is to generate new and more detailed understandings about the underlying meanings of the shared experiences of a small group of people who are purposely selected to participate in the study in order to select information rich cases for detailed study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2002). My intention was to understand the meaning and essence of the complex and holistic lived experiences of successful senior women leaders in North Carolina community colleges. The procedure involved studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged dialogue to identify patterns and relationships of meaning (Moustakas, 1994).

Creswell (2009) explained the use of theory in qualitative research as a means to provide a broad explanation, a prediction, or a generalization about behaviors and attitudes. A theoretical perspective provides parameters for the study of issues of marginalized groups. “This lens becomes an advocacy perspective that shapes the types of questions asked, informs how data are collected and analyzed, and provides a call for action or change” (Creswell, 2009, p. 62). The theories relevant to this study are representative bureaucracy theory and feminist leadership theory.

In representative bureaucracy theory, Krause (2009) posited that representation is an important element involved in equality of opportunity. The absence of representation of certain groups of people might be interpreted as barriers to their advancement. Individuals in specific social groups, such as women and minorities, may have perspectives based on their life experiences that differ significantly from other groups, such as White males (Smith, et.

al, 2009; Tiao, 2006). Adherents of the theory of representative bureaucracy support leadership that represents the racial, ethnic and gender composition of the majority population (Krause, 2009).

According to liberal feminist theory men and women are equal in their abilities to lead; it is their different life experiences that most influence their leadership style (Avolio, 2007; Chliwniak, 1997; Gilligan, 1989; Jagger, 1983; Kark, 2004). According to Jagger (1983), biological differences should be ignored to achieve gender equality at work. Avolio (2007) suggested that cultural worldviews, gender socialization, and different life experiences have led to gender inequality in the workplace, resulting in fewer opportunities for women to advance to senior leadership. The principles of feminist leadership, derived from liberal feminist thought, include social justice and advocacy for women and other minorities who are marginalized (Barton, 2006). Both of these theories provided an appropriate lens to examine the phenomenon of women and their experiences related to their career upward mobility. Open-ended questions in personal interviews were used to elicit, to the greatest extent possible, the participants' voices and success stories (Glesne, 2010).

The use of data triangulation can show new dimensions of social reality as well as highlight inconsistencies that may be overlooked if using just one source of data collection (Glesne, 2010). Following this principle of triangulation for research studies (Creswell, 2008; Patton, 2002), multiple sources of data were used: including demographic survey responses, transcripts from in-depth personal interviews, data from the personal resume of each participant, archival documents such as articles they may have written or articles that may

have been written about them, and researcher observations based on field notes. Based on these data, themes and patterns were identified and used to answer the research questions.

Participant Selection

Qualitative sample sizes are usually small and purposeful (Wiersma & Jurs, 2003). Maxwell (2005) explained that, “purposeful selection is a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 88). Creswell (2008) added that purposeful sampling is used to achieve a representation of the context, including the setting, the individuals, and the activities. “Purposeful sampling was also used to adequately capture the heterogeneity in the population” (p. 89) and to “establish particular comparisons or to illuminate the reasons for differences between settings or individuals” (p. 90). This method of sampling is consistent with interpretive paradigm research.

Maximum variation sampling plan. Maximum variation, a form of purposeful sampling, describes the selection of participants to maximize differences in certain characteristics (Wiersma & Jurs, 2003). Maximum variation was used in this study to generate two types of information: descriptions of the participants that highlight their differences, and commonalities among the participants, despite their differences (Wiersma & Jurs, 2003). Maximum variation effectively increases the diversity of the sample and generates greater confidence in the themes that emerge from the data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The North Carolina Community College employee email listserv was used to identify employees by name, job title, and institution name. A review of the listserv and names generally associated with women yielded a sample size of 115 potential participants. An online demographic survey was conducted among this sample to identify participants based on a range of specific criteria designed to create a diverse pool of candidates and based on their willingness to participate in a more in-depth interview of one to two hours. As previously noted, the targeted participants were female senior leaders at North Carolina community colleges. The overall criterion for selecting participants was to include women who provided a diverse representation of senior administrators in North Carolina community colleges. This was accomplished by seeking a:

- Diverse representation of length of time as senior leaders at a community college (one to 10 years)
- Diverse community college student population sizes
- Diverse community college settings (urban, rural)
- Diverse representation of participant age
- Diverse representation of participant race
- Diverse representation of participant educational degree attainment (bachelor's, master's, doctorate)

This list of characteristics was intended to produce a varied sample. This diversity lends richness to the data and is a valued aspect of interpretive paradigm research (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007); however, meeting every area of diversity was difficult. Categories for which

diversity was not established were noted. Willingness and ability to participate for the duration of the study were factors that also influenced selection.

Seidman (1998) suggested two criteria for determining how many participants to interview: (a) sufficiency, and (b) saturation of information. Seidman (1998) defined sufficiency as the number of participants sufficient to reflect the range of participants and sites within the sample population that would allow readers outside the population to connect with the experience. Saturation of information was a term used to refer to that point in a study when no new information was forthcoming (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Creswell (2009) and Polkinghorne (1989) suggested that a reasonable number of participants in a hermeneutic phenomenological study was between three and 10. Given these differing opinions and the practical limitations of my time and financial resources, this study sample included seven participants representing a diverse population of women senior leaders identified based on demographic survey responses.

Site Selection

The site of this study was limited to community colleges located in the state of North Carolina. Creswell (2002) discussed the “universal general nature of phenomena” (p. 13) created by limiting the geographic region of selected participants to give clarity to the phenomenon. Participants from a particular geographic region may reveal or identify certain aspects or experiences that may seem trivial as individual statements but, collectively, become more significant and provide more insight to the results. This is the ‘universal nature

of phenomena' and is associated with trends, commonalities, or recurrences that may arise during interviews in hermeneutic phenomenological research. Selecting participants from similar demographic regions makes it more likely that their experiences will be similar. However, selecting participants from a similar demographic region means the results cannot be compared or used to predict. Therefore, this research was not intended to serve as a comparative study of career experiences among women community college senior leaders in other U.S. regions or in other countries (Ballentine, 2000).

Data Collection

As already noted, this study incorporated multiple data sources (demographic survey, archival documents and reports, resumes, job descriptions, and authored articles) to support the principle of data triangulation and expand the conceptual understanding of the phenomenon.

Demographic survey. Potential participants were asked to complete a demographic survey (Appendix A) to determine age, ethnicity, education, and regional location for the purpose of clarifying the conceptual image of the phenomenon. The demographic survey also provided the data necessary to identify participants who met the specific criteria outlined in the maximum variation sampling plan. In addition, the results of the demographic survey are presented in Chapter 4 to provide a better understanding of the level of variation in the original participant pool. These secondary data sources could reveal data that bring additional clarity to the experiences of women community college senior leaders.

In-depth interviews. To understand the essence of the phenomena and to answer the research questions, the main method of data collection for this study was in-depth interviews in the participants' usual situation. Merriam (2002) proposed that the data collection method be determined by the purpose of the study and the sources of data that will result in the most significant information regarding the research questions. According to Patton (2002), the primary method of data collection for qualitative research requires having direct and personal contact with participants in their own environments so the researcher, through fieldwork and close proximity, can briefly experience participants' environments and daily life circumstances. All interviews were conducted in the participant's office.

In hermeneutic phenomenology, interviews are used as a means to gather and explore narratives of lived experiences (Van Manen, 1997). Open-ended interview questions were used (see Appendix B) to facilitate a conversational style of interview; in other words, general questions were asked and the participant was allowed to speak at length to elaborate, volunteer information, and pursue whatever she found of interest (Glesne, 2006). I asked follow-up questions as needed. The interview questions focused on the experiences that contributed to the advancement of each woman as a senior leader and any barriers each may have encountered. The interview questions were developed based on the original research questions of this study and encouraged participants to share more insights and details during the interviews. Follow-up interviews were conducted as needed to clarify information from initial interviews and allowed participants to speak more extensively on certain topics, if they desired.

Observations and field notes. Field notes are considered good practice to support research observations during and after the interview process. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) defined field notes as, “the written account of what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study” (pp. 110-111). By arriving to each interview at least 30 minutes early, I was able to actively observe each participant’s surroundings, making both descriptive and reflective notes before, during, and after all interviews. Additionally, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. This not only ensured confidentiality and accuracy, but also allowed less chance for omitting information that may become important to the experience (Reissman, 2008).

Multiple reviews of participant transcripts were conducted to identify initial and developing themes and were used as a focus for analysis. Reissman (2008) advised that “studies like narrative accounts, are jointly produced; as investigators interact with subjects, analytic ideas change” (p. 57). By studying transcribed text early in the process, I was able to identify interpretive categories and clues to aid in the clarity of the phenomena.

Personal resumes. Merriam (2002) suggests that the researcher collect documents that can be analyzed and used in the research to add clarity and understanding to the phenomena. Participant resumes were reviewed before interviews to gain a better understanding of the participant’s life experiences and also to allow the researcher to become more familiar with the participant before the interview. Resumes were reviewed after interviews to help identify any themes or patterns that emerged related to previous job

experiences, education, or professional development that may have helped or hindered their progress.

Archival reports and documents. The job description for each participant was requested and reviewed for consistency because duties may vary between schools even though titles do not. In addition, an Internet search was conducted on each participant to locate any pertinent material she had authored or that may be relevant regarding her institution. These documents added further clarity to understanding experiences that helped or hindered the participant's career advancement.

Role of the Researcher

Qualitative research is interpretive research and therefore subject to researcher bias. It has been recommended that relevant personal experiences and beliefs be discussed as part of the study design. According to Van Manen (1997), it is virtually impossible to put everything one knows about an experience aside. Therefore, "we make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories. We hold them at bay so as to come to terms with the lived experience" (p. 47).

Creswell and Clark (2007) suggested the researcher begin with a discussion of her own interpretations of the phenomena before conducting research. Some writers on this topic believe it is not possible to conduct research without preconceptions or bias, and emphasize the importance of making it clear that interpretations and meanings are a part of the findings: as well as including the researcher as a part of the overall process as an interested party with opinions and views instead of a separate detached and unbiased bystander (Plummer, 1983).

Further, Gray (2003) contended that it was “far better to acknowledge that the researcher is part of the world which he/she is researching, that different factors will influence the interviewees, and to take account of these in the kinds of claims you might make on the basis of the data that is generated” (p. 72). A candid acknowledgement of the researcher’s relationship to the subject could help establish closer, more trusting relationships with study participants and benefit the study overall.

I acknowledge that my perceptions of women and their experiences as senior leaders at community colleges were affected by my personal experiences. I have been a community college employee for the past 18 years. I started my career at a small, rural institution and moved to a large, urban school. I worked as an instructor of business administration for 10 years. For the past 8 years I have worked in student services, initially as the director of student advising, then as dean of enrollment services. Presently, I am Vice President for Student Services. In this capacity, I work closely with trustees, other senior leadership team members, professional and administrative staff, faculty, students, and the local community. I have knowledge of and provide input to decisions made at the highest levels at my institution. I am also involved in personnel issues, policy making, and budgetary activities and decisions that impact all of the college stakeholders.

After 18 years, I have accumulated a set of personal and professional experiences that have shaped my career and influenced by mobility. I have benefited from both formal and informal mentoring, and also mentor other women who aspire to advance. In these mentoring relationships I frequently share stories of barriers I have faced and strategies I have used to

overcome them. I believe that using a hermeneutical phenomenological approach and emphasizing my shared experiences with participants helped to create an environment of trust, allowing participants to freely discuss their experiences as female senior administrators with me.

Establishing an environment in which participants feel comfortable telling their stories is an important part of the phenomenological process (Campbell, 2011). A participant must relive her experiences by transporting herself back to another period in time. For some, the memories may be painful, requiring sensitivity and empathy on the part of the interviewer. My professional experiences helped participants more freely discuss their experiences and resulted in a deeper understanding of the phenomena.

While my experiences were helpful, I also recognize that I brought certain biases to this study that likely shaped the way I understood the data I collected and the way I interpreted findings. For example, the difficulty I experienced obtaining a mentor was solely my experience at my institution and should not be interpreted as a universal experience for all women seeking mentorship. I made every effort to remain objective. Van Manen (1997) referred to this attempt as hermeneutic alertness and occurs when researchers intentionally step back to reflect on the meanings of situations rather than accepting their pre-conceptions and interpretations at face value. Reflexivity was considered an important dimension in designing and implementing this research process. Finally, by acknowledging my biases at the outset, I established trustworthiness; I continued to direct my research efforts to the purpose of the study.

Data Analysis and Coding

Qualitative research studies can produce large volumes of data and organizing transcripts into a manageable amount of data must be considered first before any successful analysis or interpretation is possible (Creswell, 2008). Even though there are no standard data analysis procedures in hermeneutic phenomenological research, Campbell (2011) suggested using a matrix to classify data into categories to gain a holistic understanding of the essence of the experience. One side of the matrix is used to record any responses or phrases that deal with texture or the “what” of the experience; the other side is used to record data that deals with the “how” of the experience as expressed by participants. For this study the “what” was the personal, educational, and institutional experiences of each participant, as well as professional and personal barriers. The “how” was any references to strategies used to overcome barriers.

Campbell (2011) goes on to suggest that researchers highlight any common words or ideas as another way to begin to identify themes. Both methods of categorizing allows for the ongoing addition of information as interviews are transcribed, read, and reread. Reviewing, comparing, connecting, integrating, and explaining data allows for new insights and connections to emerge. Rereading data, especially transcripts, allows more connections and contradictions to surface (Matthews, 2012). Glesne (2006) advised researchers to begin reflecting upon and analyzing the data early in the research process. Early reflections enable the researcher to be open to new thoughts and shape the research as it unfolds. Color coding

(using highlighting pens on the paper transcripts) was used to distinguish recurring concepts for the purpose of grouping.

The data collection and analysis format used in this study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Data Collection and Analysis

Collection and Analysis Process	Details
Conduct demographic survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect descriptive data to identify participants
Interview participants using a semi-structured interview guide. Probe when needed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take field notes, expand data. • Read, reread, reflect, read, and reflect on data.
Transcribe data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read/re-read transcriptions • Reflect/make meaning of the stories • Denote themes/interpret/retell
Review resumes and archival data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gain more familiarity with participants • Locate additional information • Support emerging themes
Select stories to present as data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect/retell/reflect • Interpret/analyze/reflect to determine the essence of the stories • Craft a text for the whole

(Adapted from Kelchterman, 1993)

Triangulation—the use of multiple data sources—is recommended in qualitative research to check and establish validity by analyzing research questions from multiple perspectives and provides an opportunity to uncover deeper meaning from the data (Patton, 2002). For this study, the primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. Multiple reviews of the transcripts allowed me to identify

themes. Field notes taken during and immediately after the interviews were used to record researcher perceptions about each participant and her surrounding environment. Résumés and archival data were gathered and used to give the researcher a better understating of the participants and their experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations—especially important in qualitative research—must be considered in order to minimize risk or harm to the participant and to maintain participant and institutional privacy (Bell, 2002; Conley, 2001; Kramp, 2004). Several strategies were used in this study to minimize harm.

1. Each participant was asked to complete an informed consent form to ensure that she clearly understood what she was being asked to do (see Appendix C).
2. A code name was assigned to each participant to protect her identity and was used throughout the data analysis and reporting process.
3. Participants were reminded that they could discontinue their participation at any time, including during the interview process.
4. Pseudonyms were assigned to each institution.
5. All data collected, including transcribed interviews, were stored in a secured location and will be destroyed at the end of the research study.

Additionally, to ensure ethical consideration of participants, I followed the rules and guidelines set forth by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). One of the requirements of the IRB was to complete a battery of research modules that are used to ensure an understanding

of correct, appropriate, and legal approaches to data collection. Upon successful completion, this research proposal was submitted to the IRB and final approval was granted to proceed.

Validity and Credibility

To establish the validity of this study and enhance the credibility of findings, several measures were employed.

- **Member checks** - participants were asked to review their interview data and the data analysis conclusions developed by the researcher for accuracy and clarification. Maxwell (2005) stated that member checks are the best way to avoid misinterpretation of meaning and perspective during data collection. Additionally, member checking often gives a researcher further insight into biases, which should be addressed to further increase trustworthiness.
- **Triangulation** - using multiple data sources and evaluation methods. This study triangulated by using the demographic survey to ensure the selection of a diverse range of participants and settings for the study along with resumes and other documents to deepen the interview data.
- **Rich data** - a rich description of data is that which involves observations, quotations, context, and the feelings expressed by participants (Merriam, 1998). This qualitative study included participants' perspectives based on direct quotes from interviews. The open-ended interview questions used in this study allowed for descriptions of participant experiences and also the meanings participants give to their thoughts and actions to report a more

complete picture. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher to ensure accuracy. After each interview, observations were recorded in field notes. Both are important instruments that provided a detailed grounding for, and a test of, the study's conclusions.

In summary, triangulation, or the use of multiple data sources and evaluation methods, were used to ensure the reliability and credibility of this study. I continuously compared and contrasted all the above-mentioned data sources to preserve the stories of each participant. The findings of this research study are presented in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

As discussed in Chapter 1, the purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to inquire into and offer a basis for understanding the lived experiences of women who currently serve as senior leaders in North Carolina community college. Further, the study was intended to explore the perceived barriers these women may have encountered and the strategies they employed to succeed and overcome challenges. The research methodology led to the following research questions which were designed to explore the lived experiences, challenges, coping strategies, and gender influences of the career decisions of senior women administrators:

1. What are the personal, professional, and institutional experiences that contribute to the upward mobility of women as they advance into senior level positions in North Carolina Community colleges?
2. What do women perceive as the barriers to upward mobility within their institutions?
3. What coping strategies or skills have women senior leaders employed to overcome barriers?
4. In what ways does gender influence the experiences of career advancement for senior level women in North Carolina community colleges?

In this chapter, I provide demographic information and present a picture of the seven women who participated in this study. The North Carolina Community College email listserv identified senior women administrators. A review of the listserv and names generally

associated with women yielded a sample size of 130 potential participants. An electronic survey that included a section requesting participation in the study was sent to potential participants as indicated in the sampling plan in Chapter 3. The demographic survey provided the data necessary to identify participants that met the specific criteria outlined in the maximum variation sampling plan. Twenty-five potential participants responded to the survey. This 30% response rate is considered an acceptable response rate for online surveys (Maxwell, 2005). A summary of the potential participants' demographic data can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Potential Participant Survey Demographics

Age	40–45= 4 (16%) 46–50= 0 51–60 = 11 (44%) 61+ = 1 (4%) 9 did not answer the question
Race/Ethnicity	Black or African = 4 (16%) White = 21 (84%)
Highest Degree Completed	Doctoral = 13 (52%) Masters = 11 (44%) Bachelors = 1 (4%)
Marital Status	Married = 21(84%) Separated = 2 (8%) Living with Partner = 2 (8%)
Occupation of spouse or partner	Self-employed = 5 (20%) Retired = 2 (8%) Other = 7 (28%) No Answer = 11(44%)
Work hours per week	40–45 =5 (20%) 46–50=12 (48%) 51+ = 7 (28%) 60+ = 1 (4%)

Number of children	0 = 7 (28%) 1 = 5 (4%) 2 = 9 (36%) 3 = 4 (16%)
Primary care for elderly parent	Yes = 4 (16%) No = 19 (76%) Formerly, not currently = 2 (8%)
Mother with some college	17 (56%)
Father with some college	13 (44%)
Years in current position	1–3years = 7 (28%) 4–6 years = 6 (24%) 7+ years = 6 (24%) 15+ years = 4 (16%) 20 + years = 2 (8%)
Previous positions	Only 1 held a position outside of CC higher education in previous position; all others were promoted from within the NCCCS.

Years worked in higher education	1–5 = 0 6–10 = 4 (16%) 11–15 = 3 (12%) 15–25 = 8 (32%) 26–40 = 9 (36%) 41+ = 1 (4%)
Mentor	Yes = 21 (84%) No = 4 (16%) Majority had a mentor that was a friend, colleague or boss
Gender of mentor	Male = 11 (44%) Female = 10 (40%) No Answer = 4 (16%)
Interested in follow up interview	Yes = 12 (48%) No = 13 (52%)

Of the 25 respondents, 12 indicated they would be willing to participate further in an in-depth, one-on-one interview. I reviewed the demographics of the 12 potential participants and invited eight who sufficiently comprised the maximum variation sample discussed in Chapter 3. These eight women were specifically selected to provide the greatest diversity for length of time as senior leaders, age, race degree attainment, community college student population, and setting.

Participant Profile

Due to unexpected circumstances involving one participant, only seven were interviewed. Table 4 provides a demographic summary of the seven participants including age, race, highest degree earned, age, marital status, number of children, and whether or not she is caring for an aging parent. Six of the seven achieved a terminal degree in their field, while one is currently enrolled in a doctoral program. Ages of these successful women ranged from the mid-40s to the early 60s, with an average age of 51. Some of the most interesting facts are related to their family circumstances. Of the seven participants, six are married and one is twice-divorced. Four of the seven are married without children. Of the three with children, one has two adult children and two have school-age children, with the youngest being just five. Of the six who are married, they all shared that they have tremendously supportive husbands. Although two of the participants currently have no responsibility for aging parents, the remaining five either have current or previous responsibility for one or both parents. For confidentiality, participants have been assigned first-name pseudonyms.

Table 3

Personal Demographics of Participants

Pseudonym	Age (range)	Race	Highest Degree Earned	Marital Status	No. of Children	Caring for Aging Parent?
Willow	42	African American	Masters	Married	3	No
Angelica	(48–52)	White	Ed.D	Married	0	Yes
Camille	46	White	Ed.D	Married	0	Yes
Connie	61	White	Ed.D	Married	0	Previously
Jane	58	White	Ed.D	Divorced	2	Previously
Sandy	(45–47)	African American	Ed.D	Married	3	No
Ginger	54	White	Ed.D	Married	0	Yes

Each interview was conducted in the participant’s office and lasted approximately two hours. All interviews were recorded, except for one in which the participant requested no electronic recording. For this interview, I took notes by hand. Interviews focused on the career experiences of these senior women leaders and their life experiences related to education and work. Although the individual stories are unique, collectively they represent success. All participants successfully navigated the sometimes circuitous paths of life and career to become successful senior leaders on their respective community college campuses. Most humbly gave credit to mentors and even to the benefits of society’s increased awareness of the contributions of women as senior leaders. All agreed that they would not be

where they are without proper academic preparation and a consistent track record of success and hard work.

When I first began interviewing the participants, I expected to hear stories of struggle and hardship or bias and discrimination, even though participants had successfully advanced to senior leadership positions. Their stories, however, reflected very little hardship. All seven stories were primarily about persistence, determination and success. Each participant, at some point, faced both personal and professional challenges, but was able to successfully navigate through them and see opportunity.

As shown in Table 4, all participants have achieved senior level status on their respective campus and have served in their senior leadership position for at least two years. The campuses range from large (10,000 or more enrollments) to small (enrollments at 5,000 or less) and represent both urban and rural communities.

Table 4

Professional Demographics of Participants

Pseudonym	Current Leadership Position	# Years in Current Position	College Setting	College Enrollment
Willow	Academic Dean	3	Urban	10,000
Angelica	Associate Vice President	7	Urban	12,000
Camille	Vice President	6	Rural	5,000
Connie	Academic Dean	2	Urban	10,000
Jane	Vice President	2	Rural	3,600
Sandy	President	3	Rural	4,300
Ginger	Senior Vice President	4	Urban	15,000

*The Completion Arch (2012)

All the women considered being a caregiver, whether of children or aging parents, as just part of a woman's life. Many believed that they were not alone in terms of family responsibilities and domestic obligations. None had a clear vision of what their career would look like and none aspired to become senior leaders. In fact, only two started their careers as community college educators. The others began by working in jobs that were considered traditional careers for women, such as public school teaching and healthcare. However, once they began to work in community colleges, they developed an appreciation for the community college mission and recognized the potential for advancement within its hierarchy.

Introducing Participants

I had a previous working relationship with only one of the participants. Therefore, I did not know the majority of the participants. Through scheduling and interviewing, I developed my first impressions of each of the women. Interviews took place during the summer semester, which meant that meetings had to be scheduled around participant vacations. Furthermore, since it was summer session most campuses were not busy; there was an overall air of low intensity and calmness, creating a relaxed and casual environment.

In this introductory section I summarize the success story of each participant in order to provide a context for the findings and data analysis (Glesne, 2010). These profiles provided insight into the development of leadership attitudes and behaviors of these successful women, as well as the important meanings of their lived experiences—including factors that contributed to their success, barriers and challenges, and coping strategies employed to overcome obstacles. Through detailed descriptions of their experiences, meaningful and practical strategies are presented. Participants are introduced in the order in which they were interviewed.

Willow. Willow, at 42, was the youngest participant in the study. She currently serves as Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences at a large urban community college with an enrollment of 10,000 students. I have known Willow for a few years and she had shown an interest in my research from its beginning. She asked a couple of years ago if she could participate when I started interviews. That interest and enthusiasm continued. She was my first interview and her answers to my questions were open and forthcoming. Upon arrival at

her office she made it clear to her staff that she was involved in an important meeting and was not to be disturbed. Willow was warm and inviting, but definitely a woman with a sense of purpose. My impression is that she has no problem taking charge in any situation. We sat at the round conference table in her office which was filled with books (many on leadership) and pictures of her husband and their three boys.

Willow attributed her success as a woman in senior leadership to her childhood, community, family expectations, and internal drive. She grew up in a community of affluence where she saw that progress comes from hard work, perseverance, and personal and community investments. She is the only child of parents who were college sweethearts. Her mom left college before completing her degree to work and support her dad, who earned a bachelor's degree. She continued to support his career as he advanced and eventually retired as a senior manager in a federal government agency. Her mother retired as a secretary.

Willow learned early in her life the importance of education, courage, and being a risk-taker. Her parents often put her into uncomfortable situations in which she frequently found herself as "the first." For example, she was "the first" minority to attend the previously all-white, private girls school; "the first" minority to have the lead role in the local Christmas play; "the first" minority at her school to earn a prestigious academic scholarship. These experiences, and other similar ones, helped her to understand the importance of assimilation, or fitting into your environment. This is a skill that she cited as important in helping her accelerate, perhaps more quickly than some of her peers, into positions of leadership. Willow

started a doctoral program, but stopped due to her growing family. She is married and has three boys. The youngest is five years old and just started first grade.

Angelica. Angelica is the Assistant Vice President of Student Services at a large, urban community college. Angelica and I had some difficulty arranging an interview time - she was preparing to attend an out-of-state conference and then adding an additional two weeks of leave. She was taking extra time off to help her mother pack up and sell their family home. Angelica's mom and her brother with disabilities were planning to relocate from the Midwest to be closer to Angelica and her husband.

Angelica's office was immaculate; however, there were no personal items other than a clock and a couple of awards showing various accomplishments over the years. Although the interview went well there was an interesting tension in the room and it took us a few minutes to get into a rhythm – it was almost as if she had somewhere else she needed to be. I am not sure if the distraction was due to her impending trip or something else. Angelica's office gave me the impression that she may be very guarded at work. I had to contact Angelica twice after our initial interview to get additional information and clarify statements from the interview.

Angelica attributed her success as a senior leader to her doctoral advisor, her supportive husband, and her progressive professional experiences in student services. Angelica comes from a family that always expected her to do well, though they did not explicitly tell her. She is the youngest of three children and the only one to complete college beyond an associate's degree. Angelica stated that her parents were not the kind of people

who told her what she should do or be, but always seemed pleased with her accomplishments. However, they never really seemed enthusiastic or excited about them. She noted that once she had a conversation with them about their understated reaction to everything she had done, including her decision to get her doctorate. She said they simply stated they knew she was doing what she should be doing. Angelica said that though she was not overtly pressured to pursue high accomplishments, she nonetheless felt parental expectations. However, she sometimes feels guilty that her life became so different from that of her siblings and her parents. She said that she really had to work through that and credited her husband with helping her.

Angelica has been married more than 10 years and does not have any children. She enjoys her life and is active in community sports. On the day of our interview she was preparing to take a few weeks off work to help her mother pack up their family home to move across country to be near Angelica and her husband. Her mother and her brother will be living with her temporarily until they find a house in the area. Her mother is aging; her brother is developmentally delayed, and her father is deceased. Angelica said that the time is right for her mother to move closer in case anything happens, and to just be closer to family.

Camille. Camille, born in 1969, never imagined she would have a career in higher education. She is a professionally-trained ballet dancer. She has 22 years' experience working at community colleges and has been in her current position as vice president for the past six. Scheduling the interview with Camille was easy. She was excited to meet with me and it showed in her warm and inviting greeting. It was cloudy and pouring rain the day of

our interview which was a direct contrast to the bright print colors in Camille's dress. Although reserved, I determined from our meeting that Camille is very poised in her presentation (likely from her training in ballet dance) yet not too concerned about order and protocol. Her office was a warm mixture of organization and casual chaos.

Camille has been fortunate over the last 17 years to have had several opportunities for career growth at her current institution. Both her parents are college-educated and have bachelor's degrees. She knows her parents support her career and believe in the value of education; college was always a part of her plans. Her parents and husband are very supportive of her career. They are proud of her achievements, but most of her drive has come from just trying to always do her best, plus her interactions with professionals in her path who believed in her and encouraged her to do more.

Camille has been married for 12 years and does not have children. She attributed most of her career opportunities to being in the right place at the right time. She never really had a well-thought-out career plan, but found that whenever she was not sure what to do, asking for help from people she respected and admired has been beneficial and helped her advance to senior leadership. Without intending it to be so, this has become Camille's advancement strategy. Her first community college position was as the coordinator of tutoring services at a large urban school. She was asked to apply for her next position as director of admissions at a small rural school where she has remained and continued to advance from director to dean of enrollment, and then on to her current position as vice president. Reaching out and asking for advice meant that her learning and progress has come

quickly. Beginning with her first position out of graduate school, she has been asked to apply for each job she has held. “I did not have to make those decisions to move to the next level. It was pretty much offered to me and I don’t think that’s normal. I just think I have been lucky.” Camille freely admitted that she benefited greatly from other women administrators who mentored and advised her every step in her career.

Connie. At 61, Connie is the oldest participant in this study and has been in her senior leadership position for the least amount of time. She has been an academic dean for just a little over two years. Connie’s scheduling as well as her office was a clear reflection of the exactness and order that she brings to her work from her former background in healthcare. Everything about Connie seemed crisp: her manner, her speech, her desk – all seemed very precise and formal. Although friendly, there was no doubt that in the interview we were conducting business. Our interview ended when she had to take a call from her college president.

She ascribes her success to her college and professional experiences, as well as her mother’s early encouragement to be diligent and never give up. Connie knew very early in her life that she wanted to be in healthcare so that she could help people who were sick. She also knew that in order to be successful, she had to work really hard and do well in math and science. Her goal was to work in a hospital. It never occurred to her that she might someday end up as a higher education senior administrator.

Connie’s decision to attend a four-year college was somewhat unusual, as a two-year degree in her field was much more common – and even preferred in the 1970’s. Her mother,

who had a bachelor's degree, encouraged her to go to college and wanted her to have this experience. Connie was always very proud that her mom had a college degree and worked as a high school teacher. Connie grew up during a time when most of her friends had mothers who did not attend college and especially did not work outside the home. Her mom was an early model of a working woman.

It was the encouragement and reminders from her mother that having an education and a career meant that she would always be able to take care of herself that helped her survive in a very competitive environment. Connie credits a lot of her professional development to working in a tough, decision-driven environment. She says it made her tough. Even though she never really considered herself tough or aggressive, she learned to not be afraid to take a stand. She credits those early experiences with shaping her into the administrator she is today. Connie was very pleased to participate in my study and told me so throughout our conversation. She said she was happy to be giving voice to her experiences and hoped it would help other women.

Jane. At 58, and a community college vice president, Jane is preparing to retire. She has 30 years with the North Carolina community college system and feels she needs a break. One of the first things that struck me about Jane's office was the beautiful hardwood floors. She said that her president had recently had them installed in his office and asked if she would like them, too. Of course, she agreed. The wood tones along with the custom drapery really gave her office an air of importance. Jane greeted me with warmth and immediately offered me water. She wanted me to meet her secretary and told me right way that they were

the only two women in the executive suite. Jane's campus is very rural. She was concerned about my travel and told me a better route back home. She noted there was one gas station along the way in case I needed a stop. Jane is filled with southern hospitality. I could see where she may use her charm as her secret weapon (southern style). She noted that even though she had been a vice president for only two years, she was really proud of what she had accomplished at her small rural community college, including the leadership development program she put into place for her deans. She said most had never participated in any formal leadership training. Additionally, she noted that she has also learned much from the community, including how to shoe a horse.

A review of Jane's resume showed that she has moved around a lot. Many of the early experiences that required her to frequently relocate and seemed difficult at the time actually served to put her in a position to be able to stop out by taking retirement and recharge for the next phase of her career. Jane has two adult children who are both college educated, both are now married, and doing very well. She is twice divorced. She calls herself a single mother for most of the time that her children were in middle school and during all of their high school and college years. Financial stability was a major incentive throughout her years of career advancement. Jane credited her success to the tremendous mentors who have been a part of her life and her desire to be a good provider for her children.

Both her parents had bachelor's degrees and stressed the value of education. Lifelong learning is her mantra, but she found that she also had a real ability to teach. Teaching gave her the flexible schedule she needed as a mother and helped her find work quickly as they

moved across the state, following her husband's job. Jane taught at a total of seven community colleges. As she moved from one school to another, she continued to build her career as well as build an extensive network of contacts. Many of these people became her mentors and friends who supported her career and provided opportunities for advancement.

As time progressed, Jane and her sister shared the responsibility of caring for their parents through cancer and dementia. Jane is proud of her life and that she has been true to her values emphasizing education and family. She recognized that she has accomplished a lot, but conceded she is tired and burned out from all her commitments. Therefore, she has decided to take some time off to re-charge and think about her next career move. She knows that her circumstances are enviable, but also knows her decision is risky. She is 58 and would like to become a community college president, but wonders if she will be considered too old. She can't help but wonder how her life might be different if she had been a man.

Sandy. Sandy was the only community college president who was part of this study. She is married and has three children. Scheduling an interview with Sandy proved to be a challenge. Her schedule was very busy and all communications for scheduling took place with her secretary. I had no prior communication with Sandy until the interview. I waited in the lobby for about 15 minutes the day of our interview as Sandy was running late from an off campus meeting. She obviously has a back door entrance because to my surprise, she actually came to the lobby to greet me. From meeting Sandy, I got the impression that she is very focused with high expectations of herself and her staff. She is warm, but very business-minded. Even though all of my previous communication had been with her secretary, we

walked right past her with no introduction. It did not appear to be a slight but just how the office functions. As we entered her office it had the look that it belonged to someone else who was much older and obviously male. The walls were paneled and the furniture was big and dark.

Meeting Sandy was a pleasure. I was a bit concerned as I had no prior personal contact with her before the interview and she requested no voice recording. Sandy is a very private person; actually, I discovered most her early background by reviewing internet articles written about her when she became a community college president. From our conversation I did learn that Sandy loves her work and that she is proud that she has earned the respect and support of both her board and her staff.

She attributes her success as a women senior leader to her parents for first instilling in her the importance of education and the power to persevere. Sandy has always considered herself a hard worker and has always been drawn to things that were challenging. She attended a private boarding school for her high school education. This decision automatically set her apart from friends and relatives. She loved the challenges, both academically and socially, that it presented. She left boarding school and attended a highly prestigious college on an academic scholarship. She majored in public policy and Spanish and spent her early years working in jobs related to rural health and poverty. She thought she would spend her life writing policy to aid citizens in third world countries. None of this happened. Instead she took a job teaching basic skills and reading at a local community college and continued to advance in her community college career.

She says that beyond working at a community college and believing in the transformational ability of education, she has had no career strategy. Actually, she thinks it would have been too stressful to try to figure everything out and develop a plan. She says her plans are day-by-day and then week-by-week. This planning method has just always seemed to work for her. Sandy believes her success can be attributed to her reputation for hard work; people recognized that and doors opened. She has remained close to home and worked in the community where she grew up. She admits that there may have been some inherited social capital along the way that helped to advance her career.

Ginger. Ginger is 54 and called herself a “recovering perfectionist.” She is married and has no children. Ginger openly expressed her excitement to work with me on this project. In fact, she sent me an email stating such and said that she would meet with me anytime. On the day of the interview, she greeted me with the same eagerness and enthusiasm. I was waiting in the lobby when she returned from lunch and with no hesitation she invited me to join her in her office. Her office was decorated with modern furniture in soft pastel colors. She mentioned that she designed the office herself as part of the new campus project she managed. We sat side by side at her long conference table facing the wall of floor to ceiling windows. Ginger is very expressive and my interview with her lasted nearly three hours. She is interested in other people and what motivates them. Plus, through personal and professional assessments, she has taken the time to know herself. An example of Ginger’s understanding of her strengths and weaknesses was demonstrated by the fact that prior to my arrival she had prepared a packet of information for me that contained a recent copy of her

resume and typed responses to all of the interview questions. This combination of self-reflection and acceptance makes her a very capable and effective leader. At the end of the interview Ginger mentioned that she was looking forward to a two-week vacation with her husband. They were going hiking in the Virginia Mountains.

She has spent the past 12 years at the same community college with increasing responsibilities. The college enrollment has almost tripled in that time. She started as department dean, then campus dean, associate vice president, vice president and senior vice president. When I first visited Ginger, her office was located at a very new site about 10 miles from her college's main campus. Ginger had the unique experience of collaborating with architects and contractors to construct this campus, and then partner with faculty and students to build programs and enrollment. She thrived in the environment and is credited with the double-digit enrollment growth that her college has recently experienced. She says that in her earlier life she wanted to save the world. These days she said she can settle for doing whatever good she can, adding that this is why she works for a community college. She absolutely loves the work.

Ginger has worked in higher education for the past 24 years. She stated that she believes in the community college mission, and believes that all persons deserve to be treated with respect and should have an opportunity to pursue higher education. Ginger has always been a fast and eager learner; education provided a perfect outlet for her intensity. Her parents, both of whom are college educated, supported and encouraged her to learn and do more. She credits them for instilling in her a love of learning. She is persuaded that it was

their support, plus the love and support of her husband, that was the main reason she has a doctorate and the wide range of professional experiences she has had. They have helped her be courageous in pursuing her dreams.

Ginger also gives much credit to the many wonderful mentors she has encountered along the way. She realized early in life that she could learn from anybody. Therefore, her mentor list is extensive: students who initially came to her for help, friends (both male and female), managers (both current and former), colleagues, direct reports, and even paid professional advisors. Ginger has had a lot of work experiences and never backed down from a challenge in fact, she enjoys challenges and new experiences. She said she generally can stay in one position for five to eight years and then is ready for something new. Most recently Ginger was promoted to Executive Vice President on her campus. Her duties are mainly to manage all of the day-to-day operations of the college. She could not be more thrilled with this new opportunity.

Summary. The seven women interviewed for this study are all unique and extraordinary people. It was obvious to me that they are very positive individuals, and I was motivated simply by the interview responses and participation, plus the encouragement I received from several of them. Six of the seven hold doctorate of education degrees. Several of the women commented that they will never forget that people helped them along the journey to earning their doctorate, thus they feel obliged and honored to help others who are on the same journey.

All seven participants shared their stories of successful advancement to community college senior leadership. It was obvious through our conversations that the women are confident in their abilities as senior leaders and know how to navigate the numerous and sometimes difficult paths to senior leadership. Their voices were clear, upbeat and positive. They all had pleasant smiles and greeted me warmly, which often indicates an openness to communicate. These women have successfully made it to senior leadership, but have not forgotten those still on the journey. They were open to sharing their experiences.

Results

The following section presents a discussion of the major themes that emerged from the stories of the seven participants. The themes and subthemes are categorized by research question. I met each participant for one interview that was between one-and-a-half to two hours long. Each semi-structured interview focused on experiences that contributed to their success, any barriers they may have faced and the strategies used to overcome these barriers, and, lastly, the influence of gender on their career advancement. Using the Vanhook-Morrisey (2003) and Tiao (2006) frameworks as major theme categories, participant responses were reviewed multiple times and coded under the following major themes: formative experiences, barriers and challenges, success strategies, and gender influences. Each participant had a very individual and compelling story and sub-themes for each of the major themes are shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5

Major Themes

Theme	Sub-Themes
Formative experiences	Personal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early influences • Personal drive Professional <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning to lead Institutional <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work ethic and rewards
Barriers and challenges	Personal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple role challenges • Self-doubt Institutional <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender stereotypes
Success strategies	Educational preparation Supportive relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family and community support • Mentoring relationships Taking Risks Emotional intelligence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resiliency
Gender influences	Neither good nor bad

Formative Experiences

In responding to question one, the personal, professional, and institutional experiences that contributed to the upward mobility of women as they advance into senior level positions in North Carolina Community colleges, formative experiences emerged as a major theme. These can be defined as early personal influences, as well as professional and

institutional experiences that contributed to the participant's career upward mobility (Vanhook-Morrissey, 2003). These influences predominately came from the positive encouragement of parents and/or from their inner ambition, such as: drive for achievement, wanting to be the best, and affinity for being in charge and making decisions. Several of the women also commented that having a strong work ethic helped them to get recognition and promotions at work. Formative experiences were critical to shaping attitudes and personalities of these women that contributed to their upward mobility into senior level positions. These experiences may, for convenience, be categorized as personal, professional, and institutional.

Personal. The interviews started by each participant sharing her background and how these backgrounds helped shape their careers.

Background and early influences. The women in this study came from a variety of backgrounds. Four were from families in which both parents were college educated, two had one parent with a college degree, and one was from a family in which neither parent had attended college. They all grew up in families where education and high expectations were appreciated. All participants reported receiving familial support and encouragement. Going to college directly after high school was a goal that all the women set for themselves and was also a goal supported by their parents. Three of the participants, Ginger, Camille, and Jane were from families where both parents had bachelor's degrees, while Sandy's father has a master's degree. Camille said "going to college was never a question for her; it was a given. In my family, it was what you did after high school, period. I chose ABC University because

of the dance program. I wanted to be a ballet teacher and I didn't apply anywhere else."

Ginger had a similar comment: "there was never an option I was always going to college."

Jane described her mother's influence and how she set a real example for what women could do. She said there was never a lot of conversation about what path she would take. She called her mother a trailblazer and describes a moment when that really hit her:

One day we were just talking about life. She was in the first class of women at ABC University when they only let women go as juniors. You couldn't go as freshman. It hit me, and I looked at her and said, "Mom you were a trailblazer." She did not work, but she was still a leader. She did not work until I went to the eleventh grade, very Ozzie and Harriet, but she was president of the PTA, she was the Girl Scout leader, she was very active in the community, the women's Club, church secretary for 45 years, a female deacon. My dad graduated from ABC University too. There was never a question if I would go to college. For me, it was only a question of which college. My parents were wonderful role models for my going to college.

This reinforces the notion from Jane that her family held high expectations for Jane and her sister.

In Connie's case it was just her mother who had a college degree. However, she too talked about the assumption of college as the next step for her. She says her mother encouraged both she and her sister to go away to college. Connie explained:

She wanted us to have that experience. Because she graduated from college in 1946, I believe when she graduated college, she came out different. She had a broader view of what women could do. She was one of the few women in our community who had a college degree and worked. Her degree was in Home Economics, a science field. She was so helpful and encouraging to me because she also had been in a rigorous program and knew what that was like. Even though she was supportive she did not make excuses for me. She'd say this is what you have to do. She would add, "Nobody will ever be able to take that away from you. If something happens, it is very important to be able to support yourself." My mom is the reason that I have my doctorate. She valued education so much.

In Willow's family it was her dad who had the college degree. Her parents were college sweethearts and her mother had dropped out of college to get married and support Willow's father's education and career. However, in Willow's case, college was not only her parents' expectation of her; it was the expectation of the entire community that all young people would go to college. It's how they would advance as African-Americans and a community. She said:

Everyone was invested in my education. One thing that my parents instilled in me was that every round goes higher and higher. Every generation needs to do better than the former generation. That is an expectation in our family. That is creating legacy in our family. Being 'less than' is not even an option. When you have these African-

American communities that are kind of affluent, it was not at all uncommon for them to be intolerant of what they saw as racial injustice. Education was a way to overcome that.

Sandy recalls that her grandfather could barely read, but stressed education for his children. Actually, Sandy's father has a master's and her mother a bachelor's; somewhat unusual for an African American couple raised during the 1950's. Sandy said that her parents always challenged her academically and encouraged her to attend a boarding school. She said from that experience she gained confidence in her own abilities and learned to not be intimidated by other people. She excelled in both a very prestigious high school and an equally prestigious college. She credits those experiences with helping to develop her love for education and its power as a great equalizer of opportunity.

Angelica recalls that even though her two older siblings were not great students and showed little interest in school, she knew education was important for her. She said her parents, though proud of her achievements in school, were generally uninvolved in her education. Angelica grew up in the Midwest where working and earning a living was the primary goal. How you did that didn't really matter. Education was Angelica's chosen path.

Early influences of family and their support for education and high achievement were emphasized as important personal formative experiences. These helped shape views of education and contributed to the career achievements of the women in this study.

Personal drive. Personal drive also emerged as a formative experience that contributed to the upward mobility of the participants. Willow, Connie, Ginger, and Jane

shared their story of learning the importance of having a strong personal drive. Each one greeted me with warmth and open smiles, and shared stories that gave insight into their strong drive to be successful.

For Willow, her drive to be the best was developed at an early age. She grew up with the notion that anything is possible given the right tools and resources and her parents considered exposure an essential resource. Owing to these views, she learned to push herself to be the best. She explains:

It was always these first for me. I had attended a very diverse elementary school and then we moved. Where we moved to was kind of this rural area where they were building these really affluent homes, very few minorities. When I got to the private school there I was, one of three minorities in the school. That's when I became acutely aware that I was different and that I had to constantly prove that I could do and had to be better and had to be stronger. That was kind of when that epiphany came to me in middle school.

Meeting Connie in her pastel-colored office, surrounded by positive quotes, I was somewhat surprised to hear her articulate her early experiences and how she learned to be tough and persevere. Connie credits her strong personal drive to getting her through a very competitive undergraduate program, and an even tougher and more competitive early work environment. She explained:

Interestingly, all of my professors at that time in that program were female. They let you know right away they had to dig for it, and you would have to dig, too. It was part of the process. There was a lot of attrition. I lost a lot of friends. But I made it - I thought I had the right stuff. Then it started all over again. When I finally got a job, it was just as bad. It was a very cold and rude work environment. But I did it. I survived and even got promoted. I was not inherently ambitious. I just wasn't that way. But I stuck with it because I loved the work. That was what I wanted to do, and I was willing to do whatever I needed to do. I learned to be tough.

On the other hand Ginger, who greeted me at her office door with a warm hug, described that, although she is often misunderstood as a lightweight, said she too has a strong personal drive. She says, "People with sunny, loving personalities are sometimes assumed to be too weak to make tough decisions. After others get to know me, they understand that I have a will of iron." As a single mom, Jane says she drove herself to accomplishments because she wanted her children to have the best life she could possibly provide for them, and worked hard to make that happen. She said, "As a single parent I had to work hard, but it was important to me that my children have a great childhood. I wanted them to have a great childhood like the one I had."

Professional. All participants noted that they learned very early in life the importance of personal achievement and developed a strong personal drive that ultimately carried over into their professional lives and learning to be a leader.

Learning to lead. Ginger, a very soft-spoken individual, described a time when her supervisor thought she was a lightweight, but later she compared her to Muhammad Ali – except that did not fit either. She has spent the last 24 years in higher education and came to understand that most people in higher education are thinkers and respect and respond to thoughtful decision-makers and leaders. She described an early experience by saying: “I struggle to communicate effectively with thinkers who prefer a more linear approach. I leap to conclusions, and then I have to go back and fill in the gaps. When I was in my early forties, my supervisor said to me: “Ginger, you go racing down the track and leave everyone else behind. I want you to go back to the train station and pick those people up!” I think of this metaphor she gave me almost every day.” Ginger described this experience as a very valuable lesson in her professional development as she learned to be a leader and build a cohesive team.

Both Connie and Jane attribute their learning to lead to their early work experiences in a difficult and demanding profession. Connie describes a conversation she had with her mother that led to her first supervisory job:

They had asked me to take the head charge position and I really didn't want to do it. I just saw what that was like to have to navigate and if something went wrong, they were after you. I was complaining to my mother about that being a lot of pressure.

She said, “This is part of it. You’re going to have to learn how to deal with this stuff – buckle up. So I took the job and even though I was scared to death – I did it and got better and better. I even started to work with some of the students that were coming in for training. I had people that were looking up to me and depending on me. Once I accepted that, I got really good at being in charge.

Jane attributes her learning to become a leader to her professional work experiences. She says, “I was in an environment where mistakes meant life or death. Everybody learns very quickly who the real leaders are.” Jane later started teaching at a community college to supplement her household income, and because she loved learning. In the early years of her career she moved a lot and the timing was right for many schools to start two- year degree programs in her field; they were glad to have someone with her experience. She was hired as lead instructor to develop curricula and hire faculty. She quickly became a go-to leader in her field, migrating more and more toward teaching and setting up programs at community colleges, as opposed to being a practitioner. She started to feel that she was better suited for community college rather than the hard-core environment in which she had been trained. There were numerous opportunities to lead, and she developed even more complex leadership skills by working in her professional organization at the state and national levels.

Connie reflected that even though she learned to lead in a very competitive and tough environment, the leader she became at that time was not a style of which she was proud.

However, it was effective and expected. She recollected:

It's like I got good feedback when something would go on in the unit and they would hear that I pulled so-and-so aside and said that will never happen again. The director would come by and say, "Oh yeah, you handled that." I would think, "Well, I handled it, but I don't know that I'm real proud of *how* I handled it. But I got results. People didn't push back and the outcome was good. So, I got into the mindset that being direct and just telling people what to do works. Plus, it takes a lot less time to just say, "Don't ever do that again."

Connie admits this was not a leadership style with which she was comfortable, because it hurt people. It was, though, her beginning, and gave her a leadership advantage. As time progressed, she learned to develop her own, less aggressive style. She also learned collaboration could be effective.

As I listened to the early leadership experiences of Connie and Jane, I began to consider that their early leadership styles run counter to the collaborative and supportive culture of community colleges. These two participants had learned styles suited to their early work environments and required characteristics more closely associated with masculine approaches to leadership.

Stereotyping gender and associated leadership styles became apparent in my interview with Angelica. She discussed her concerns for appearing too masculine in her behaviors and responses to work situations:

One of my hobbies is I play ice hockey. I don't typically tell people that because I think people have a negative opinion of that sport and it is a male-dominated sport. There are some women, but not very many. For example, I am the only woman on one of my teams. I play on three teams. I think people would have a negative opinion about that. Some will say, when they find out, "oh, cool." But I don't share it because I think that it's going to give this negative stereotype like, "oh yeah, well it figures you'd be part of something like that – it's a hardcore sport." Maybe, when I have to be firm at work, they might associate something like that to the sport, or say a man's way...and women are nicer. Whereas, I just play the sport because I like it. Maybe some of the learning to lead is based in geography and on what is acceptable in one region versus another.

Willow had this to say about moving from the North to the South:

I had to learn that I could get the same effect with a feather that I would with a baseball bat. I didn't have to come off so strong like you saw in AC. AC is dramatic. I had to learn that I was kind of overkilling it. I was overdoing it and the very results I was looking for, I was not getting because I was coming off too strong. I watched a friend who was really bright and talented derail. She derailed because she couldn't acclimate to the culture.

This section of interviews related to participants learning to lead reminds me that women seeking leadership opportunities at community colleges must be cognizant of what characteristics are expected and accepted in their work environment. It also reminds me of the complexities that women continue to face as they work to fit into whatever organizational work structure is already in place. Surviving, and certainly thriving, often requires assimilation. Several of the women commented that being successful is closely linked to these professional formative experiences that occurred early in their professional life and led them to increased responsibilities and opportunities for advancement.

Institutional. The participants shared details of their significant institutional experiences that provided important early opportunities for developing a strong work ethic and the rewards of career advancement that came with these experiences.

Work ethic. Producing quality work was important to all participants, as quality signified personal competence and led to satisfaction and—in two very recent situations—has led to opportunities for advancement. Institutional experiences that led to opportunities to lead large, college-wide projects and promotions to positions with increased responsibilities were cited as formative experiences that contributed to upward mobility and career advancement. Jane, Connie, and Sandy all discussed the rigor of their academic programs and how they learned to work hard as students in order to be successful; the same has been true at work. Sandy says it this way, “Hard work is the key. The best job you can have is wherever you are. I have tried to always work hard where I am and it has created

opportunities for me. People have recognized my efforts and doors have opened.” She concluded, “Whatever I was doing, I tried to do the best that I could do.”

Work ethic and quality were equally important to Angelica who said: “When our vice president left, I stepped in to do the job. Nobody really asked me to do it – I just saw there was a need so I stepped up. It was important that the department keep going and I knew I had the ability to do it. It felt really good when people recognized the work was getting done and students were being served. I was proud of the work I did.”

Camille, who had been at the same small, rural institution for the past 17 years, noted that it has always been her goal to work hard in whatever position she had. She felt that her efforts have been recognized as she has continued to move into positions with more responsibility. She was recently named the new Associate Vice President for Student Services for the North Carolina Community College System. The same is true for Ginger. She has been at her large, urban community college for the past 12 years. As Senior Vice President, she opened a new satellite campus that has had tremendous enrollment success. During the interview, she noted that she became proficient in working with architects and managing contracts. She had many long days during the building of the new campus site and has been handsomely rewarded for her work. She contacted me a few weeks after our meeting to let me know that she had been promoted to executive vice president. Her hard work and competence are continuing to bear fruit.

Barriers and Challenges

In response to Research Question 2: *What do women perceive as the barriers to upward mobility within their institutions?* Participants were asked to share experiences related to barriers and challenges they encountered. The purpose was to reveal the kind of difficult situations they had encountered so that a deeper understanding of what it took for people like them to succeed could be gained. As noted in Table 5, the second major theme, barriers and challenges, that emerged was both personal and institutional. Three sub-themes depict various large and small tribulations with which the participants dealt on a personal level: (a) multiple role challenges, (b) self-doubt, and (c) gender stereotypes.

Personal. Several of the women discussed their roles as primary caregiver at home while also being a professional leader at work. Both of these roles were described as being very demanding and challenging.

Multiple role challenges. The stories of the participants indicated that balancing work and family was one of the biggest challenges they faced as they advanced to senior leadership. The women who had children described the struggle to balance the responsibility and time commitment of raising children with the responsibility and time commitment of career advancement. Those without children struggled with the compromises they had made in order to advance their careers. There were also the struggles of those women who either are currently primary caregivers for elderly parents or have been primary caregivers for elderly parents at some point during their advancing career. Key understandings in this section focus on their efforts to balance career advancement and family responsibilities.

Of the three women with children, two were currently married and each had three school age children. Willow's three children are young, ranging between five and 12. Sandy has three children who are a little older. Her oldest is 16 and her youngest is 12. Both Willow and Sandy declared that they have spouses who are very supportive of their careers as senior community college leaders and they would not be able to do the work that they do without the support of their spouses and children. Even with that support, both say it is still a very demanding to be both primary caregiver and a senior campus leader. Willow, whose husband is a church pastor, describes it this way:

I feel like I have three full-time jobs. Of course mother, which is the most important, then wife, and first lady at church. The church for me is huge, and so when I leave here Friday afternoon, I feel like I am picking up my hat for my next full-time job. Our children are young and they didn't sign up for this – so it's our responsibility to make sure they have a balanced childhood and one that works for them. I was on the fast track for achievement and I will admit being a wife and mother has slowed me down. Not in a bad way—just tempered my expectations and re-arranged my priorities. I had to say not now does not mean not ever. I cried when I came to that epiphany. I'd have friends or family say, "why can't you move on to that next promotion" or "why haven't you finished your (doctorate) degree?" and I'm like, "I am about to die! I am worn out!" From the outside looking in it looks effortless. But it is exhausting at times and draining at times and you have to pull back because

balance is important. I have had to retire the superwoman cape. I had to put it in the closet and be ok with that.

Sandy, whose husband is self-employed, had to make difficult decisions to balance career and personal life. She became a college president outside of her well-established and supportive community. This is the community where she grew up, where her children had attended the only school they ever knew, and where her husband owned a very stable business. As a family, they decided to relocate to a new house and a new school for her children. She said her children were not happy. They missed their school and their friends. Thanks to Sandy's strong belief that family is not limited to a specific place, they have made adjustments. Currently, her family lives in two different places. They have two homes. Her children and her husband have returned to their old house about an hour away, and she maintains a residence in the county where she works. Sandy says this arrangement is much better for her family and they are happy. She finds this situation works because she and her husband are committed to making the needs of their children a priority. Her oldest child is now old enough to drive and that makes things easier too. They make frequent trips during the week between the two houses and spend every weekend together. Sandy describes herself as a kangaroo; no matter where she goes or what she does, her children are always her first priority. She contends that she is intentional about her privacy and her family rarely attends any of her public events. In Sandy's office are pictures of her children on her desk. However

they are not facing outward, but inward towards her and cannot be seen by visitors. This is, in my opinion, a reflection of Sandy's effort for privacy.

Jane, who maintains two residences, has an apartment in the small town where her job is located and she has kept her house in the city where she previously lived. She noted that the distance is too far for a daily drive, plus living close by the college allows her to become a part of the community. Jane, the only divorced participant in the study, talked about her early life and felt her choices were a double-edged sword. She was torn between needing (and wanting) to advance to make more money to support herself and her children, while still balancing the time she needed to spend with them as a mother. She had high expectations for herself in both areas:

I was determined that we were going to be a family and for me that meant dinner on the table every night. It might just be hot dogs and macaroni and cheese, but we were going to sit down to a set table and have dinner. My children have always been my priority, but being a single mom was also an obstacle. In terms of handling family and personal issues, I purposely delayed going to graduate school, my Ed.D program, until my children were out of high school. What is so ironic about that, when I think about how it might have been different if I were a male? I was living in the same town where the university was located, knowing the Ed.D program was right there. But my children were in high school and I was and needed to be a super-involved high school mom. Before that I passed up an opportunity in a full-time Ph.D. program at a prestigious university because I could not see how I would provide for myself

and two children with no income. But it has all worked out. Both of my children graduated college and are now married with their own careers. I do not regret the decisions I made. I concluded early that something's got to give. You've got to give yourself permission. When you sit there and you read *Southern Living* and don't understand the ingredients in the recipe, it's because something had to give. I don't know how to cook like that.

The remaining four participants in my study are married but do not have children. None of the women spoke specifically of their decision to not have children. So I do not know how their career advancement may have factored into their decision to not have children. However, since no one had talked specifically about their decision to not have children, I did ask Camille if her career had factored into her decision to remain childless and she said:

I just didn't want kids. I don't think I would do very well in a situation where I had a career and children. That's not why I made the decision. If I really wanted kids, I would have kids and I would find a way to manage. I don't think I would do well, and it's because of the guilt. I would feel guilty that I wasn't doing enough at work and I would feel guilty that I was not doing enough for my family. I think I'd be a lunatic.

Another component of multiple role challenges for many women is being the primary caregiver for elderly parents. This was the situation for both Jane and Connie. Jane

commented that by the time she had spent years caring for her children, her parents needed her:

Finally, I had completed my doctoral degree and taken a new job as chief academic officer when things got really rough with my parents. My mom had her first cancer surgery and my dad was diagnosed with dementia. he had been sick for a while but things had really started to go downhill and I ended up taking six weeks off work to care for them. That fell on the tail end of being a single parent for 25, 26 years. I was just exhausted. I am exhausted. I am fortunately in a place that I can retire. But I am thinking of it more like a sabbatical. I will be back, hopefully to resume or even advance my career. I'm trying to honor myself. It's very hard because I've never done that and I don't really know how to do that. I guess perhaps if I'd been a man, which sounds very sexist, then I could have delegated a lot of things to a spouse. You know settling estates, making sure kids have things they need, planning weddings; wanting to do that part of my life, but at the same time I was doing the other part of a top administrator. I'm not sure you can do it all and not lose yourself. For me I've decided to do a stop out. I'm tired from all I have been doing. I guess you could call it burnout.

Although Connie has no children, she spent several years caring for her parents. She tells the story of the impact that has had on her life including her career. Connie's account of

her experience as primary caregiver for her aging parents highlights the gendered roles of women as caretaker:

When you are the female in the family, and you're the nurse, tag, you are it. When my dad started having health issues, I was the person who took care of him. At first it was nothing more than just making sure medications were right and getting him to appointments and that sort of thing, but as his health got worse, I actually became a caregiver. I had to help my mom because he ended up having a heart attack, then he ended up having a stroke and just wanted to stay home. Actually, my mom died first then my dad. Yeah, I felt like I couldn't leave or do a lot of other things like go back to school. I waited way too long to go back to school. I felt like there were other career opportunities out there, but I couldn't leave. We did not have children so I didn't have that pressure of that I got to get the kids here, I've got to do that for the kids and that sort of thing. For me, it was my parents that became sort of my hand to deal with; but again, I can't imagine not having done that. I was primary caregiver for 18 years. Yeah, a large chunk of my life...my career life. Yes, it takes a toll. It just does not matter how wonderful it is and a privilege to do it, there is a price you pay. Missed vacations, missed career moves, all of that.

Self-doubt. The women in this study were very open in their discussion about women often being their own worst enemy when it comes to lack of confidence and belief in them-

selves. It is a self-imposed psychological barrier that often keeps women from advancing to senior leadership. Connie describes herself by saying:

I wasn't maybe as aggressive as I should have been about my career. I look back now and I think I had some missed opportunities along the way. I should have taken more advantage of opportunities when they were offered to me but I tended to think that I always needed more of something; I needed more experience or I needed more education or something. I tended to always feel like there wasn't enough of me, and then I had this idea in my head that the people that do that or get those jobs are so much... They have so much more than I do. I don't know what it is, but I am pretty sure that I don't have it.

Camille describes how, in her career, others have always seen more in her than she has seen in herself and she is grateful:

All along my career other people have always seen more in me than I have seen in myself. A couple of years ago, my president called me into the office and passed me a folder. I open it up and it's a job announcement for a college presidency. I was shocked! We had a really long discussion and she kept telling me that this is what I should be doing; I could be a college president. Actually, it scared me to death. I never imagined that I could be a college president. She has not given up and continues to pass along vacancies. I have interviewed for three presidencies now and I have not gotten an offer. I don't know if the committee can see my doubt or what. I

know I have to start believing in myself more if I plan to advance in my career. It's a pitfall that women need to avoid –not believing that they're capable. I've seen women who don't believe that they're capable or they believe that their fate is in other people's hands. You have to believe in yourself and stop talking ourselves out of opportunities, because we don't think we can handle the job.

Willow recalls a former work situation in which she witnessed two very smart and talented female friends derailed and had their careers stagnate at their institution. Even though the work situations were very bad and both women were eventually demoted, neither had the confidence in her own ability to move on to another opportunity. Willow said, "I never want that to be me. Even though I may be afraid I hope I have the courage and confidence in my own abilities to move on when it's time to go."

Professional. Some of the barriers that I expected participants to identify either never came up, or came up once or twice. For example, from my own experiences as a senior women leader and my discussions with other women in similar positions, I thought there would be references to glass-ceiling limitations, or gender bias in favor of men would be cited as professional barriers that women face. This was not the case as I interviewed the participants. In fact, only one mentioned anything related to professional barriers. Angelica wondered if the reason that she may have been passed over for a promotion was that the president (or senior leadership team) may have felt there were already too many women in senior leadership positions at her institution. "There are a lot of women in this

administration.” Four of the six vice presidents on her campus are women. She would have been number five. In fact, they did hire a male to fill the position. Angelica describes the situation: “The HR director came to tell me I did not get the job. “She just said to me that I was not selected for the position. That’s all she told me. There’s never ever, ever, ever been any discussion about why I didn’t get the position or why I didn’t even get any recognition for filling in for that year”.

Angelica spoke at length about situations at her institution that she saw as professional, institutional, and structural barriers:

Stuff happened at my institution that has made me wonder about my own abilities and the barriers within the institution. For example, I was a VP running things for about a year. I never got a title. They never officially called me interim but I was the one running the division. I never got a stipend, nothing. What was that? My thoughts were, “I’m working in an institution that does not appreciate me.” I never asked anyone about it because here if you question certain things, then you’re a bitch. I guess right now I feel like I have hit a glass ceiling here because I have not been able to advance. I don’t know whether that would be true somewhere else. I also think there is a pay discrepancy right now between me and a male co-worker. But I haven’t said anything. I know this sounds crazy, but even with everything that has happened I haven’t gotten to the point where I am ready to go apply somewhere else yet.

When describing barriers and challenges they have faced while advancing to senior leadership, all seven participants talked about the importance of working hard and always doing your best. They conceded that barriers and challenges are a part of any work environment and learning to successfully navigate these obstacles has been an important part of their career development. At the end of each interview participants were asked to reflect on their journey to senior leadership and comment on the coping strategies or skills they had employed to overcome barriers and successfully advance to senior leadership. Their responses were captured and categorized into an overall major theme of success strategies. Within the major theme of success strategies several sub-themes emerged. They were educational preparation, family and community support, mentoring relationships and emotional intelligence.

Success Strategies

Educational preparation. All participants considered their educational credentials to be crucial to their success as senior leaders. Six of the seven study participants held terminal degrees and one was enrolled in a doctoral program. They further declared that their ascent to senior leadership was a combination of hard work and having the proper credentials and that this was even more important for women if they wanted to become senior leaders. The sub-theme of educational preparation not only included having the proper credentials but also having vast work experiences and the learning that takes place along the way. The most representative examples are found in the lives of Jane, Ginger and Sandy.

Jane, who completed her Ed. D within the last three years, has 30 years of community college experience and is currently retiring as a Vice President of Instruction and Chief Academic Officer. Her experiences have been vast and included some rather interesting positions as she navigated her career path:

I started out as an ICU nurse with a cardiac care specialty and really thought that I would do that forever. However, because we moved so much – and often to small towns; there were times when there was no opening in the ICU so I worked in the OR. But I also started to work with students and really enjoyed it. I was fortunate to be able to begin a teaching career in nursing. With every move, I became lead and had the wonderful experience of starting new two-year nursing programs – often at rural schools. They were happy to have me and I was gaining tons of experience. I’ve been in the classroom; I’ve been a department chair and a vice president of instruction. I’ve also done some part-time legal nurse consulting. I’ve had the state and national level policy experiences. My experiences go way beyond what the average person has done in their career. These were just great experiences that prepared me for senior leadership.

Connie, too, started out in nursing but found that she enjoyed teaching nursing and found it to be a much better fit for her than working in the hospital environment. Also, like Jane she believes that she benefited from the fact that community colleges were looking to build their programs. She said, “Even before going into the community college, I worked in a

hospital and I was in a supervisory position there as well, so some of those skills carried over to the community college leadership positions.”

Ginger’s biography indicates that she has spent 24 years in higher education. The first 12 were at a small private college, where she held multiple positions in both academic and student affairs. Those positions ranged from faculty, registrar, director, to dean. Eventually, she left the college while serving as Vice President of Student Life. She has had a very similar career at the community college; starting as an academic dean, then becoming a campus dean, an associate vice president, and then vice president. She has just recently been named Executive Vice President. Ginger says she has been very fortunate that she has not had to change schools a lot in order to get new opportunities. She has only worked at two colleges over her 24-years in higher education.

Sandy, the only college president represented in this study, had a diverse career before becoming a community college president. She shared her journey:

I started out working in journalism and public health. I decided to move closer to home and took a position at my hometown community college teaching basic skills. I found that I really enjoyed the work and wanted to focus more on developing the relationship between poverty and education and the transformational ability of education. I quickly became program director, then campus dean and on to division dean. I left for a short period to become division vice president at a neighboring school. I got a lot of exposure during that period, and when the presidency came open at a nearby school, I was encouraged to apply. I had the support of some of my

local board members. It has been a wonderful experience, but I would not even have been considered if I were not academically and professionally prepared. It's critical.

Forging support networks composed of friends, family, allies and trusted colleagues is a very powerful success strategy. Two categories that emerged as themes when the participants were asked to identify coping strategies or skills employed to overcome barriers were family and community support and mentoring relationships.

Family and community support. Family support is quite often the foundation of a successful career and it was found to be so with many of the women in this study. Unlike career-related mentors who give guidance and training to less experienced or younger colleagues from a professional standpoint, family gives support more personally. In this section, family includes blood relatives, friends, and professional colleagues who have no official authority in the women's careers. Several of the study participants identified family as the glue that has helped to sustain them during their career journeys. It was Willow, Camille, Angelica, Jane and Ginger who lauded the support that they received from their families during their careers.

Willow, who currently serves as an academic dean, was very pleased with the encouragement she received from her family early on in life: "It was my cousins, aunts and uncles who were always very supportive and influential, and it was my parents who saw something in me and encouraged me to take what I called challenging courses. My entire family has always supported me in my endeavors."

She praised her husband for standing by her side throughout her career. She was especially thankful that he supported her decision to accept a lateral position at a larger institution that was a further distance from their home, requiring him to take on more responsibility for the routine care of their three children; such as getting them ready for school in the morning and helping with homework and dinner in the evening. Her new position required her to leave earlier in the mornings and often get home later in the evening. Having a supportive spouse also gave strength to Ginger, Camille, and Angelica. When asked what helped to sustain her during her career, without hesitation all three women discussed their husbands. Each of these women has been married for at least a decade. Camille, who of the three has been married the shortest time at 11 years, described her husband as her rock. Angelica stated: “I don’t have children. But I do have a husband that is very, very supportive. He is a lot of strength and power and a shoulder when I need it. He provides perspective which has really helped me through some difficult times.”

Ginger related that her husband understands her like no one else and provided advice that she trusts. Jane, who is twice divorced, says it has been the extension of family and friends that has kept her going when times were tough. She calls the network her “web of inclusion.” She said:

You have to create that web. Family support is huge. As a single mom, many times, that support was what got me through. I am so fortunate that my sister and I are very close. I can tell her anything and she will help me think it through. Actually, she was

the person who helped me see that I needed a break. I am not sure I would have had the courage to do that if she had not been there supporting me and convincing me that after taking care of everyone else, I needed to take some time and take care of myself.

The role of family support in the lives of the women in this study was definitely important. They all spoke of family support with warmth and enthusiasm. Family was surely an important factor as the women believed that these were people with whom they could unwind and who unconditionally supported them.

Mentoring relationships. Several of the women noted that mentors played a critical role in their career upward mobility and was definitely part of their success strategy. Camille stated that her president has certainly been a mentor:

She sees me as a college president and does everything she can to give me experiences in that way. She sends me to presidents' meetings and has me sit in on calls for her. She's made sure that I meet people that might have an influence over something. She puts in a good word here and there. She tells people about me. She does all that. She is the kind of mentor who says "this is what you need to do and here's your time frame."

Camille noted that this was not the first valuable experience that she had from someone showing her the way. She says she thinks her first mentor relationship actually

started from a mistake she made. She has had the benefit of being mentored throughout her career:

Probably the best mentoring that I had was from a former supervisor. It was very early in my career and I think I messed up somehow and she was the one who said, “Okay, here’s what you should have done. Here’s how we are going to go forward. From that point on there was just somewhat of a connection that I relied on. Then when I came here, my first boss was a good mentor. My second boss, the new dean, was good. Now it’s my college president. I’ve been very fortunate.

Consistent with Camille’s comments regarding the significant role that mentoring played in her career, are those from Jane. She has worked at seven community colleges and contended that mentoring was a key factor in her career advancement:

I am thankful that I had a mentor in my very first teaching job, an older lady, very old school. Our thoughts were very different. But she was wonderful. She inspired me. She let me do my thing, but with guidance. I respected her so much. She was willing to let the new in. That’s why I felt safe with innovation. We helped each other. To this day, at our Christmas card exchange, there’s such a mutual respect. I still credit her with allowing me to grow. My second mentoring relationship started with my interview for my first senior level leadership position. I was applying for a dean position and was interviewed by the vice president. She asked questions that really made me think about my future in a way that I had not before. I got the job and the

mentoring kept going. I really liked the way she recognized your strengths and weaknesses and called you to it. She was a very strong leader. She would look at you and say, your life is more than right here. Where are you going to be? What is your plan?" She and I have both moved on from that institution but we still keep in touch at least twice a semester. And she will still ask the tough questions and forces me to think about work in life in an entirely different way than I normally would. I love that about her.

Connie, who started her higher education career teaching at a university, said that it was a group of very nurturing women co-workers in her first teaching job that mentored her to become a great educator. She continued:

These women were great role models for me as a new teacher. They really believed that students were our future. They provided a true understanding of adult learning theory. They just started talking to me about these kinds of things and I could really see it in action. They really saw something in me and they worked with me and they were just so supportive and I never wanted to leave. I had a dean that would challenge me and about every three years she'd see me getting complacent and she'd say, "Oh I have a new challenge for you". Here, I need you to do this or that." She would do that for me. When the job came open here at the community college, we talked about it and she said, "You could do that job, you're ready." I said no, I'm so happy here. She

said, “I know you are, but that’s your next step.” I still have mentors now, people I trust and have asked to give me feedback. I need that, it’s how I grow.

Ginger’s approach to mentorship is like a kaleidoscope, with various colors, both genders, all ages, and many different walks of life. When asked about mentors, she actually provided a page long list with the names and contribution(s) they made to her career development. Ginger says, “Get all of the mentoring you can from anyone who will give it to you—short or long-term. Learn from everyone around you. Be a sponge.”

Angelica and Sandy have had only male mentors. In Sandy’s reflection on the role of mentors in her career development, she noted that she did not have anyone who she would call a mentor. However, she did note that all her big breaks have been given by white men. That seemed to be a revelation – even to her. Sandy noted that her father has always been of great influence in her life, helping her to craft great ideas as well as being a great support.

Angelica’s reflection on mentoring revealed that her dissertation chair became much more than that while a doctoral student trying to decide on an internship location and later a research topic. She says she was all over the place. He took the time to really understand what she wanted from both experiences and made recommendations that turned out great:

I needed someone to help me figure out my direction with everything. I was all over the place. I was like, “Oh, I want to do this. Oh, I want to do that. He was like, “You need to narrow something down. He made the suggestions and I said, “Okay.” I

believe in John. He's always given me good guidance. Another male that helped me out was George. I was really struggling after getting passed over for an internal job promotion. George, who is a former executive VP, former president and has just been in the system for a long time. He came to me and said, "It's a tough spot to be in. What are you going to do?" We talked about that and I appreciated him coming and talking to me. Since that time we talk sometimes – especially if something is really bothering me. We may have lunch or go to dinner and I will vent. And he will give me advice on how I should handle whatever the situation. George is an older guy with lots of experience and wisdom. I trust him. I don't trust a lot of people. Plus we seem to have similar personalities. So for me, I guess that's a tall order for being my mentor. I guess that's why I struggled with the question and these two guys are it on my short list as mentors.

Willow noted that she is in charge of a very large department and recognizes the value of mentoring, as well as being mentored. However, she does not have anyone that she would formally call a mentor for herself. What she does have is a diverse assembly of girlfriends that provide tremendous support and advice. Willow discussed that she learned the value of girlfriends from her mother, who always turned to friends when she needed support and advice. Willow learned to do the same. She intentionally has a wide and diverse circle of friends that she can go to when she needs advice and perspective. She stated: "I have always had friends of different age ranges, different races and backgrounds to give me what I

needed. Interestingly, or maybe intentionally, I have never had a male in my mentoring circle.”

Mentoring to her was not always about having a relationship with someone else the benefit can also come from having a mentoring eye. “Sometimes the mentoring occurs in visualizing what people do that you don’t want to do. Sometimes it’s not a formal mentoring. It can be just you being observant enough to see what’s going on around you to say, “I know this hill. I’d better not do that because if I do it’s going to put me over here in this place that I don’t want to be.” Willow credits her faith as being the main foundation for guidance and direction in all aspects of her life – including her career.

In varying ways and in differing degrees, all seven women described positive and professional strategies that helped them to become successful senior leaders.

Emotional intelligence. Sandy, Ginger, Camille, Angelica, Connie, Willow and Jane all, in one way or another, talked about the importance of emotional intelligence and resiliency as an important element of success for women seeking to become senior leaders. Being able to handle adversity, disappointment and anger is critical. Camille describes it this way:

This may not apply to everybody, but there is a real problem here with women not being in control of their emotions. I think its gets harder as you move up, but if you don’t get control over your emotions it can be a real challenge. You may be really hurt by something or seething inside with anger, but if you let that show too much,

you get a bad reputation. I see people struggle with that. Sure we all get hurt over one thing or another, but you can't let that show. I am the leader and it's not going to do anybody any good for people to be worrying if I am OK. That messes with the ecosystem a little bit.

In continuing to discuss what has contributed to her success and what other women should consider, Willow said:

I think in addition to your IQ you have some EQ as well. Sometimes I think we are so focused on the academic ability that we forget the importance of the emotional intelligence that you bring to the picture. You don't derail because you don't have a degree. You derail because somewhere along the line your EI became a little skewed and you made some poor judgments when it came to self-awareness or how you relate to others or manage conflict. It's really an interesting dynamic. This is what I mean; women, we are emotional beings. We have a choice when we feel emotions. We have a choice to give in to the emotions and allow the emotions to kind of sway our decision making and how pursue things in the future. We can learn to manage those emotions and allow our strategies and instincts and our wisdom to guide what we do. We can make an emotional response and it causes us to hurt ourselves professionally. Go home cry or do whatever you do, but find a way to empty yourself of that. Come back the next day, be on point, be professional, and be ready to go because men do not want to work with emotionally-charged individuals. It's uncomfortable.

Ginger described emotional intelligence this way:

People want to be happy; they respond well to people with emotional intelligence – who seek to persuade instead of directing only. If a person of strong feeling can learn to deal with conflict and make difficult decisions, she will have a powerful combination of skills. I am a strong proponent of adapting to the communication preferences and personality styles of others and respecting these, but I can do this without compromising what I value, in part, because I value communication so much that I am willing to work at it and make sacrifices. I have had to make significant changes in my natural style of communication to reach others, but it has been worth it.

To determine if participants saw gender as a barrier and whether it made any difference in their careers and personal lives, all were invited to comment on their perceptions of the role(s) gender played in their experiences. All seven believed that, at different points in time, gender played both negative and positive roles in their careers. Willow, Jane, and Sandy (the three participants with children) felt that no matter what the data says, most of the domestic responsibilities still fall on women, creating more struggles and more difficult choices for women than for men.

Gender stereotype came up as a theme that related to question four that asked, “In what ways does gender influence the experiences of career advancement for senior level

women in North Carolina community colleges?” Gender can have both positive and negative impacts. Ginger believes being a woman has been a positive for her as she relates to her male colleagues and even her boss. She says, “Men tell me things they do not tell their male colleagues; they confide in me better. It’s probably because they do not see me as their equal and, therefore, less of a competitive threat. I see it as an advantage.” She went on to say that often better communication skills and empathy are attributed to women. “The toughest person at my institution is a woman. It is good to be female.” For Camille being a female is a good thing, too. At her institution, the majority of the senior staff are women, including her president. On the other hand, the contradictory expectations to be strong, effective, decisive leaders as well as nice, warm, friendly women at the same time have created problems for some of the women.

As Angelica said, “You can’t just be nice all the time.” However, as women work forcefully and decisively to make things happen, they tend to get negative responses. They are sometimes described as being non-emotional, pushy, demanding, insensitive, distant or cold. Some of their experiences and observations of other women leaders in the professional over the years led them to believe that female leaders today are still more vulnerable to resistance than men.

Jane said that she can’t help but ask, “How would life be different had I been a career man instead of a career woman?” Jane was emphatic in her belief that she would probably have had a wife taking care of their children at home, like most of her male counterparts do. Life would have been easier had she been male because she would not have had to multi-task

and struggle so much trying to balance work, family and personal life. Spending most of her time fulfilling responsibilities to advance her career, like working on advanced degrees, would not have seemed so wrong, or maybe even her focus on work may not have contributed to her two divorces, as well as deep-seated guilt feelings when she could not attend her children's events or special occasions.

Angelica, Camille, Connie, and Ginger did not have to choose between marriage, children and career since none have children. They do, however, have a supportive spouse. In addition, the fact that they did not have to play the mother role made the challenge of balancing between work and life a bit easier for them. Not one of the women I interviewed seemed bitter or angry because of any discrepancies they may have faced by being a woman.

Willow commented:

I think because we are in the South, which is clearly kind of a good 'ole boys' network, gender always plays a role. I think if you have a really strong male leadership, they will recognize the fabulous assets that women leadership or female leadership can bring to the table. Sometimes it is frustrating to think maybe you're the smartest person around the table – not arrogant – just a fact, but you know you can't just come right out and say something because you may appear aggressive or assertive and the 'B word' – so you have that fine line. You have to use your femininity to make it work. It's all in the perspective. Once you embrace what your femininity offers and understand that it is a tool that could be used in a positive way. It is not an issue. It's a non-issue. If you have been given that access, use it

strategically. You can make it better for those other women that are coming along behind you. You've got to be comfortable in your skin in a male-dominated world.

Summary

The first theme, formative experiences, responded to research question number one and examines the personal, professional, and institutional experiences that contributed to the upward mobility of women as they advanced into senior level positions. It was found that the sub-themes of parents and their support of education, as well as the participants' early foundation of achievement and personal drive, plus their strong work ethic were considered to be personal experiences that contributed to success. Several participants discussed professional experiences that allowed for developing leadership skills early on were an important growth step to becoming a senior leader. Additionally, institutional experiences provided challenging assignments, provided job promotions and career growth.

The second major theme, barriers and challenges, included two sub-themes. The first were personal barriers, which consisted of multiple role challenges and self-doubt; the second were professional barriers caused by gender stereotypes. Both present findings to research question two, which seeks to identify perceived barriers that women face in their path to upward mobility. Being the primary caregiver for their children and/or aging parents emerged as a sub-theme under multiple role challenges was discussed by most of the women. They cited expectations by family and society that even though they held powerful jobs requiring travel and long hours, they were nonetheless expected to provide most of the care

given by the family. Multiple role challenges that the women faced at home and work overlapped and combined with gender stereotypes, which emerged as a sub-theme and provides insight for question number four. Question four seeks to identify the ways gender influences the career experiences of women. Though gender stereotypes and expectations of acceptable women's behavior were in general considered both negative and burdensome, most of the women did not dwell on the negative aspects of gender expectations and accepted it as 'a fact of life'. Some even considered it an advantage to be a woman in the workplace. Credibility, integrity, interpersonal relations, and confidence in other words, interpersonal skills were considered positive aspects for the women in a work environment that is often dominated by men.

Various answers associated with question three related to the coping strategies the women used to overcome barriers. They talked about taking risks, which was the fifth major theme. Taking risks by accepting new positions, relocating for new opportunities, believing in yourself, and generally not being afraid to try something different was identified as success strategies that several women noted. They contend that 'playing it safe' does not generally allow one to reach desired goals. The women argued that risk taking was absolutely necessary for advancement.

The third major theme, success strategies, included educational preparation, family support and mentoring relationships as sub-themes. These also respond to question three, which considers coping strategies or identifies areas of support for the women as they have advanced to senior leadership. The family, which includes relatives, friends and colleagues,

were people the participants could depend on for emotional support. Mentoring, the women asserted, was very beneficial to their career success.

The final sub-theme, emotional intelligence, emerged as a surprise but was identified by several of the participants as critical for women to achieve career success. Although none of the women were asked questions about emotional intelligence, five mentioned resiliency as an important success factor for aspiring women leaders and one that they were very mindful of in their own career advancement. They introduced the theme of emotional intelligence in response to questions such as, “What advice would you give to other women aspiring to senior leadership?” It was evident that these women felt strongly that being able to recover from difficult and even hurtful situations was an important component of their own success and one that they wanted to bring to the awareness of other women aspiring to senior leadership.

In the next chapter, a discussion of the themes in relation to the literature on women in senior leadership is presented. It also includes suggestions for women in senior leadership and recommendations for college policy and practice.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through exploring life stories related to work and education, this study inquired into and offered a basis for understanding the lived experiences of women who currently serve as presidents, vice presidents, assistant or associate vice presidents, chief academic officers, student services administrators or deans at community colleges in North Carolina. Further, the study was intended to explore the perceived barriers these women may have encountered and the strategies they employed to succeed and overcome those challenges. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the personal, professional, and institutional experiences that contribute to the upward mobility of women as they advance into senior level positions in North Carolina community colleges?
2. What do women perceive as the barriers to upward mobility within their institutions?
3. What coping strategies or skills have women senior leaders employed to overcome barriers?
4. In what ways does gender influence the experiences of career advancement for senior level women in North Carolina community colleges?

Hermeneutic phenomenology was chosen as the methodology for this study due to the open-ended, exploratory nature of these questions. The goal of hermeneutic phenomenological research—a form of qualitative inquiry—is to develop rich and deep textual descriptions of participant experiences while also allowing for an interpretive element

of the data based on the researcher's theoretical and personal knowledge (Maxwell, 2005). Using this method of inquiry, the experiences of senior women leaders were described and analyzed in an effort to better understand how and why they were successful. This qualitative study was designed and conducted using the combined frameworks of Vanhook-Morrissey (2003) and Tiao (2006). Vanhook-Morrissey (2003) concluded in her study on the career development of women community college presidents that women's career development is influenced by formative experiences relating to their background and early career experiences. Tiao (2006) presented a framework that classifies personal and professional barriers that women face as they advance in their careers as well as strategies for career success. She also provided a framework to examine the influence of gender on women's career mobility. Through these lenses, the stories of seven senior women leaders revealed patterns of success. Using four major themes (formative experiences, barriers and challenges, success strategies and gender influences), subthemes emerged within each one. This chapter presents an analysis of the findings in the context of Vanhook-Morrissey's (2003) and Tiao's (2006) models. The most relevant findings are presented and will be discussed vis-à-vis the research questions and existing literature. Lastly, a discussion of recommendations for future research is provided along with implications for practice.

Overview of the Study

Narrative life stories of seven North Carolina community college senior women leaders served as the foundation for this qualitative study. The lived experiences of these women can be helpful to other women who aspire to senior leadership, as well as to college

administrators charged with setting policy, designing programs, and managing resources that help women advance. As more women seek community college senior leadership positions, it becomes critically important to understand their experiences. A review of the literature revealed that research on women as senior leaders in higher education has been focused mainly on university and four-year college women presidents (VanDerLinden, 2004) and has not generally included either women in senior community college leadership or pipeline positions (Riggs, 2009). This study was designed to respond to that gap by adding a narrative account of the experiences of women in pipeline positions. The stories of these women will add to existing knowledge in an effort to broaden and enrich understanding of the experiences that have contributed to their upward mobility, strategies they have employed to be successful, and what, if any, influence gender has had on their career advancement.

Using a maximum variation sampling plan, seven participants were identified and interviewed. To support the interview data, follow-up telephone interviews were conducted as needed to clarify the accuracy of the data collected and analyzed. Observations, field notes, participant personal resumes, archival reports, and documents were also used to further clarify the experiences that helped or hindered each participant's career advancement.

Though there are no standard data analysis procedures in hermeneutic phenomenological research, a matrix was used to classify data into categories to gain a holistic understanding of the essence of the experience, as suggested by Campbell (2011). One side was used to record any responses or phrases that dealt with texture or the "what" of the experience, while the other side was used to record the data that dealt with the "how" of

the experiences expressed by the participants. For this study, the “what” was the personal, educational, and institutional experiences of each participant, as well as professional and personal barriers. The “how” was any references to strategies used to overcome barriers and the influence of gender.

Discussion of Findings

The preliminary conceptual model for this study was grounded in the work of Vanhook-Morrissey (2003) related to formative experiences and Tiao’s (2006) work on the barriers and success strategies of senior women leaders. The conceptual model was also influenced by the work of other researchers (Chliwnak, 1997; Gilligan, 1998) related to gender and its influence on women’s career advancement and leadership style. The frameworks of these researchers guided the design and interpretation of this narrative study, were appropriate as a means to organize its findings, and were intended to provide a better understanding of the experiences of women who advanced into community college senior leadership.

Formative Experiences

The first question was, *What are the personal, professional, and institutional experiences that contribute to the upward mobility of women as they advance into senior level positions?* The initial finding of the study was that women’s career advancement was influenced by formative experiences relating to their personal backgrounds and early career experiences. Formative experiences describe the early personal influences as well as the professional and institutional experiences that contributed to the participant’s career upward

mobility. For example Willow stated from the time she was a very young girl her parents taught her to always do her best and good things would follow. Similarly, each participant had decisive, formative experiences that contributed to her upward mobility as she advanced to senior level positions.

Although the literature review for this study did not include research on social learning theory a brief discussion of social learning theory is relevant to understanding the value of formative experiences on the career development of women. Social learning theory, is based on the assumptions that people cannot be separated from their environments and that there are continuous, reciprocal interactions between behavioral, cognitive and environmental experiences that impact learning (Vanhook- Morrissey, 2003). Helen Farmer and Associates (1997) applied social learning theory to a framework examining women's career development experiences. Farmer's conceptual model for women's career motivation included personal and environmental factors that influence women's career choices and behavior, either by inhibiting or facilitating career motivation. The social learning framework of her study supports the idea of a connection between a woman's career development and their formative experiences.

According to Vanhook-Morrissey (2003), there are early influences that are both personal and environmental that shape a person's decisions about careers. In this study, Connie spoke with pride about the fact that her mother had graduated college in 1943 and had a job during a time when it was not the norm for women to do so. She described her mother as a role model for what Connie herself could achieve. As in the case in Vanhook

Morrissey's study, social learning theory was applied in this study as a means to appreciating the personal and environmental factors that impacted participants' upward mobility as they advanced into senior level positions. The three categories of formative experiences are personal, professional and institutional.

Personal. The women in this study were guided by the value that was placed on education by their families. The women grew up in families who placed a high importance on education; all had at least one parent who had a bachelor's degree. Knowing that education was a central component of their success journey was important and provided clear direction leading to success. Both Ginger and Angelica commented on the good feeling they got from knowing they have done a job well. These perspectives were important to the study, and were supported by previous research discussing the connections between early positive experiences and confidence to pursue increasingly complex responsibilities that provide opportunities to learn and grow (Vanhook-Morrissey, 2003). Hackett and Betz (1981) proposed that expectation of self-efficacy is a major influence in career decision making.

Efficacy expectations, as defined by Bandura (1986), are beliefs one has concerning his or her ability to successfully perform a given behavior. Efficacy expectations are influenced by experiences related to performance accomplishments. The findings of this study support Hackett and Betz's (1981) theory of self-efficacy and expectations. For example, Ginger spoke of her high level of curiosity and that education had proven to be a great outlet for her interests. Consequently, she had always been a very good student. Also, her parents were supportive and encouraged her educational accomplishments. She knew she

could excel in academics and that is part of the reason she pursued her doctorate. School was in an environment in which she felt comfortable. She went on to say it was the only place she ever wanted to be; “No one who knows me is surprised I ended up working in education.”

Hackett and Betz (1981) found that “self-efficacy can influence the degree to which individuals utilize their abilities and consider expanded career options” (p. 29). Their model may help explain women’s persistence and success. This study supported such a concept of advancement. For example, both Willow and Sandy explained the confidence they gained from working hard and doing well in school and attributed their current success to the early support and encouragement they received from their parents. All the women commented that they were very good students through high school and college and believed these academic experiences contributed to developing the drive and work ethic that ultimately led to career success.

Professional. A second category of formative experiences important to the upward career mobility of the women in this study was professional. These women uniformly talked about the value of early learning opportunities at work. Using the frameworks of social learning theory and Vanhook-Morrissey’s (2003) model of formative experiences, professional influences are part of the environmental context that provide new experiences and help women grow. These new experiences are instrumental to women’s upward mobility and help them learn valuable leadership skills. Ginger freely spoke of her early struggles to communicate effectively. She was grateful for a supervisor who recognized her potential as a young professional and gave her opportunities to lead projects and improve her

communications style. Ginger had the benefit of working in a supportive environment that allowed her to grow professionally, leading to opportunities for advancement. Both Connie and Jane discussed their early professional careers in healthcare, where mistakes could not be tolerated. They both acknowledged that although the aggressive and autocratic leadership style they learned was not optimal, it had been an important step in helping them become successful in their current positions. Both Connie and Jane benefited from their early work in a challenging environment, which set them on a path to discover their own leadership styles. Women who do not have these types of learning experiences, whether supportive (Ginger) or difficult (Connie and Jane), miss out on an important formative stage that can limit their professional growth and, ultimately, their career mobility.

Unlike men, women often do not have leadership experiences until adulthood. According to Helgesen (1990), playing team sports has long been considered an important realm for learning to lead. Boys have been traditionally encouraged to play sports. They learn through play to be tough and aggressive; which includes giving and taking directions, and offering and accepting criticism. These are skills considered beneficial at work and essential for leaders. However, for women, playing sports often comes a bit later in life and the lessons may be unequally valued as tools of success. Playing certain sports may be considered a negative and the lessons may make one too tough and aggressive. For instance, Angelica, an associate vice president, noted that she generally hid the fact that she played ice hockey because it is considered a male sport. She was concerned that she would be unfairly judged if her leadership style appeared too masculine. All participants acknowledged that, at

some point in their career, they had to deal with their leadership style, societal and cultural norms for women, and organizational expectations. Helgesen (1990) commented, “leading in your own way within a small group or unit not only will make you more comfortable and effective but will also position you to assume greater leadership roles” (p. xxi). Having early opportunities in the workplace to explore leadership styles is an essential formative experience for women as they advance to senior leadership.

It is important for women to have early professional formative experiences because, as noted by Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001), women faced more challenges than men when seeking to become senior leaders. Leadership styles have long been associated with gender, with men having an inherent advantage based solely on gender. For example, women generally lead from the center and have a more democratic and relational leadership style. Whereas an autocratic, top down and direct style was considered more masculine (Jogulu & Wood, 2006). Early experiences that allow women to explore and develop their own leadership style are critical to their career advancement. In their study, Eagly and Johnson (1990) found women to be able to lead in a task-oriented, autocratic style, while men could lead in an interpersonal, democratic style if given the opportunity. Leadership effectiveness is not based on a particular style or gender (Chliwniak, 1997). However, women must often overcome societal and cultural patterns of gender norms that include preconceived notions related to the effectiveness of their leadership styles (Chliwniak, 1997). Helgesen (1990) argued that, for women, “finding their own voice is key to creating their leadership style” (p. 10). This study revealed that opportunities to lead and explore leadership styles provided

participants important professional formative experience crucial to their effectiveness and success as senior leaders.

Institutional. The final category of formative experiences important to upward mobility of these women was institutional. Institutional experiences are those that relate to the hierarchal structure of the community college workplace. The women in this study represented a variety of community college settings; yet, they were all concerned about producing quality work, as quality signified personal competence to them and gave satisfaction. Doing their best and working hard is how they advanced to higher level positions. In fact, Ginger and Camille both received promotions shortly after our interviews. Ginger, who worked very long hours to learn all she could about construction projects, along with curriculum development, was promoted to executive vice president at her campus. Camille became an associate vice president for the North Carolina Community College System. She believed her opportunity came because she had been open to trying new and creative solutions to traditional campus processes. Sandy, as a community college president, put it this way: “Hard work is the key. You must give your best every day. I have tried to always work hard and it has created opportunities for me. People have recognized my efforts and doors have opened.” It is worth noting that none of the women ever intentionally sought or pursued a promotion. They just worked hard and let their work speak for them. As Camille said, she was “in the right place at the right time.”

Vaughan (1986) identified three major ways of advancing to senior level leadership positions at community colleges. “Serendipity,” or being in the right place at the right time,

described those who found themselves promoted without planning. Camille's experience exemplifies that. According to Vanhook-Morrissey (2003), this trend was common during the early years of community colleges when there were few experienced administrators and leadership training (e.g., the North Carolina Community College Leadership Program) had not yet been developed. The second approach was the "planned approach," which describes senior leaders who actively pursued advancement and prepared through education, experience and networking. The third approach involved someone who was dissatisfied or unhappy with campus leadership who wanted to change campus culture by becoming president. The women in this study generally took a serendipitous approach to advancement; i.e., they let their work speak for them and let others approach them concerning advancement. Institutional experiences that support career upward mobility and promotions are important formative experiences for women as they advance. Although there is no substitute for hard work and good work habits, perhaps a more planned approach would have been more advantageous to them and resulted in even further or faster advancement.

According to Helgesen (1990), a serendipitous approach, or waiting to be recognized, is not uncommon among women. She noted that several of the executive-level women in her diary studies were successful because they honored and believed in their own values and skills. Women have a tendency to wait to be recognized for their accomplishments, hoping someone will notice and reward them for their hard work. Men, on the other hand, believe they deserve to be leaders and are more likely to take a planned approach to career development. The women in this study demonstrated a very traditional approach to upward

mobility within their institutions and this might explain why women are under-represented in community college senior leadership.

For the women in this study, formative experiences could be categorized as personal, professional and institutional. Each category was vitally important in preparing them to learn how to successfully advance. Although the path may have taken longer, advancing to senior leadership seemed possible and proved achievable.

Perceived Barriers and Challenges

The second research question addressed perceived barriers that women face as they move upward in their careers: *What do women perceive as the barriers to upward mobility within their institutions?* When asked to share what, if any, barriers they faced in their careers, two categories emerged. The first and most significant area of common challenges among the seven senior women leaders were personal. While all faced personal barriers and challenges, their solutions were different.

Personal. It is worth noting that the women in this study did not necessarily see personal issues as barriers that blocked their success, but as additional challenges that women must manage in order to be successful.

Multiple role challenges. In her book, *The Female Advantage*, Helgesen (1990) wrote that women saw their identities as complex and multifaceted. She explained that, unlike men, the women in her study viewed their jobs as just one element of who they are. She continued, “Other aspects of their lives simply took up too much time to permit total identification with their careers” (p. 26). The same was true for this study. Willow, Sandy,

and Jane, were taking care of young children at the same time as attempting to advance their careers. Jane and Connie were primary caretakers for aging parents. According to Helgesen (1990), women are much more inclined to want to have it all marriage, children and career whereas men generally are much more compartmentalized and willing to allow work to take up most of their lives.

All the women interviewed, except Jane, were married and gave their spouses credit for helping them advance by sharing family and home responsibilities. However, no one said the balance of duties was equally shared with their spouse, nor did any of the participants have a spouse who stayed home to take care of the family. This aligns with the research from the Harvard Business School alumni survey that supports the assertion that there is not an equal balance of household duties between men and women, even if the woman holds a position that is equal to or even higher ranked than her spouse or significant other (Ely, Stone, & Ammerman, 2014). The women's stories about the challenges of balancing family and career indicated that they had to make compromises in order to stay on their career tracks. Connie, for instance, said that she waited much too long to pursue her doctorate, but felt it was her responsibility to take care of her father during his illness. She was in her late fifties when she received her degree and her first senior leadership position. Jane, too, felt like she paid a high price for taking care of her parents. She is retiring after just two years as a vice president because she says she is exhausted. Sandy described the compromise she made by accepting a presidency in a different county and moving her family, including uprooting her children from their school. They were unhappy with the change. The next year

she allowed them to return to their previous school. Her family now lives in two different houses, in two different counties, and she spends a lot of time traveling between the two residences. She said, it's hard, but she makes it work.

All participants felt some level of challenge related to traditional gender expectations and societal norms that place women as the primary caregiver for their families. Though men often share in family duties and responsibilities, their lives are generally more compartmentalized between work and home. Their main identity is with their career and not domestic caretaking (Helgesen, 1990).

Having it all—at what costs? Being a senior women leader compared to a senior male leader often means a doubling of duties and requires more juggling. Women, regardless of professional status, remain the primary family caregiver and are still responsible for the majority of household duties (Tiao, 2006). Evidence from this study, as well as statistics from the American Council on Education in 2012, indicated that women senior leaders are much less likely to have a career, marriage, and children. This is often described as “having it all” and, in this study, includes “doing it all.” For example, Willow said, “But it is exhausting at times and draining at times and you have to pull back because balance is important. She went on to say “I have had to retire the superwoman cape. I had to put it in the closet and be ok with that.” All participants talked about the issues associated with career success as related to the concept of women having a career and family. Their comments focused on the tradeoff and compromises women continue to face as they struggle to make everything work out personally and professionally.

A recent article in the *New York Times* (Miller, 2014) examined why women have not achieved leadership equality in the workplace. Miller found that men and women have different expectations of the balance between family and career: men generally expect that their careers will take priority over their spouse's careers, and that their spouse will handle more of the child care. On the other hand, women expect that their careers will be as important as their spouses' and that they will share child care equally. In general, neither happens. The study concludes that women do have high career expectations, but factors like the workplace, societal norms, and men's expectations have not kept pace and may be responsible for the low representation of women as senior leaders.

The question of 'having it all at what cost' lingers. Six of the seven participants were married and one is divorced. Even so, four of the seven do not have children. Did the reality of attempting to have it all prove to be too much and the compromise was to forgo having children? Women continue to sacrifice more and pay a higher personal price for career success (Ely, Stone, & Ammerman, 2014). This was true for Jane, who has been married twice and divorced twice. She wondered how her ambition and desire to advance her career may have impacted her marriages. She conceded that she spent a lot of time away from home working towards her doctorate, attending conferences, and assuming important leadership duties. Regarding her decision to not have children, Camille said she could not imagine having children and the career she currently has. She said she would likely be in a constant state of guilt about not giving enough time for either. She said she just never wanted to have

children. None of the other participants without children discussed their feelings about the decisions they made to remain childless.

Regardless of their success as professionals, women still consider taking care of family and other household duties their primary responsibility, as well as an essential overall measure of their success. In their study, Ely, Stone, and Ammerman (2014) found that 42% percent of women expected to handle a majority of the child care, yet two-thirds of men expected that their wives would. The conclusion is that workplace norms and men's expectations of women's work have not kept pace with the goals of women. Women in this study believed that as long as women are married, have children, and/or aging parents, they will always have primary responsibility for care. According to societal norms, senior women leaders still have two full-time jobs: home and office. It was presented as just a fact of a woman's life.

Women certainly have made great strides in their quest for equality in the workplace and it is generally concluded from this study that managing both family and work is not a barrier to upward mobility and career advancement. However, it does present challenges that are unique to women and the price has been high. Based on the participants' lived experiences, being a woman and trying to fulfill traditional roles that are both societal and personal is difficult, but not impossible. But at what cost? Several of the women in this study said they are often exhausted from the burden of so many competing responsibilities. Again Jane is retiring after only two years in her dream job as a vice president. At times, the compromises these women have made are extreme. For example, who Sandy maintains two

residences for the sake of her children. Connie who put off getting her doctorate degree until late middle age so she could take care of her father who was in failing health. There is no doubt that the women in this study have been successful in advancing to senior leadership, but the price has indeed been steep.

Self-doubt. Several of the women commented that their careers could have likely moved ahead much faster if they had not doubted themselves and their abilities to lead. For example, Connie stated that she had passed on two promotional opportunities because she was afraid and, at the time, did not feel she had what it took to be successful. She described what she called the “it factor” by saying, “I didn’t know what the “it” was, but whatever it was, I didn’t have it.” Willow also talked about watching two of her female colleagues derail at their institutions, yet not have the confidence to move on, literally and figuratively. She hoped that if something like that happened to her, she would have the courage to move on.

Tiao (2006) described this experience for women as both “fear of failure as well as a fear of success” (p. 38). She explained that because women are not socialized to compete and stand out in the same way men are, the impact of successes and failures are dealt with more personally. She also believed, as does Helgesen (1990), that women do not compartmentalize work as a separate identity, but more of an extension of who they are. Tiao (2006) offers the following advice for future women leader: she needs to know herself, be herself, do her best, recognize her limitations, view things positively, have confidence, use her strengths and take assertive actions. Reflecting on their career experiences, the women of this study

acknowledge that self-doubt has been a personal challenge that they have worked hard to overcome as they advanced to senior leadership.

Coping Strategies

The third research question was, *What coping strategies or skills have senior women leaders employed to overcome barriers?* The next major conclusion responds to this question by revealing that these women developed certain coping strategies and skills to overcome barriers they faced in their careers. The four major themes for coping strategies were educational preparation, supportive relationships, mentoring, risk taking and emotional intelligence.

Educational preparation. For the women in this study, educational preparation included masters and doctoral degrees. Six of the seven participants completed their doctoral degrees and one was enrolled in a doctoral program. All worked on their advanced degrees while working full-time in community colleges. Looking back on their educational attainments, the women believed that having an advanced degree was vital in preparing them for their senior leadership roles. In their study of the evolution of women's leadership in higher education, Astin and Leland (1991) reported that education was important in developing leadership skills, personal awareness, and self-confidence. This finding held true for the women in this study, who reported that they gained both valuable knowledge and increased self-confidence through their higher education experiences. The importance of higher education for women's career advancement in community college administration is documented in Shultz's (2006) study on community college presidents, which found that

90% of the female presidents held a doctorate degree. The women in this study purposefully pursued higher educational opportunities that led to increased self-confidence and technical knowledge and ultimately provided opportunities to advance their careers.

Supportive relationships. Effective senior women leaders are experts at forging supportive relationships. For those in this study, supportive relationships included family, friends, colleagues, professional associations, and faith-based communities; all were considered important throughout their careers. Having a multi-layered support system was vital to the career advancement of the women. In a study intended to help understand how women advance to senior leadership, Helgesen (1995) found that networking opportunities and personal support systems were career facilitators. She called this a “web of inclusion.” From this same study, Helgesen (1995) found that the women were successful in part because they had built integrated networks focusing on building and nurturing good relationships.

Although Helgesen (1995) described the web of inclusion related to the organizational environment, the same concept can be applied to how women succeed in other areas of their lives. Participants in the current study emphasized the value of supportive relationships with family and friends in providing encouragement when they felt overwhelmed or discouraged.

All the women pointed to family as being an important catalyst in their ability to remain grounded and content. Although only 83% of all college presidents are married (AACC, 2012), six of the seven women in this study have been married for 10 or more years.

Among the many support systems, the most effective, and most treasured help, according to the participants, is the ability to share both home and workplace pressures with their spouses.

Willow, whose husband is a pastor, was the only participant who spoke of the importance of her faith in her career and life decisions. She spoke passionately of her faith and described it as her ultimate sustainer; whenever she is feeling tired, lonely, or discouraged she turns to prayer for hope, encouragement, and guidance. Willow also talked about her network of supportive girlfriends. She said she learned from her mother that girlfriends can be a very supportive link when things get rough. It was her friends that helped her mother get through a difficult divorce. Willow shared that she tries to create a girlfriend network for all areas of her life: home, church, work, and her children's school. She said she always has someone she can count on. Jane, too, commented that had it not been for her web of inclusion, there is no way that she could have successfully finished her doctorate, taken care of her parents, and advanced to be a vice president.

All participants talked about issues associated with career success as they related to the concept of women having a career and family. Their comments focused on the tradeoffs, compromises and challenges which women confront.

Mentoring. An important aspect of supportive relationships included having mentors as a strategic approach to career advancement. Many of the women had the benefit of several mentors as advised by Ballentine (2000), Latimore (2008), and Tiao (2006). On the other hand, Angelica had a few people who helped her along the way, but did not have what she considered to be any real mentors. It is interesting to note, though, that all the women, even

the one without a mentor, believed having one is beneficial to career development by revealing knowledge and access that might otherwise take years to acquire. Latimore (2008) stated that “mentors serves a vital role in the career and leadership development of new employees and to individuals who desire to advance their careers” (p. 59).

The women who were mentored had both informal and formal mentoring relationships. Interestingly, one of women in the study stated that all of her mentors had been white males. White male leadership is still prevalent in community college senior leadership, so it is understandable that she would have them as mentors. What is uncommon about this mentoring relationship is that the participant was an African-American female. Mentoring relationships between an African American female and a White male can have its challenges, but can also be very rewarding and beneficial for the career advancement of African American females (Latimore, 2008). Though the literature review did not cover this aspect of mentoring relationships, this finding can begin, or add to, a dialogue on cross-cultural and cross-gender aspects of mentoring that African American women can use to negotiate their careers. Nevertheless, advancement opportunities, as noted by some researchers (Nidiffer & Bashaw, 2002), are more likely to be presented by male mentors who continue to be better connected and included within both formal and informal power structures (Tiao, 2006).

Risk-taking. Another strategy the women used to learn and to present an image of confidence was risk-taking. This involved facing a fear in order to learn and grow. “We cannot always play it safe because that does not put us in a position to learn and grow” (Tiao, 2006, p. 178). Hegelson (1995) described women as being much less willing to apply for new

positions or take risks by assuming new responsibilities unless they are “expertly qualified for the move” (p. 10). The women in this study demonstrated that their upward mobility came by starting with small challenges and as their confidence grew, they progressed toward more important and challenging experiences.

The women spoke of the significance of taking risks in order to gain knowledge and becoming more skilled in the workplace. They clearly understood the necessity of not waiting on life and circumstances to work in their favor, but of participating in their own career mobility. Ginger specifically discussed taking risks as a characteristic of a successful leader. She spoke specifically of the fear and doubt she faced when asked to lead her college in building and opening a new campus. She explained that she spent many hours learning architectural terms and building codes so she could be more competent, confident and respected in meetings in which she was often the only woman. She believed the respect she gained from this experience was responsible for her promotion. All of the women attested to initially being afraid to take risks, but realized they had to be willing to take a chance on such things as new techniques, new programs, and new career positions in order to move up. Risk taking was definitely employed by the women as a strategy for career advancement.

Emotional intelligence. The term, unofficially called EI, is used to describe one’s ability to monitor their own emotions as well as the emotions of others and make suitable adjustments to guide behavior and thinking. The use of appropriate emotional intelligence is often considered a strong indicator of workplace and leadership success (Goleman, 2006). Having a strong sense of emotional intelligence and resilience was identified as an essential

success strategy that the women spoke of for themselves and highly recommended for other women. Several participants noted that, by nature, women are emotional beings. There is, however, no place for emotional outbursts in the workplace and they add another level of discomfort for men as they work with women. The lack of resiliency, which means the ability to bounce back quickly from negative encounters and situations, can certainly derail a woman's career. Willow spoke of the need for women to figure out how to privately handle their anger, disappointment, or frustration and not do so publicly. She noted that such public behavior can be very uncomfortable for others, especially men, and can have a lasting negative impact. Tiao (2006) emphasized that it is important for women to evaluate their environment and adapt accordingly, while holding on to their own values and gradually developing their own way of leading.

Gender Influences

The fourth and final question asked was, *In what ways does gender influence the experiences of career advancement for senior level women in terms of North Carolina community colleges?* The answers to this question were mixed. Women's equity movements have positively impacted working conditions for women over the past 20 years, creating more opportunities for advancement and reduced bias. (Tiao, 2006). However, for at least one of the participants in this study gender was a source of concern. Angelica wondered if the promotion that she expected but did not receive was because she was a woman. She also expressed concern that her pay was less than her male counterpart. Since none of the other participants expressed the same concern, it is possible that Angelica's situation was unique to

her institution and was not widespread across the entire community college system. During Jane's interview, she wondered aloud how her life, in general, may have been different if she were a man. She provided no speculation on the answer and did not appear to expect an answer. Her question was more of wonderment. On the other hand, there were other participants who celebrated their gender. One participant who worked at an institution where women held the presidency and the majority of senior leadership positions. Camille stated that while she did indeed enjoy working at an institution with a women president and predominately women senior leadership team, she did not feel her work environment was biased or more supportive of women and women's concerns though having the support of other women leaders at her institution has certainly been an advantage in some ways. For example, there was a sense of shared understanding related to competing responsibilities and multiple role challenges. At least two of the study participants considered being a female had been beneficial for them. Ginger explained that once her president realized that she was "not a lightweight" and had a lot to offer as a member of the senior leadership team, he began to relate to her more openly. He discussed his leadership vulnerabilities with her that he did not share with the men on the team. She assumed that he felt less competition or pressure to be perfect. She decided this deeper level of communication gave her an advantage with her president. Both Willow and Jane commented that women leaders should not try to fit in as "one of the boys", but instead embrace their femininity and the strengths women bring to leadership. They suggested that as women learn to be comfortable 'in their own skin', others are much more likely to accept them as leaders. None of the women in the study spoke of

gender influence as an overwhelmingly negative factor in the workplace. Gender was discussed by two of the participants as a concern, but not one that they described as insurmountable or too big to overcome. Gender had both negative and positive impacts.

Summary

As a result of their formative experiences that propelled them to seek senior leadership, the women in this study were able to develop success strategies that allowed them overcome the barriers and challenges they faced and become successful senior women leaders. Gender was a neutral point and they did not see it as a factor in their success. In fact, they embraced being a woman and considered their natural tendencies toward collaboration and nurturing as important elements of their leadership success. All participants described their lived experiences of career advancement as an overall positive one and concluded they are very proud to be a senior leader on their respective campuses.

Conclusions

Does gender still matter? Gender in the workplace may not matter in the same ways it may have mattered before the passage of important legislation such as the equal pay act and Title IX but, having more women in senior leadership pipeline positions could prove to be an important opportunity for women. With an increasing number of community college senior leaders approaching retirement, college administrators are under pressure to find well-prepared replacements. Trends such as women as college presidents, increased degree attainment, and workforce numbers of women, point to increased opportunities for women (Kuharski, 2009). Further, as community college enrollments, faculty, and staff are

comprised mainly of minorities and women, leadership that reflects this combined population may be beneficial (Krause, 2009; Kuharski, 2009). Krause (2009) posited that representation is an important element signifies equality of opportunity; whereas the absence of representation by certain groups of people might be interpreted as barriers to their advancement. Within the context of this focus on more women in community college senior leadership, aspiring leaders as well as community college senior administrators need to more deeply understand how programs, policies, and practice must be planned and managed to achieve significant results.

Sheryl Sandberg (2013) relays a story in her book, *Lean In*, about her being pregnant and working for Yahoo. The only parking space she was able to find was a good distance from the building. She ended up walking the distance and promptly telling the owner that there was a need for reserved parking for pregnant women. He agreed without hesitation and said he had never thought of that need. Sandberg (2013) admitted that neither had she until she found herself in the situation. She concluded that “the blunt truth is that men still run the world” (p. 5).

Although, none of the women in this study felt gender had a negative impact on their leadership effectiveness; they did discuss their leadership characteristics as collaborative, inclusive, and relational which tend to be associated more with women. For example, Connie described that her early experiences of leadership in an environment which was tough, aggressive, and top-down were rewarded. She went on to describe her discomfort with the expected leadership style and began to develop her own leadership style, which was less

aggressive and less intimidating. She concluded that her style was just as effective and less damaging to the self-esteem and feelings of others. Both Willow and Jane emphasized their concern for their staff and the genuine care they felt with them. They stated that they always acknowledged birthdays and other important personal events of their staffs – and even knew the families of most. They both stated that building a supportive team had been critical to their success as senior women leaders. This study has added to workplace awareness and helped to broaden the general understanding of feminine attributes that are beneficial and important components of effective leadership; as a result it may ultimately help expand opportunities for women aspiring to senior leadership by making them more confident in their own individual leadership styles.

Typically, men are more linear in their thought processes and are narrower in their focus; women tend to have a broader spectrum view of their environments. Helgesen and Johnson (2010) called this broader spectrum of noticing that is unique to women, “the female vision.” They posit that “what we notice also informs how we understand events, order information, and assign value” (p. 41). They go on to explain that based on women’s prior experiences and socialization, women are trained to pay attention to details, including emotional clues, anticipating the needs of others, and making necessary adjustments to avoid conflict (Helgesen & Johnson, 2010). The dynamics of the female vision align with the competencies for emerging community college leaders identified by the AACC (2013). These include more women as senior leaders as a critical element of the future vitality of community college higher education.

Molly Broad, president of the American Council on Education, stated that leadership is not only effective, but reflective, of the world around it and will be key to managing the challenges of today and the unknown challenges of tomorrow (ACE, 2012). The full impact of female perspectives, contributions, and role modeling has yet to be felt. According to DiCroce (1995), women leaders are expected to change the culture of the community college and improve opportunities for women by:

1. Reducing gender stereotypes.
2. Instituting a relational—as opposed to bureaucratic/hierarchical— culture.
3. Developing and implementing more gender-related policies and procedures to promote diversity.
4. Increasing awareness about gender issues.
5. Supporting women to take a proactive role in public policy issues beyond the local campus.

Each of these actions would support *all* stakeholders if more women were to become community college senior leaders (DiCroce, 1995). “If women and other minorities are absent from power positions where ideas and images are produced,” wrote Anderson (1993), “then their world views and experiences will not be reflected in the images those organizations produce” (p. 59). This research study supports his statement.

“When the female vision remains untapped, both women and the organizations suffer” (Helgesen & Johnson, 2010, p. 91). Community colleges would be remiss if they did not become more intentional in preparing women to become senior leaders within their

institutions. By not including the female vision, organizations, including community colleges lose power Helgesen and Johnson (2010) paint a poignant picture as they describe organizations that fail to include women as senior leaders:

“They undermine the full potential of their talent base. They diminish the capacity of their people to make balanced decision. They undermine creativity and reduce the potential for real collaboration. They remain one dimensional in a multi-dimensional world” (p. 91).

What if I were a man? Jane pondered this question a couple of times during her interview. She wondered how her life would be different if she had not had all the primary care responsibilities for her children and her parents. She wondered if she would have had more time for personal interests, such as cooking or traveling. Or, maybe, she would have had more energy to pursue her career. Camille also considered the possibility that she might have moved further away, to a different state, like her brother had done. The question comes to mind for most career women, as it did for Jane and Camille.

For the past several decades, women have fought for equality at work and home. Men are told to take more responsibility at home and be less aggressive; on the other hand, women are told they need to be more assertive and take on more work responsibility in order to move ahead. However, this advice seems to reinforce the stereotypes: Men who are more home-focused are labeled as too soft and women who focused on the workplace are called aggressive. Even though these characterizations may be overstated, research does show gender stereotypes still exist and influence the work lives of women.

In a survey to nearly 7,000 Harvard Business School alumni, men and women graduates had nearly identical goals; they wanted meaningful, satisfying work and opportunities for career growth. They also wanted fulfilling personal lives. Although the goals of men and women are similar, the reality favors men. Among those working full-time, men were significantly more likely than women to have senior level management responsibility. Fifty-seven percent of men were in senior management, whereas only 41% of women were senior leaders (Miller, 2014). These data are in line with research presented in Chapter 1 of this study, which documents that only 33% of community college presidents are women (Touchton et al., 2008).

Men tend to take a more direct route to leadership than women and, therefore, become senior leaders at an earlier age than women – thus allowing them to spend more time in their leadership roles. As noted in this study, women consider hard work and waiting to be recognized and rewarded for their hard work as their plan to advance. For example, both Camille and Sandy noted that their promotions had come about as a result of their hard work. Indeed, early formative experiences had taught them that this was an effective strategy. However, this strategy also means that, for women, advancement often comes later in life and is not intentionally directed. Using this strategy, women may more likely to find themselves in positions that they do not enjoy or which are not well-suited to their strengths. Their path to senior leadership may be more circuitous, thus resulting in their entering senior leadership at an older age than men (Kellerman & Rhode, 2007).

Furthermore, this study revealed that while risk taking may be a strategy for success some women are not comfortable taking risks at work and thus may turn down opportunities for advancement or not seek new ones. Research shows that when men review a job description and meet two out of ten of the qualifications, they feel qualified and will apply for the position. Women, however, are likely to apply only if they meet nine of the ten requirements (Kellerman & Rhode, 2007). Additionally, workplace norms still give men an advantage in leadership, which in turn means that they are given more opportunities to practice their leadership skills compared to women. This practice reduces their level of risk when they are promoted.

In general, men carry less family care responsibilities than women. A factor that affects women's career advancement is the reality that they carry the majority of family care responsibilities. Jane, who found herself exhausted just when she was nearing the height of her career, stated, "I suppose if I had been a man, I would have had someone else taking care of my children and cooking my meals. But instead it was just me." The Harvard study (Miller, 2014) revealed that 42% of the women surveyed expected to handle the majority of the childcare. Some women do leave the workforce to handle family care, but the Harvard study showed that few do so by choice (Miller, 2014). Men rarely leave the workforce to take care of family. The Harvard Business School study revealed that 71% of women had taken more than six months off work to care for family, compared with only 2% of men (Ely et al., 2014). If women return to work, some choose part-time work and are again punished in the

workplace by frequently not being able to resume career status or become involved in what they consider to be meaningful work.

Men earn more than women. Another issue that negatively impacts women who may aspire to senior leadership is the salary disparity that exist between men and women. According to the United States Department of Labor (2013), women still earn just 81% of what men do for performing the same work. Although the number of women receiving advanced degrees and entering the workforce continues to grow, women remain clustered near the bottom of the organizational chart (Latimore, 2008). Further, it is more difficult for women to find influential mentors. This is primarily because the majority of senior leaders are men, and men are twice as likely to mentor other men as they are to mentor women (Latimore, 2008). There is still work to be done to break down the barriers surrounding cross-cultural and cross-gender mentoring. Although women have made great strides in equality both at home and at work, there continues to be societal and workplace norms firmly in place that favor men and add additional layers that complicate the career upward mobility of women.

What women want? In summary, what women want is multi-layered, but it begins with satisfaction. Results from a satisfaction survey given by Helgesen and Johnson (2010) revealed that women want work that is meaningful to them. They prefer work that aligns with their personal values and is not necessarily based on power and competition. They also want work that respects their need for balance between their personal and work lives, so multi-tasking that has become so much a part of their daily lives can be reduced.

Equitable compensation is also important because many women are either the primary breadwinners, or their salaries account for more than 50% of the household income (Miller, 2014). However in the satisfaction survey of women (Helgesen & Johnson, 2010), salary was more a means to an end (e.g., comfort and security) rather than the goal. Women prefer work environments that are relational, team-oriented, and collaborative—where they can create supportive networks for advancement. Finally, what women want is their partners to respect their career goals and accept an equal role in the responsibilities of family care and household duties.

Limitations

The findings of this study are based on a small group of seven women who are senior leaders at North Carolina community colleges and are not intended to be a comprehensive statement about the experiences of all women senior leaders. The results of this study cannot be generalized to apply to all women senior leaders in community colleges. Consideration must be given when extending the results of this study to other populations of women and even to other community colleges within the state. Although this study provided important insight in to the experiences of women senior leaders, additional studies could include women from several states.

Implications for Further Research

One recommendation for further research is to explore the connections of race and gender in the career development of senior women leaders. Although there were only two African-American women participants in this study, there were several very intriguing

intersections of race and gender that came up during interviews. Therefore, I suggest the relationship between them be explored.

There is recent research that explores the simultaneous oppression related to race and gender through intersectionality, a term coined in 1989 by Kimberle Crenshaw. Intersectionality is the juxtaposition of race, class and gender. The factors of race and gender are arguably beyond anyone's control. So what do women intentionally need to bring to this intersection that can empower them to move beyond these factors? Perhaps the answers can be found in education, perseverance, faith, etc. These are questions for further study, but are also questions raised during my interview with Willow – one of two African American women in this study.

It may be interesting to conduct a study that looked only at the experiences of African American women in pipeline positions as they advance to senior leadership, including their perceptions of perceived barriers and the strategies they employ to overcome them as well as the additional impact of gender. The fact remains that, of the 58 community colleges in North Carolina, only one is led by an African American woman.

Another area of research related to gender bias is found in a recent article in the *Washington Post* (Feltman, 2015) claimed that genius fields are still dominated by men. If the conclusions of this article are accurate and certain professions and fields of study favor innate ability over hard work and perseverance, women should be decidedly troubled. Gender bias based on brilliance still favors men. The results of my study showed that women employ hard work and perseverance as an advancement strategy. Further study could be done to

explore the impact of bias towards genius and its result on the career paths of senior women leaders.

Recommendations for Community College Practices

Within each of the themes identified in this study, there are opportunities for institutions to reflect on how their environmental and institutional cultures may influence the career upward mobility of women who may aspire to senior leadership. Community colleges could start by examining the campus environment for important formative experiences available to aspiring women leaders. Other areas of college operations that could be modified to support future women leaders are discussed below.

Financial support. Institutions could provide financial support and schedule flextime to support women who may choose to pursue higher degree attainment. Additionally, institutions could be more intentional and create more opportunities for women to lead campus-wide committees and large projects. Participants in this study noted the value associated with having a variety of roles in their careers. Participants explained that this allowed them to explore and be exposed to various aspects of leadership in a supportive and developmental work environment.

Self-efficacy. Institutions could help promote self-efficacy in women by providing avenues for formal recognition of accomplishments like project leadership, successful project completion, degree attainment, and promotions. These experiences and opportunities for recognition ultimately lead to greater self-confidence in one's abilities, promote leadership as a positive career experience and provided the opportunity needed to develop and practice

their individual leadership style. Therefore, institutions would benefit from ensuring that women who aspire to senior leadership have increased responsibilities to maximize their talents, skills, opportunities for recognition, and professional development in their current roles.

Work-life balance. When looking to provide leadership development opportunities, institutions will need to consider the pressures women leaders face in their efforts to balance the multiple role challenges unique to women. Any steps that community colleges could take to either assist in balancing the demands of work and home including flexible work schedules or work from home options; or addressing unrealistic gendered expectations would likely help cultivate a greater pool of potential leaders.

Serendipity. Institutions will also need to pay more attention to the development of its “accidental leaders.” The majority of the women in this study found themselves in senior leadership positions they did not actively pursue. Consistent with the literature, this serendipitous approach to leadership is not uncommon among women who have advanced to senior leadership. Community colleges would be wise to provide resources to help women identify their expectations, as well as those from others, thereby reducing fears and uncertainties that may be associated with leadership positions. In general, institutional leadership should find ways to make leadership more attractive, manageable, and possible as a career goal. As a result of the conversations with the participants, institutions have much to examine as they attempt to provide supportive environments and important experiences for the women who desire leadership roles.

An additional recommendation for community colleges is that they focus on succession planning or identifying replacements for senior leadership as they retire (Ebbers, Gallisath, Rockel, & Coyan, 2000). It deliberately targets potential leaders and serves to prepare not just future presidents and vice presidents, but also preparation for pipeline positions like chief academic officers and deans and other potential leaders to fill vacancies as current campus leaders reach retirement.

Professional development. Those responsible for leadership development programs, particularly in-house ones, could benefit from the data and themes identified in this study. The major themes that emerged from the data could serve as a possible format or structure, or at least provide relevant topics of discovery for program participants. From a leadership development perspective, personal, professional, and institutional formative experiences are essential in the early careers of aspiring senior women leaders. Opportunities for formal learning and developing positive experiences that lead to increased confidence and other opportunities for growth are essential. Providing an environment that helps women better understand what they will encounter as senior leaders can assist them as they advance. Special attention should also be paid to what expectations they may face that are based on gender. Based on this study, women would seem to benefit from leadership development focused on specific areas: balancing family and work responsibilities, developing supportive relationships (including mentors and family), emotional intelligence, resiliency, and dealing with self-doubt.

Participation in structured professional development programs away from campus could be an important support for women who are aspiring to become senior leaders. For example, institutions could set aside funding for women to attend national development programs such as the HERS Wellesley Institute for Women in Higher Education Administration, begun by Wellesley College in 1978. It provides an intense curriculum intended to prepare women for institutional leadership roles. Even more regional or state programs could prove beneficial and send a strong message of support. North Carolina in particular has the North Carolina Community College Leadership Program, an annual program that allows for local institutions to send two emerging leaders to participate in a nine-month leadership development program. Colleges could decide to reserve one slot every year for an aspiring women leader from their campus to participate in this professional development program.

Mentoring. Finally, institutions that establish formal mentoring programs may assist women in developing their personal strategies for success, by including topics such as self-reflection, dealing with the loneliness and isolation that may come with career advancement, and savvy navigation of workplace politics.

Personal Reflections

This study has explored the experiences of senior women leaders in North Carolina community colleges. While conducting the research, I sometimes struggled to set my lived experiences and biases aside so that the research findings would not be influenced. However,

in this final section, I have shared some of my personal experiences. This research experience has been very rewarding.

As I talked with each of the women in my study, I continually relived my own experiences during my career journey where I have been declined opportunities to participate in professional development programs and struggled, on my own, figure out how to advance my career. The career paths and personal lives of the women seem very similar and entangled as my own. Even as I read research articles and books, the familiarity of experiences was very close to me. I found myself identifying with many of the circumstances and situations.

The opportunity to reflect on my own journey through the increased awareness provided by this research experience helped me realize that I too have an important role in preparing other women who may aspire to senior leadership. This study also made me question whether I am active enough in intentionally supporting women who aspire to senior leadership and to remind other women who are currently senior leaders that we have a responsibility to support and influence policy at our local institutions. Women who are currently senior leaders must improve the cultural environment and expectations for women who hope to become senior leaders. This study has reminded of my vital role and responsibility as a senior women leader.

I was able to identify with the examples provided by participants who relayed stories of taking care of children and parents while trying to pursue degrees and taking on more responsibility at work in order to advance to higher positions. It was very affirming to me to

hear the stories of success and gain a better understanding of the experiences of women who have chosen this journey. In many ways it helped me to add meaning to my own experiences.

As the women in this study have shared their stories of success, I wish the same success for other women who aspire to senior leadership and to the institutions that will hire them.

That Woman is a Success...

Who loves life and lives it to the fullest;

Who has discovered and shared the strengths and talents that are uniquely her own;

Who puts her best into each task and leaves each situation better than she found it;

Who seeks and finds that which is beautiful in all people and all things;

Whose heart is full of love and warm with compassion;

Who has found joy in living and peace within herself.

Barbara J. Burrow

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Appendix A: Demographic Survey

Name: _____

Institution name: _____

1. In what year were you born? _____

2. Race/Ethnicity

American Indian

Asian

Black or African American

Hispanic or Latino

White

Other

3. What is the highest degree you have completed?

Doctorate

Specialist

Master's

Bachelors

Associates

4. Marital Status

Single and never married

Married

Living with partner or significant other

Separated, divorced, or widowed

5. (If applicable) state the occupation of spouse or partner: _____

6. Estimated number of work hours per week: _____

7. Number of children (if any): _____

8. Do you have primary care responsibilities for an elderly parent? _____

9. Parents' highest educational levels: _____

- Father: _____
- Mother: _____

10. Number of years in current position: _____

11. Previous 3 administrative positions, institution/organization, and years of service

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

12. Total number of years in higher education: _____

13. Professional/career mentoring experience:

- Position/title of mentor(s): _____
 - Relationship: _____
- Gender of mentor: _____

14. Would you be interested in participating in a follow-up interview? Yes _____ No _____

If **yes**, please provide your contact information:

Name: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

(Adapted from *National Survey of Post-Secondary Faculty*, 2013)

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

1. General

1. Would you please tell me a little bit about yourself?
2. To what would you attribute your obtaining your current position as a senior leader?

2. What are the personal, educational and institutional experiences that contribute to upward mobility of women as they advance into senior level positions?

1. How have you experienced family and/or personal struggles in your path to success as a women senior leader?
2. What strategies have you developed along the way to handle family/ personal issues?
3. Identify two or three barriers or obstacles that have hindered or delayed your effectiveness and success.
4. How have these barriers affected you personally and professionally?
5. Describe how you have overcome barriers or obstacles that have hindered or delayed your effectiveness and success.

3. What role do formal and informal mentoring programs have in the career advancement of women?

1. Tell me about any formal mentoring experiences you have had.
2. Tell me about any informal mentoring experiences you have had.

4. How does gender influence the experiences of women as they advance in their career in the North Carolina Community College System?

1. Tell me if you think gender has played any positive or negative role for you in your pursuit of career success in higher education administration?

2. What do you think are the general advantages and/or disadvantages to being a woman in the profession?
3. From your perspective, had you been a man, would the institutional, family, and personal barriers you described have been different? If so, how?
5. **What strategies or skills have senior women leaders employed to overcome barriers?**
 - a. What insights have you gained about women in leadership over the years? What pitfall should women avoid and what choices can they have?
 - b. What skills, strategies, or support are most critical if women are to succeed as senior level decision makers at community colleges?
 - c. What advice would you give to women who want to have both a career in higher education administration and a family life?

Are there any other questions or comments you would like to add?

Would you mind if I contact you for more information or clarification?

Thank you for your participation.

(Adapted from Tiao, 2006)

Appendix C: Consent to Participate Form

My name is Jewel Cherry. I am a doctoral student at Appalachian State University, under the supervision of Dr. Precious Mudiwa, Dissertation Chair. I invite you to participate in a research study focusing on *Women in Senior Leadership Positions in North Carolina community colleges*. The purpose of this study is to inquire into and offer a basis for understanding the lived experiences of women who currently serve as presidents, vice presidents, assistant or associate vice presidents, chief academic officers, student services senior administrators or deans at community colleges in North Carolina. Further the study is intended to identify barriers they may face and strategies needed for women leaders to succeed. This research project is being fulfilled as part of my program of study.

While there may be no immediate benefits of your participation in this study, your insights could help add to the body of knowledge pertaining to the experiences of women who have advanced to senior leadership. Also, your expertise may provide insight and guidance for women who may seek to advance as well as for institutions they may seek to prepare them. No foreseeable risks are associated with your participation in this study. As a participant, your name will be disguised with an alternate name. Information used in this study will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and destroyed after one year of this study.

Realizing the value of time, I plan on limiting interview sessions to no more than two sessions per participant. Each participant will be interviewed no longer than a total of 2 hours. You may also be asked to participate in a focus group, if needed. However, participation in the study is voluntary, so you may choose at any time to discontinue participation. Your discontinuance of this study will not have any adverse effect on your standing with Appalachian State University or the institution where you work.

I am asking your permission to take written notes and/or audio record each of the interview sessions, so that I may accurately transcribe or review our discussions. Thank you for your participation in this study. If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you may contact me at jcherry@forsythtech.edu or my Dissertation Chair at mudiwap@appstate.edu. Questions regarding the protection of human subjects may be addressed to the IRB Administrator, Research and Sponsored Programs, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608 (828) 262-2130, irb@appstate.edu.

Biographical Information

Jewel Elizabeth Boozer Cherry was born in Woodruff, South Carolina, to Henry and Mattie Boozer. She graduated from Woodruff High school. She went on to earn a Bachelor's degree in Political Science and an MBA degree, both from Winthrop University in Rock Hill South Carolina. While working at Forsyth Technical Community College she later earned an Education Specialist degree in Higher Education Administration and a Doctorate degree in Educational Leadership from Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina.

Over her twenty year tenure in community college higher education she progressed from her faculty position into various leadership positions – including coordinator, dean of enrollment and she currently serves as vice president of the student services division. In addition to her professional career, she is an active member of her church and community. Jewel has three adult children and currently resides with her husband in Clemmons, North Carolina.