EPISTEMOLOGICAL GERMINATION: EXAMINING THE TRANSFORMATIVE
EXPERIENCE OF FIRST-GENERATION WOMEN PROFESSIONALS IN
COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERSHIP

A Dissertation
by
JENNIFER MCLEAN

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
at Appalachian State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May 2023
Educational Leadership Doctoral Program
Reich College of Education

EPISTEMOLOGICAL GERMINATION: EXAMINING THE TRANSFORMATIVE
EXPERIENCE OF FIRST-GENERATION WOMEN PROFESSIONALS IN
COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERSHIP

A Dissertation
by
JENNIFER MCLEAN
May 2023

APPROVED BY:

Shawn Ricks, Ph.D.
Chairperson, Dissertation Committee

Patti Levine-Brown, Ed.D.
Member, Dissertation Committee

Chauntee Thrill, Ph.D.
Member, Dissertation Committee

Vachel Miller, Ed.D.
Director, Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Marie Hoepfl, Ed.D.
Interim Dean, Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate Studies

Abstract

EPISTEMOLOGICAL GERMINATION: EXAMINING THE TRANSFORMATIVE
EXPERIENCE OF FIRST-GENERATION WOMEN PROFESSIONALS IN
COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERSHIP

Jennifer McLean
B.S., University of North Carolina at Pembroke
M.A. Appalachian State University
Ed.D., Appalachian State University

Dissertation Committee Chairperson: Dr. Shawn Ricks

This dissertation seeks to examine the impact of the first-generation experience on

women executive leaders in community colleges. The project included interviews of eight

women in order to seek understanding of their journeys. Utilizing transformative learning

theory and phenomenology to analyze the data, several themes emerged that highlight this

experience. Examination of the research question from three facets were then translated into

a three-article structure. First, the role of gender was examined where three themes emerged:

the exigency of the call to education, the societal expectation of emotion, and the gender

dichotomy in leadership. In the second article, the community college setting is highlighted

with the themes of navigating the complex community college system, the unexpected career

ladders the system provided, and the joy of serving a disparate population. Finally, I

examined the first-generation impact and participants shared the role of family dynamics,

their interconnected identities, and how their story shaped their leadership. In the concluding

portion of the dissertation, I discuss overarching themes that emerged from all articles

including the role of mentorship, leading with your soul, and navigating with your heart.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not have been possible without the encouragement of my family and friends. My faith has led me through the difficult valleys of my experience and enhanced the joys of the mountaintops. My husband has been my rock throughout my journey and consistently encouraged me when the pressure felt too great. My son has endured the sacrifice of my time away during class and writing sessions and served as my inspiration. My mother, through her tenacity, joined me in the college experience and has always proclaimed the power of education.

I would like to also acknowledge Dr. Shawn Ricks, my dissertation chair and confidant through this process. Thank you for your gentle spirit, wisdom, and your encouragement when I needed it most. My committee members, Dr. Patti Levine-Brown and Dr. Chauntee Thrill were amazing guides during this process that caused me to look continually deeper into my content and cheered me on.

Dedication

To my husband, I could not have made it without you.

Table of Contents

Epistemological Germination: An Overview

For this study, I was drawn to examine the experience of first-generation students who entered the white-collar workforce to become first-generation professionals. My own experience as a first-generation college student and first-generation professional was life-changing for me and I was curious how others interpreted their journey. Reflection on this journey led to the creation of the term *epistemological germination*. Epistemology is explained by Crotty (1998) as "a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know" (p. 3). It incorporates knowledge, how we developed it, the elements that constitute knowledge and the importance we place on this knowledge (Crotty, 1998). Germination in the scientific world is "sequences of complex processes that lead to the initiation of growth" in seed development (Benech-Arnold & Sanchez, 2004). For educational literature, I created *epistemological germination* to encompass the growth of individual knowledge and the intricate stages that contribute to this growth. These stages can include a wide variety of experiences including family dynamics, childhood trauma, cultural environment, educational journey, and life experiences. In my personal experience, the seed of my epistemology was watered and fertilized by my childhood experiences, my first-generation college journey and my foray into the white-collar world as the first in my family to enter this world.

My earlier experiences significantly impacted my worldview and *epistemological germination* perfectly summed up the transformative experience. I consider the roots of the germination process as my childhood experiences. My family and the environment in which I was developed contributed into how I viewed the world. I was raised in a multi-ethnic county in North Carolina. My county of origin provided a unique perspective on the dynamics of

ethnicity. My mother returned to school, attending our local community college for a brief period of time in my pre-teen years. These experiences led to my development and made me into the person I am today. The seed of my worldview was within me, but through the watering and fertilizing of my postsecondary journey and life experiences, I flourished into a new creation. My *epistemological germination* continues and as a creation I will continue to grow and learn from my experiences. I am enjoying transforming into a seasoned educator.

Transformative learning theory was chosen as a theoretical framework as it spoke to the disorientation of postsecondary education and the steps students take to acclimate to their new environment. I am utilizing phenomenology as this methodology focuses on the experience of the individual through examination through qualitative interviews. I chose to select participants from North Carolina Community College leaders as this system resonated with me as providing opportunities through its 'open door' policy and is the system in which I am currently employed. Executive leaders were chosen as they have positional power in the organization, to examine if the impact of their first-generation college experience influenced their approach to leadership. The combination of the first-generation experience and positional power provides the basis for the results of this study that seeks to counter the deficit narrative surrounding first-generation students and the lack of research of first-generation professionals.

Research Question

The research question addressed in this study is 'What is the significance of the first-generation experience on women that are serving in executive roles at the community college?' Through the lens of phenomenology, the study sought to discover the meaning

making developed by participants that have experienced this journey. To develop a rich understanding of their experience, three interview questions were asked:

1. Describe your first professional higher education job experience after obtaining your undergraduate degree?

2. How did that experience impact you as a community college leader?

3. What do you think about how your leadership experience may have differed from your male colleagues?

These questions prompted in depth discussions of their educational and career journeys that are reflected in three articles included in this dissertation document.

Three-Article Selection and Overview

A three-article dissertation style was chosen for this project to allow me to share the content with academic journals and increase the awareness and breadth of research on this topic. Creativity is encouraged in this approach to the dissertation process and that appealed to me. To provide continuity between each article, a bridge has been inserted to discuss the experience of writing the previous article and how the next article ties in with the overall research project.

Article One: Through the Lens of Gender

In the first article, *Tiptoeing on the Glass Ceiling: Community College Women in Executive Roles*, I examined the role of the participant's gender. How has moving through the community college space as a woman influenced their career and their perceptions of its trajectory? The participants shared the urgent, or exigency, of the calling to education, specifically the community college system. They also discussed embracing and rejecting the societal role of emotion. Many felt their compassion was an asset to their engagement with

others and yet they were rewarded when they were perceived to lead without emotion. Finally, in this article I shared the participant's experience of the gender dichotomy in leadership. Microaggressions and assumptions of the capabilities of women were common experiences within their institutions. I anticipate submitting this article to the *Advancing Women in Leadership* journal. The *Advancing Women in Leadership* journal is coordinated through the Educational Leadership Research Center, in affiliation with Texas A&M University and the focus is on content related to women's leadership issues (n.d.).

Article Two: Through the Lens of the Community College Setting

For the second article, *Navigating the Labyrinth: Executive Women's Experience in the Community College*, the focus is on how the community college system influenced the women executive leaders. Why were these women drawn to this educational system? Three themes emerged from the interviews with participants: their experience navigating the community college as a complex system, the unanticipated career ladder the system provided, and the joy of serving a disparate population. The community college focused article will be submitted to the *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*. Since that journal is focused on the community college space in higher education and community college educators are their intended audience.

Article Three: Through the Lens of the First-Generation Experience

Lastly, the third article, *First-Gen Impact: How the First-Generation Journey Impacts Executive Women's Leadership* explored the effect of the first-generation experience on participants. When attending postsecondary education as the first in your family, is your lens of leadership altered when you return to this system for your career? I found that the dynamics of family support varied among participants and impacted their journeys as a

result. The participants also shared interconnected identities as some were of low socioeconomic status during their educational journey or working full-time and juggling a family while they pursued their degree. Ultimately, their story shaped their approach to leadership and shaped how they engage with colleagues and students. With the focus on first-generation experiences, this article will be submitted to the *Journal of First-generation Student Success* coordinated by the Center for First-Generation Student Success. The *Journal of First-generation Student Success* audience are student affairs personnel working to support first-generation student success.

Each article in this dissertation will utilize these questions to examine my overarching research purpose of the significance of the first-generation experience on women who are serving in executive roles at the community college from a different lens.

Participants

The study process began with a survey sent to North Carolina Community College System listservs that target Presidents, Vice Presidents, Deans, and Executive Directors. Those interested in the study were asked to complete a short survey that requested their name, institution, role, and gender. Over seventy responses were received from the survey. A list of responses was created from respondents who met the requirements of the study. From this list, participants were chosen for this qualitative study from executive leaders serving in the North Carolina Community College System. Emphasis was placed on selecting participants in different leadership roles along with a geographical dispersion across North Carolina. Eight women were included in this study who were executive leaders representing different areas of the community college including both curriculum and continuing education. The women also represent community colleges from across the state, as their

varying roles and the culture of their community college would influence their leadership perspectives.

After interviews concluded, a transcript was provided to participants to confirm the data represented their voice. The women were also provided an opportunity to comment on the transcript and schedule a follow-up interview if clarification was needed. Once this was complete, I analyzed the data with open coding and three themes emerged for each article included in this dissertation document.

Eight women agreed to participate in this research study. All of these women work in the North Carolina Community College System in an executive leadership role. Their roles range from Executive Director to Dean to President. I appreciate the privilege of sharing their voices and experiences in this project. All women were provided an opportunity to select a pseudonym. Due to the nature of the study and the selection of this limited population, some details such as specific titles are not mentioned with the participant's pseudonym. The names below include these pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity.

Angie. Angie graduated from her local community college before entering into the healthcare system while she pursued her bachelor's degree. She sees many of the parallels in serving both systems in that at their core it is about relationship-building and establishing trust. Angie serves in the administration division at her community college.

Ann. Ann began her first-generation experience at a large university before withdrawing and serving in the military. The university she attended served over 10,000 students and contrasted with her experience at the local community college of less than 5,000. She was a student at the community college system and served in healthcare before

joining her current institution. She has now worked at the community college for over 20 years and serves in a senior administration role.

Carrie. Carrie started her postsecondary education journey at a large university. After stopping out, she raised her family before returning to complete her undergraduate degree. Armed with her new degree, she joined her local community college in an entry-level position, and she has now ascended to executive leadership at her institution. Carrie has worked at her community college for over 10 years.

Elizabeth. Elizabeth graduated from a large university and was employed in the financial field before listening to her inner voice that called her to education. She joined the community college system as a faculty member and now serves in a senior administrative role at her institution.

Joy. Joy had a multitude of experiences before coming to education. She earned her degree at a large university and worked in several states before coming to North Carolina. Once here, she worked in the student services area before switching to faculty and later becoming a senior leader.

Katherine. Katherine earned her bachelor's degree at a large university. She worked in several states and even outside the United States before joining a community college. Her previous corporate experience provides a unique lens to her current work at her institution. She works in the continuing education administration area at her community college.

Kristen. Kristen was a student at her community college when a staff member recommended her for an entry-level position. She worked full-time, managing her family while pursuing both her bachelor's and master's degrees. The strain of juggling these

responsibilities is shared in the articles below. She has worked at her community college for over 20 years and serves in a senior administration role.

Tara. Finally, Tara was a student at her community college as well. She juggled family and school responsibilities while she worked for a local small business. Realizing the lack of growth in her position at the business, Tara applied for an assistant position at her alma mater and began her journey of achieving additional degrees as she climbed the career ladder. Tara joined her community college almost 20 years ago and now serves in a senior role in the curriculum area.

These women all share a unique perspective of the first-generation experience. As women, they have blazed trails within their careers, often encountering barriers and overcoming these through their tenacity. As executive leaders, they now bring their own experiences to leadership, guiding the colleagues and students they serve.

Transformative Learning Theory Framework

Transformative learning theory was the guiding conceptual framework for this project (Mezirow, 1997). It has been utilized in many fields but predominantly focuses on educational research. I utilized transformative learning theory to examine the perspectives and experiences of female leaders who were first-generation students. Educational leaders can learn how to alter the educational environment to better serve marginalized students but also gain a deeper understanding of our colleagues that have this experience. Transformative learning theory can assist in providing a realistic depiction of the first-generation professional experience for women that will allow for fellow educators to connect with this experience while informing and educating others that may serve under their leadership.

Jack Mezirow is the founder of transformative learning theory. Mezirow's work was conducted at a pivotal time in America. In the late 1970's he conducted a study of re-entry programs designed for women interested in pursuing postsecondary education or entering the workforce (Mezirow, 1978). The study design included urban and rural settings, diverse economic status areas, as well as women of color (Mezirow, 1978). Hoggan and Browning (2019) note the societal role of women was changing in the "midst of the second-wave feminist movement" where women were challenging historical standards of femininity and the role of women in the world (p. 28). Metamorphosis of the role of women reshaped the outlook and overall view of women in Western culture. Individuals that were brave enough to reflect critically on their previous assumptions can examine the context of these meanings, modify them with new information or excise old perspectives altogether (Mezirow, 2000). The transformative process altered how women approached the workplace as well and many began to challenge the glass ceiling. The *glass ceiling* is a term that was coined during the time of Mezirow's study that explained the typical experience of women at work. Marilyn Loden coined the term glass ceiling in a 1978 panel session addressing women's experiences in their careers (*BBC*, 2017). While advancement was possible, most women reached a point where their heads bumped against a glass ceiling, a transparent boundary where their careers were halted. Only White men were able to elevate into the most senior roles. While women have since broken the glass ceiling, invisible boundaries continue to exist which prompted me to incorporate this term into my first article.

In *Tiptoeing on the Glass Ceiling: Community College Women in Executive Roles*, the first article in this project, I examine the three core elements Mezirow identified in transformative learning theory: individual experience, critical reflection, and dialogue

(Merriam et al., 2007). Individual experience is prior knowledge the individual brings to the educational setting. Critical reflection is the process of deconstructing this knowledge along with dialogue with others to formulate a new epistemology. In the second article, *Navigating the Labyrinth: Executive Women's Experience in the Community College*, I delve into Mezirow's concept of communicative learning within transformative learning theory. Communicative learning is dialogue between two individuals that emphasizes discourse (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Discourse is essential to communicative learning (Mezirow, 2000). Communicative learning involves discourse, emotions, ethics, and virtues that formulate underlying meaning in discourse (Mezirow, 2000). In *First-Gen Impact: How the First-Generation Journey Impacts Executive Women's Leadership*, I examine Mezirow's ten phases of learning. As adult college students interpret new information, the application of learning occurs, in comparison to their previous experiences, and the development of meaning takes shape (Mezirow, 1991). The same experience can be replicated for the first-generation professional who may be entering into the white-collar world of work. Unexplained norms are faced, as well as the discomfort of entering an environment where family members have no experience. Mezirow and Taylor (2009) analyzed adult learning and created ten phases of learning:

- a disorienting dilemma
- self-examination
- a critical assessment of assumptions
- recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation
- exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action
- planning a course of action
- acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan
- provisional trying of new roles
- building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
- a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (p. 19)

Mezirow (2000) did acknowledge that these learning phases were not linear, but steps that may be repeated and regressed.

Transformative Learning and First-Generation Professionals

The phases articulated by Mezirow (2000) are similar to the experiences faced by first-generation professionals. By applying this framework to their experiences, educators can learn the impact of disorienting dilemmas and how navigating new information into their worldview transforms their approach to leadership and serving students.

Eddy and Boggs (2010) indicate that less than one third of college presidents are women. Women in the educational field are in a dynamic moment of time where retiring community college presidents open the door for executive leadership opportunities. The previous experiences of the women that enter these roles will impact their approach to decision making. Completing this project has caused me to reflect on my own experiences and how they have altered my view of education and leadership.

My Positionality as a First-Generation College Student and Professional

My purpose for conducting this study stems from a dearth of literature on the first-generation professional. While much research exists on first-generation students, I was disappointed to find that few look beyond the student experience to ask what happens to these individuals when they enter the world of work. I entered both environments with a resilient approach and encouragement from my family but struggled to adjust to the invisible expectations. This experience contributed to my *epistemological germination* and formulated the lens in which I approach this research.

Looking Back: My First-Generation College Experience

When learning about educational theory it is natural to reflect on how you developed your world view and perspective on knowledge. My favorite quote of Nealon and Giroux (2012) is "the task of ideology critique is to make the familiar seem a bit more strange" and thereby through examination, I realized my experiences have influenced my perspective as an educator and I should embrace this history (p. 101). My paradigm was formed in Robeson County, a unique area in North Carolina. Our county was tri-racial in that we were almost equally divided between Native Americans, African Americans, and Whites. As an educator, I am proud that I was able to experience public school classrooms with students of many races, lunchrooms with diverse student groups, and activities with multiple different ethnicities. As an adult, with a newly formed critical lens, I see my naivete. There were headlines in my youth of local government and police corruption, fights among parents about school mergers, and stories of race riots within other high schools in the county. Racial injustice and economic disparity meant that many of the citizens struggled against oppression as well as poverty.

The intersectional environment of different races shaped me as an educator. I was a first-generation, low-socioeconomic status college student. My mother consistently encouraged me to pursue my education as she began to attend college classes while I was in my teens. She set an example for me that at times, you must sacrifice time as a parent to pursue your dreams. She would often spend evenings reading her textbooks and completing school assignments while attending my school events. Due to her determination, I never questioned that I would attend college. I was very lucky to attend the University of North Carolina at Pembroke (UNCP) tuition-free due to the Pell Grant and a scholarship. My

experiences allow me to understand how students can be baffled by education acronyms. I too did not understand the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and was surprised when I was required to complete the document yearly. College policies baffled me, and it was not until I worked at a college that I understood you could withdraw from a class.

My first-generation college experiences did increase the tenacity within my character which served me well as I entered the workforce. I worked in part-time positions until I completed my master's degree in counseling. My *epistemological germination* continued when I entered the white-collar world, an environment that was intimidating but allowed me to continue my passion for education.

Emerging Educator: My Experience as a First-Generation Professional

I began my career in the diverse environment of UNCP, working with the TRIO Student Support Services program. The program originated in the 1960s as a solution for first-generation, low-socioeconomic status students to obtain their postsecondary degree. I fell in love with the work. The goal of this program is to provide a culture and climate of success for marginalized students. Wrap-around services such as tutoring, counseling, and FAFSA assistance were provided to all participants. When I first began the work, I remember thinking "Wow! I wish I knew about this program when I attended!" When I transitioned to Robeson Community College (RCC) as the Director of TRIO, I was thrilled to develop their new TRIO program from the ground up. Developing this program provided an opportunity to create an inclusive climate for students selected for the program. Program staff provided programming to explain the college policies, offered group counseling services, and provided cultural enrichment trips to our students.

Working in this environment daily helped uncovered ways in which I was privileged. We offered snacks at one of our workshops, and a student commented that it was the first thing they had eaten all day. This was at 3:00 in the afternoon. From that point forward, snacks were offered at every workshop and developed a food pantry within our space. I also tried to establish a culture of advocacy where our staff supported students when other faculty or staff members displayed their bias. If the student was afraid to meet with the faculty member, staff members would talk students through the process and attend the meeting if requested.

Little did I know that when I began the journey at RCC that the students I interacted with would stay with me forever. I carry a collection of the voices of my students to this day. One student voice is Queen, a pseudonym to protect her anonymity, who came to my office distraught because she received communication from her landlord about a missed payment and was concerned about eviction. My staff and I immediately began brainstorming about the community resources available that could assist her with this need. Through a contact I had with the Partnership for Children in Robeson County, I connected Queen with an individual that was able to meet with her in the courtroom to support her and provided her with financial support to pay the balance and stay in her home. As a leader, I strive to serve the whole person, not just the student during school hours.

These students are a part of me and push me to succeed. They are ever watchful, so as educators, we must also remember our power differential with students. I was reminded of this perception when Michelle, a pseudonym to protect the student, a tough, older student from New York, shared that she watched me during a college seminar we attended. Michelle had a tough exterior that defended the many injustices she had experienced. She was looking

for social cues to display that would integrate her into the cultural majority. After the event, she talked about watching my posture and body language and mimicking these movements to demonstrate what to her, was professional behavior. Her confession stunned me and caused me to examine myself and the influence, positive or negative, I could have for my students. As educational leaders, students perceive our passion for the field and our willingness to assist them on their educational journey. In my educational role, I try to consistently model servant leadership to my students. The voices of Queen and Michelle are still with me, evaluating my role in education. Watching their epistemological germination during their academy journey was a privilege. I was humbled to be invited to watch Queen cross the stage at UNCP and encourage her to continue her studies. Both students are still in contact with me, and they both have left an indelible impression on me as an educator. They are part of my *epistemological germination,* and I am grateful for the transformative impact they have made on my approach to education.

I recognized during this career journey that I would need to continue my own education in order to ascend into a level of leadership that allowed me to impact students on a broad scale. While serving as TRIO Director at Johnston Community College, I began to seriously investigate doctoral programs. Once again, I was entering into an overwhelming environment, blazing another trail as the first in my family to obtain a doctoral degree.

My Dissertation Journey and Familial Inclusion

The dissertation journey can be a lonely one as copious hours are spent reading literature, organizing thoughts, and writing. While the internal drive may carry the individual far, external factors are influential in a successful journey (Dominguez, 2006). One of these external factors is family support (Dominguez, 2006). I acknowledge that my

family has carried me through the low points in this experience. For this dissertation, familial inclusion will extend to the graphics you will see in each article in this dissertation. While engaging in dialogue about the themes of each article, I shared the images I thought reflected the experience of the research participants. In partnership, my husband and I then translated these words into visuals to include in each article. Our partnership brought a wholeness to my dissertation that had been missing without the artistic interpretation.

Onward to Article 1:

Tiptoeing on the Glass Ceiling: Community College Women in Executive Roles

In this first article, I focus on the experience of women in education. While the perspective of participants is primarily in the community college system, the intended audience is for all women serving in education. The themes shared in this article resonate beyond the postsecondary field. The article themes were the exigency of the calling to community colleges, the embracing and rejecting the societal role of emotion, and the gender dichotomy in leadership. My goal in this analysis was to understand the experience of women educators and understand if their experience was similar to my journey. I can then share these experiences in the educational field in academic journals to contribute to the literature on first-generation professionals and educational leadership.

Article One*: Tiptoeing on the Glass Ceiling: Community College Women in Executive Roles*

In this article, I examined the impact of the first-generation experience on women executive community college leaders through the lens of their gender. Throughout the interviews, participants shared the exigency of their calling to education, particularly serving within the community college system. Participants also discussed embracing and rejecting the societal role of emotion. Empathy and stoicism are both facets of women leadership employed to meet the expectation of emotional labor and the lived experience of oppressive norms. Finally, the participants share their experience of the gender dichotomy in leadership. Maneuvering through implicit bias, microaggressions, and selective perception in their careers is common as they navigate the delicacy of tiptoeing on the glass ceiling.

The face of leadership in American community colleges is changing. As a wave of community college presidential retirements are upon us, many are postulating that executive leadership in our educational system is changing and these new leaders will smash the mold of the male dominated environment (Eddy & Boggs, 2010). The *American College President Study* published in 2017 shared that education will continue to evolve and the diversification of executive leadership will increase in significance as the majority of presidents anticipated retiring in the near future (Gagliardi et al., 2017). The transfiguration of higher education will exhibit the growing pains of transformative learning as the face of leadership changes in future years. By challenging societal norms of the form of the executive leader, individuals

17

and society must question their prior knowledge which can be an emotionally fraught process (Hoggan & Browning, 2019). According to data, "between 2001 and 2007, the number of women obtaining community college presidencies grew by a mere 2%" which, according to Eddy and Boggs (2010) means less than 30% of community college institutions are led by women (p. 120). Despite the increased role of women in executive leadership positions, data shows this trend is not increasing but is showing a concerning downward trend (Eddy & Boggs, 2010).

While barriers exist, through the phenomenological review of 8 women in executive leadership in North Carolina community colleges, we can see that changes are on the way, impacting students in one of the largest community college systems in the United States. Throughout this article the following will be explored: the key principles and assumptions of transformative learning theory, the theory's implications for application to the first-generation executive women's leadership experiences, the exigency of the calling for women leaders, the conflict of emotion in their daily practice, and the gender dichotomy that exists in higher education leadership. This qualitative study implemented a phenomenological approach to exploring the journeys and meaning-making of women in executive leadership. Participants were given pseudonyms to encourage forthright responses. My choice of this method of inquiry reflects an intention to examine the multi-faceted experiences of women executive leaders who also identify as first-generation college students.

I was drawn to this work because I was also a first-generation college student. The experience of navigating postsecondary education on my own caused my *epistemological germination*. I created this term to describe the formation of my outlook through the influences of my life experiences. These transformative journeys led to the growth of my

leadership approach. I was interested in examining the experience of others to discover the impact of this experience on their journey.

Literature Review

Women continue to face disorienting dilemmas in the workplace each day (Eddy & Boggs, 2010). Anne-Marie Slaughter was working in the State Department with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton when she faced a disorienting dilemma (Slaughter, 2015). Slaughter (2015) reveals that "deep down I knew the right choice was to go home, even if I didn't quite recognize the woman who was making that choice", for she was torn between her feminist and family values (p. xv). Her book *Unfinished Business* documents her learning process, mining the assumptions of progressive women and men, to reveal the obstacles women still face in the modern workplace (Slaughter, 2015). Women in the educational field are in a dynamic moment of time where retiring community college presidents open the door for executive leadership and their previous experiences will impact their approach to decision making. To step into these roles, women should regularly pause for critical reflection about their leadership approach as Eddy and Boggs (2010) encourages them to "modify their mental maps of existing cognitive schemas" and how these may impact their organizational culture (p. 141).

Women will continue to face the uphill climb and experience challenges in their executive leadership roles. Mildred Garcia, a senior leader with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, points out that the community college pool of students are mostly "first-generation, low-income, students of color, and adult students" who are looking for leadership that reflects their journey (*Adedoyin,* 2022). Yet when sharing her experience with executive search committees, she laments she was instructed "to cut her hair, stop

wearing her anklet, stay away from bright-colored clothes, and stop doing research on people of color" if she wanted an executive leadership role (*Adedoyin,* 2022, p. 5). In their study of Latina women in community college leadership positions, Sangha-Rico and Hernández (2021) found that societal norms were exerted through leadership or colleagues, norms that dictated their physical looks, tone of voice, and personal life choices.

Organizations are slow to change and although leaders may be hired with explicit directives to change the culture, doing so can be risky and jeopardize the newly hired leader's career (Boggs & McPhail, 2016). To implement change effectively, Boggs and McPhail (2016) make several suggestions, including creating an environment of dialogue with the board of trustees and employees of the college. Eddy and Boggs (2010) suggest developing a career strategy where you

> engage in critical reflection of your core beliefs and values so that you can align these with potential leadership opportunities [as well as] create a support network to help deal with sexism and racism you may face…. [and] participate in training and development programs geared toward women and leaders of color. (p. 151-152)

As Mezirow and Taylor (2009) stressed in transformative learning theory, dialogue is "the essential medium through which transformation is promoted and developed" (p. 9). Communicating with employees, leadership, and mentors will facilitate effective leadership.

Theoretical Framework

Transformative learning theory was articulated by Jack Mezirow in 1978 to understand his wife's educational journey during adulthood (Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Mezirow's transformative learning theory postulates that transformative learning in adulthood is an emotionally powerful experience where individuals question their

core beliefs, and assumptions are unveiled (Mezirow, 2000). The origin of transformative

learning theory was developed in the examination of re-entry programs for women in the

1970s (Mezirow, 1978). These re-entry programs were created to address the needs of

women entering the workforce after a gap in employment (Mezirow, 1978). The 1960s and

1970s were a time in United States history where women were reevaluating their roles in

society. Many began to experience discontentment with their limited career choices and

sought higher education as a pathway to breaking free from limitations and restrictions to

opportunities. The ability to reflect critically is an important concept for higher education and

the leaders that manage its future. Providing curriculum that challenges embedded values

requires a careful balance of presenting new ideas and allowing critical reflection to take

place. Adulthood is where personal and professional growth occurs when we reflect and

incorporate new knowledge into our worldview (Mezirow, 1991). If an individual

contemplates how new information is learned and if they still believe these constructs in the

face of these new experiences, they are participating in transformative reasoning (Mezirow &

Taylor, 2009).

The impact of Freire

Mezirow was deeply influenced by Paulo Freire and his concept of *conscientizagao*

(Freire, 2000). *Conscientizagao* is translated as conscientization or critical consciousness, an

awareness of societal oppression and the compulsion toward radical social change (Freire,

2000). Freire asserts that transformation of self and society are inextricably intertwined

(Merriam et al., 2007). When discussing education, Freire (2000) emphasized that acquiring

knowledge involves inquiry. Freire (2000) felt that "education as the exercise of domination

stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived by

21

educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression"; therefore, educators must reject the banking method of education to truly free their students (p. 51). Freire (2000) coined the banking method term in rejection of the teaching approach that reduces the context and complexity of content to allow for it to be deposited into students like a bank. In sharing thoughts of Freire, Mezirow (1991) stated he felt a "realization [that] precipitated an absorbing process of transformative learning-learning that changed…meaning perspectives or basic ways of looking at the world that lasted for several years" (p. 12). Problem-posing education as proposed by Freire, where teachers and students discover knowledge together, influenced the collaborative teaching outlook of Mezirow (Merriam et al., 2007). Delving into our own learning about the higher education system, reflecting on its history and impact on the nation and ourselves leads to a consistent rebuilding of the educator and their influence as change agent (Cranton, 1996).

In this article, I will focus on three core elements of transformative learning theory. These three core elements for which Mezirow identified for transformative learning theory include: individual experience, critical reflection, and the characteristics of dialogue (Merriam et al., 2007).

Individual experience. The first core element refers to the preceding knowledge and experience built by social construction that the individual brings to their environment (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Since the core element of individual experience is socially constructed, it can also be deconstructed and transformed (Mezirow, 2000). When an individual brings substantial knowledge to their current environment, the result of interactions with new concepts will cause a more profound reflection and also communication with others (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009).

Critical reflection. Learners who begin to examine their previous knowledge for validity may experience a discord between previous knowledge and the exposure to new information (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Discomfort with this cognitive error message causes the learner to dig deeper and reflect on the discrepancies between the past and these new experiences (Mezirow, 1991). Through "questioning the integrity of assumptions and beliefs based on prior experience", Taylor (2000) indicates the learner begins the critical reflection process (p. 3). There are three categories of reflection according to Mezirow and Taylor (2009): - "content", "process" and "premise" (p. 7). Content refers to reflecting on new ideas and the emotions evoked from this recent awareness (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). The second type of reflection is a process where the learner analyzes the cognitive approach to the new information. The third type of reflection is premise, the least common type of reflection, which serves to examine the *why* behind the new attainment of knowledge (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). When considering the three categories of reflection, critical reflection involves the mind as well as emotions, which is why the process is best undertaken in a place of trust (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Writing is a strategy encouraged by Mezirow and Taylor (2009) to reify reflections of new knowledge for the learner.

Dialogue. Transformative learning is promoted in the social construction process of dialogue (Taylor, 2009). Dialogue is the process that allows experience and reflection to integrate into the memory of the learner (Taylor, 2009). The "edge of meaning making" is a vulnerable place where Taylor (2009) indicates the learner will open up to others and must take place in an environment of trust (p. 10). The last core element is where experience and reflection are applied and new knowledge is created (Taylor, 2000). Production of this new

knowledge is the result of the transformation process, the external expression of the reconstructed internal work.

Meaning making in Transformative Learning Theory

The formulation of meaning is in essence, making sense of our experiences (Mezirow, 1991). When processing new information and rejecting previous learning, new interpretations and experiences produce meaning. These meanings are then accepted and incorporated into our new reality (Mezirow, 1991). For Mezirow (1991), "meaning is an interpretation, and to make meaning is to construe or interpret experience-in other words, to give it coherence. Meaning is construed both prelinguistically, through cues and symbolic models, and through language" (p. 18). These meanings are considered by Mezirow (1991) to be the horizons that influence new learning. In essence, new meanings and experiences broaden our views of learning (Mezirow, 1991). For first-generation college students, formulating these new meanings can be an overwhelming process in a new environment. Higher education norms encountered each day must be deciphered and incorporated into new frames of reference. Mezirow (1978) asserts that "meaning perspectives are the psychological structures within which we locate and define ourselves and our relationships" and this is why individuals experience intense emotions when challenging their previous experiences (p. 7).

Methodology

The focal point of phenomenological work is to describe the essence of an experience (Bernet et al., 2005). While phenomenology began as a philosophy, it is now accepted widely as a qualitative methodological approach in disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and education. The individuals involved in this study brought their intersectional experiences as

women, leaders, and as first-generation college students to their daily work. Examining their journeys will lead to a better understanding of the impact their experiences have had in relation to their leadership approach in the post-secondary environment.

Phenomenology was first used in 1765 as claimed by Moustakas (1994) within the philosophical field to explain "knowledge as it appears to consciousness, the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one's immediate awareness and experience" (p. 30). Titchen and Hobson (2011), when explaining the roots of phenomenology, share that it is the "study of lived, human phenomena within the every day social contexts in which the phenomena occur, from the perspective of those who experience them" (p 121-122). The role of the researcher is to tease out these perspectives without inserting their own influence. Brinkmann et al. (2014) state, in a more general sense, that the origin is studying "phenomena…the world as it appears to experiencing and acting human beings", and falls under the qualitative research framework (p. 22). While the origins of the word evoke the study of phenomena, in educational inquiry its focus is on the experiences of an individual. From this research perspective, experiences are the genesis of all knowledge, and thus understanding (Brinkmann et al., 2014). In essence, phenomenology demands that the researcher question the world and its objects (Drummond, 1990).

A qualitative approach was selected to develop a deeper appreciation of the experience of first-generation women professionals in leadership positions within the community college setting. By utilizing a qualitative methodological approach, the phenomena will be examined, and a descriptive, rich understanding will result. Choosing this approach also allows for a flexible process that will follow the path of participants' voices and perspectives (Creswell, 2018). To understand the experience of participants, three

interview questions were included in the interview protocol. These "common or shared"

experiences noted by Creswell (2018) of the first-generation professional experience were

examined by asking:

1. Could you please describe your first professional higher education job experience

   after obtaining your undergraduate degree?;

2. How did that experience impact you as a community college leader?; and

3. What do you think about how your leadership experience may have differed from

   your male colleagues?

   (p. 128).

Participants and Sampling

Participants in this study were chosen by what Ravitch and Carl (2016) note is

"purposeful sampling" that selects

individuals …to participate in a research study for specific reasons that stem from the

core constructs and contexts of the research questions…such as individuals [that] may

have had a certain experience, have knowledge about a phenomenon, live or work in

a particular place… (p. 139).

The individuals selected for participation in this study are women currently working in the

North Carolina Community College System in an executive leadership role. These women

have also experienced higher education as first-generation students. Participants were

selected from a pool of executive leaders in the North Carolina Community College System.

In this study, executive leaders are defined as individuals that manage employees and wield

influence within their organization. Examples of these leaders are Presidents, Vice

Presidents, Deans, and Executive Directors. To determine individuals who met the needs of

the study, a survey was sent to all Presidents, Vice Presidents, Deans, and Executive

Directors currently working in the NC Community College System.

Participant Interest Survey

A confidential, electronic survey was shared on the executive leadership listservs

offered by the North Carolina Community College System office. Interested participants

were informed that the study would focus on the experiences of women in executive

leadership who were first generation college students. These individuals are called first-

generation professionals. Participants that qualified were contacted by the researcher to

schedule an hour-long interview via the Zoom platform. Only individuals associated with the

study had access to the responses.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study gathered knowledge by conducting one-on-one qualitative interviews with

open-ended questions. As a researcher, I acknowledge that my primary role in the interview

was to listen to the experience that is being shared by the participant, cognizant of when to

delve deeper and ask for clarification, and to be aware of nonverbal cues displayed by the

individual that indicates flagging energy and conflict about information shared (Seidman,

2006). I strove to create a rapport with each participant that allowed them to feel comfortable

with sharing their experience but allowed their answers to remain autonomous (Seidman,

2006).

Selected participants participated in a semi-structured interview in the Zoom platform

that was transcribed utilizing Zoom transcription. After transcription of each interview, the

researcher read the entire set of data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). After multiple readings, open

coding was conducted to include examination of items suggested by Ravitch and Carl (2016)

such as "repetition in and across various data items", ideas that are common among participants, and also what is missing from gathered data (p. 245). After the initial coding analysis, participants were asked to assess for validity and missing content as a form of member check (Creswell, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). These member checks were sent to participants via email and follow up interviews were offered to participants who would like to clarify elements of their experience. Ravitch and Carl (2016) share that member checks allow for a more "process-oriented and person-centered approach to challenging interpretations by creating the conditions for study participants to speak into and about a study" (p. 198).

Results & Discussion

Participants reflected that experiences in the beginning stages of their careers had an impact on how they viewed their competence and the confidence to take the next steps on their career journey. Most began with elements of prior individual experiences, when bringing deeper experiences to this journey, more content can process through reflection and dialogue (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). The critical reflection process can be psychologically difficult, as individuals question prior values that have emotional associations with the content (Mezirow, 2000). Through the narratives within this study, participants engaged in dialogue with family members, peers, and mentors. This becomes the crux of transformational learning where Mezirow and Taylor (2009) indicate "critical reflection ...is put into action, where experience is reflected on, assumptions and beliefs are questioned, and habits of mind are ultimately transformed" in a trusting environment with compassionate and attentive listening (Mezirow, p. 9, 2000). Three themes emerged from the qualitative interviews conducted with participants - exigency of the calling, embracing and rejecting the

28

societal role of emotion, and the gender dichotomy in leadership. These themes were common but not an exhaustive list of experiences of each participant.

Exigency of the Calling

The first theme exigency of the calling was a common experience by most participants. When on the journey of pursuing executive leadership, many of the participants felt a need for reassurance from family members to support this deep urgent need to pursue this calling. Angie is a graduate from the community college from where she now works and has been at the institution for seven years. For Angie, when juggling her family responsibilities with work she said, "you always try to look at the end goal". This end goal was the calling of continuing her education and serving others. For her, this meant schoolwork "at night and on the weekends where you do your homework late at night when you get your family to bed" and she acknowledges her supportive family members assisted her in this pursuit. A supportive experience was echoed by many participants, and I have found these experiences in my own pursuit of higher education leadership. When sharing my doctoral journey with colleagues we often delve into conversations of squeezing in readings while waiting in lines, in the stands of our children's sports activities or during lunch hours. It is our exigency in this calling that gives us the energy to continue managing these divergent needs. These journeys reflected what I discovered while absorbing the experiences of women executive leaders in our system - we are all spinning plates in the air, desperately hoping nothing important crashes to the floor while we pursue our dreams. Dedicated spouses and family members providing support was cited in Peterson, et al (2016) as an important foundation for women pursuing advanced degrees for their career choices. Support

for their calling was also a common theme for participants whether from their spouses, children, or colleagues.

The curveballs of life also impacted career choices, such as Tara's unexpected pregnancy before enrolling in college. As a teen parent she was tenacious in continuing her educational dreams, changing from the desire to be a physician to enrolling and ultimately graduating from the community college where she now serves in a leadership position. Tara dug into her inner motivation and instead of using a scholarship she had won for a four-year education, she enrolled in her local community college and obtained two Associates degrees while working full-time and managing childcare. Once she obtained an entry-level position at the college, she connected with a woman in senior leadership that served as her mentor. They connected over a shared belief that "education gets in your blood" and this mentor encouraged Tara to continue pursuing her education while keeping an eye on opportunities that would lead to senior administrator roles. Even with a mentor to guide her, Tara has experienced continued obstacles on her path to executive leadership. While Tara was pursuing her doctoral degree, the COVID-19 epidemic hit our country and educational facilities were forced to adjust quickly. While juggling the pivot to online learning as an administrator at her community college, she was also adjusting to her graduate studies shifting online as well. In the midst of this shift her grandmother, her source of comfort since childhood, became gravely ill. Amazingly, Tara was working full-time remotely, completing her studies, supporting her family, and managing at home care for her grandmother, who required round the clock services. When her grandmother passed, family members encouraged her to stop out of school because the burden was too high. Tara resolved to complete her degree to honor her grandmother's wishes. She readily admits that she "burnt

the candle at both ends for a long time" and now that time has passed, she looks back and thinks "how in the world did I go through all of that personal stuff and complete the dissertation? How did I do that?". Tara's *epistemological germination* from teenage mother transforming to executive leader is a wonderful example of the tenacity of first-generation professionals.

Carrie was a full-time stay-at-home mother after stopping out of a big university when she was younger. Encouraged by her family, she returned to school and completed her bachelors degree before assuming a position at the local community college. For Carrie, she found push back from colleagues and family members regarding her pursuit of a doctoral degree that would solidify her position in executive leadership. She shares that

> and now this journey that I'm on right now? Most people tell me they wouldn't do it. They just said, I wouldn't, I wouldn't spend the time or the money to get your doctorate at your age, because you'll never recoup the money you spent, and the time you've given...but I didn't do any of those three degrees, I didn't decide to do them for a job promotion…they were for me.

She felt the stress of juggling a full-time position as well as her doctoral studies but for her, in the past decade she went from stopping out at a four-year college to obtaining her undergraduate and master's degree in ten years. Her transition was jarring, going from a stay-at-home mother that substituted at her children's school as needed, to working in an entry-level position at her local community college when her children were older. She says "I loved it, and I was perfectly fine…. Figured I'd do it for ten or fifteen years…and then things changed". The change was her step into an administrative role after the retirement of a close colleague. She felt that "when the opportunity came to move up it was great, because it gave

me some more challenge and a little more input on things." At this point she decided to pursue her masters to prepare for future roles at the college. To her surprise, this opportunity came soon after completing her masters and she shared that "it was either you apply for it, or you better be satisfied with whoever gets the job".

Joy has worked at her community college for almost 10 years while juggling a family. She spoke about the trial of fitting a new degree in her life as well. When discussing how she felt about pursuing her doctoral degree, she said "...at that point, then you had to figure out, how are you going to fit this in? And when I went back my daughter had just turned one. [I was a] glutton for punishment". For women leaders, navigating the need to pursue advanced degrees to shift into higher roles and raising their family complicated their career decisions (Peterson et al. 2016). Several participants mentioned that they felt internal pressure to enroll in doctoral degrees to feel like they belonged in their senior roles. Participants also acknowledged that not all men in senior roles on their campus had terminal degrees. Joy's assumptions are interesting considering the data from The National Center for Education Statistics Fast Facts Tool (n.d.) states that in 2018-2019 men obtained 71,337 doctoral degrees, almost 22% less than the 92,340 doctorates obtained by women. Joy also expressed frustration that there were few in leadership that looked like her, women who were raising small children while managing senior administrative roles. Her female colleagues had a different journey where they had children earlier and now have less obligations to balance in their college roles.

Echoing her counterparts, Ann shared that she made the choice to leave her healthcare role and applied on impulse to a healthcare-related position at a North Carolina community college. She had previously received her associates degree from this college in her mid-

twenties. She had reached this choice after the long hours expected at the hospital where she would end her shift, take her children to school, then sleep as much as she could before picking them from school. She laments, "I just didn't sleep, and I needed something different", so she applied for a 9-month position at the community college which enabled her to spend time with her children during the summer and opt to not place her children in childcare. She made this choice explicitly for the convenience of her family. Eventually she moved through the ranks of administration and through the tenacity of a friend, applied for a doctoral program. She admits that without the encouragement and support of her friend, she would not have completed her doctoral degree and ascended into her current role in community college senior administration.

The most touching experience that resonated with me, as a first-generation leader myself, was shared by Kristen. Kristen was raised by a single mother who worked part-time in secondary education and finances were strained. The toll of balancing career and family was personified in the story of Kristen's journey. She balanced all of her educational pursuits with a career, which led her to the community college world. To maintain her financial aid while obtaining her undergraduate degree at the 4-year university, she often drove an hour and a half to the university campus after her workday. The balance of spending time with her family, working, and completing her degree coalesced in one semester with a particularly difficult schedule. In explaining this period, she became emotional, stating that she
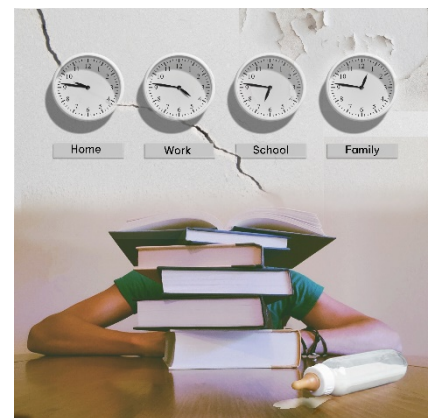
Figure 1

Journey

had class 3 nights in a row, so…in the morning my husband would take our infant

child to his mom…at 6:30 in the morning. I would put my child who was asleep in

the carrier and buckle him in…. he'd be gone for the day and then I'd work all

day…drive my hour to school from 6 to 10…which would put me home about 11

o'clock, and so then he'd be asleep again. I did that 3 nights in a row.

As she struggled with her emotions, Kristen said she "can remember the sacrifice…that I

made to better my family and to better myself, and to put myself in the position where I

could advance my career". Negotiating these choices are reflected on by Shreffler et al.

(2019) who found in their study that "mothers are much more likely than men and women

that do not have children to experience time- and strain-based conflict due to their balance of

multiple roles" and recommended changes in the workplace to meditate these stressors such

as implementing social networks to provide support (p. 82). Figure 1 illustrates the struggle

women endure with juggling multiple responsibilities. Kristen also emphasized that her

ambition is not for "titles, that doesn't mean anything to me…. I want to be in a position

where I could fix things…. that directly impact the students". She feels like her experiences

allow her to be empathetic to students, because she has faced similar struggles as well.

Katherine had a different journey that was complicated by several out of state moves

and time spent out of the United States. She began her educational degrees in Florida where

graduates are obligated to teach for one year to earn certification. An opportunity overseas,

then in the states of Maryland, and Colorado meant that her initial goal of teaching young

children pivoted to a new career path educating adult learners. This was similar to Elizabeth,

who moved from the northern east coast to Florida, then finally to North Carolina in part due

to her husband's educational pursuits. Elizabeth spoke of playing school when she was

younger and dreaming of becoming a teacher. Moving within North Carolina interrupted her

role as an educator, and she shifted to contractual work during her child's younger years.

Elizabeth referenced a book that she felt resonated with her journey that speaks to the routes

taken by women pursuing their goals. Often these look more like the circuitous routes

enjoyed by 'Billy' in the Family Circus cartoon than the linear path we would prefer.

Elizabeth explained it this way,

> Sometimes you're following your husband around. Sometimes you're having children,
>
> and all of these things seem to apply to me. I went through a divorce and got
>
> remarried. There are sometimes setbacks or choices that you make, because of your
>
> family that don't always add up to a straight line, and that is certainly something that
>
> I've benefited from in retrospect, all of those experiences, and I have to say, having
>
> degrees in…different areas, has been a blessing for me.

While this path was not what she imagined, Elizabeth felt that it allowed her to achieve her

dream role at a community college.

According to Cranton (1996), critical reflection is an essential aspect of human

existence, where we naturally assess our journey, values, and part in society. Eddy and Boggs

(2010) write that "through [this] reflection, leaders can question their assumptions and long-

held beliefs, which provides opportunities for both personal and organizational change" (p.

157). Some women in this same position early in their careers do not feel the confidence to

share their struggles to balance work and family (Madsen & Holton, 2015). By changing, the

leader has undergone a transformative process that has altered their viewpoint (Cranton,

1996). To address the work-life balance, Madsen and Holton (2015) suggests that

organizations can "create a culture where such issues can be openly discussed; women's
networks, mentoring…coaching…can all help" (p. 139).

Embracing and Rejecting the Societal Role of Emotion

The second theme was a common response to the third research question asking
participants how their experiences may have differed from their male colleagues. Women in
executive leadership roles are often defined by themselves and their colleagues in gendered
language (Eddy & Boggs, 2010). This can often be an intentional choice by the women as
documented in their presidential study, Eddy and Boggs (2010) noted participants used
language to reinforce their societal feminine roles and the elements of these roles that were
applicable to college executive leadership. Angie shares that she felt "women in general are
more sensitive to people's needs and just reactions" and could sense when a colleague was
"just a little off today" and that women can "read the room," particularly during COVID
when higher education staff and faculty were under tremendous pressure to keep the ship
sailing smoothly.

Ann agrees, indicating that it is imperative for women to share their stories with
others, to showcase that women can be compassionate and serve in executive roles. She feels
that women have a "natural nurturing type [and] compassion" not to the exclusion of males,
but that this emotion is more prevalent in women, and we can embrace it. Elizabeth shared
that one of her humanities degrees helped "with your compassion and ability to understand
other people" that assists her in executive leadership. Katherine admitted that she feels a push
to support her staff to provide the support that she lacked earlier in her career.

This assumption of the societal norm of femininity caused some participants to
become defensive of their emotions. Joy shares that when speaking with her supervisor they

know that she is not the "stereotypical [woman], she's got her feelings" that how she approaches management is "not …emotional". Carrie mentioned similar stereotypes in career advancement, that women often need to be "really loud and over the top" while she prefers to remain calm and make decisions without emotion.

In her study on women college presidents, Oikelome (2017) found that the women felt that in their positions it was indispensable "to incorporate emotional intelligence into thinking and decision-making" while interacting with many groups and that remaining authentic to their true selves as "change agents" reduced stress in their presidencies. A review of community college leadership literature by Eddy and Boggs (2010) agrees that "the interdependencies required in the community college sector… highlight the need for leaders to focus on relationships" in contrast with the patriarchal focus of previous writings (p. 62). Eddy and Boggs (2010) also note that recent literature focuses more on collaboration, a characteristic that is less gender specific.

The Gender Dichotomy in Leadership

In her leadership profile of Margie Bailly, a women leader in the Fargo-Moorhead community, Madsen and Ngunjiri (2015) documented Margie's quote that she didn't "think the guys have been such great leaders, quite frankly, so why should that be the model?" and how Margie felt that if a woman was pursuing leadership in an area in which she was passionate and fruitful, then being a woman was not a weakness (p. 200). It seems as though the tide is turning as in the *American College President Study*, most college presidents indicated that removing sexist and racist policies were a key strategy in diversifying their institution (Gagliardi et al., 2017).

Until these policies become embedded in our institutions, women will continue to experience microaggressions and indirect sexist behavior in their daily work. Carrie shared an experience where a male staff member challenged her in a staff meeting. She said, "he was very persistent about it, and he just kept right at it" while she demurred to answer his question after reflection. When his colleagues challenged his behavior, he approached Carrie and told her "I didn't mean to be like that" to which she asked if he would have utilized the same aggressive approach to their former male leader. When he stated he would not have responded in that manner, she stood up for herself and reiterated that she deserves respect, she is in the senior position, and he apologized. While the situation was resolved, Carrie stated that she always feels as though she must fight harder, and she expressed frustration that the expectation seemed to be to manage conflict in the moment, but that is not her style. She prefers to take time to assess her thoughts before addressing the conflict.

Katherine felt similar frustration when she requested a raise when she changed positions within her organization. While encouraged by a colleague to advocate for herself, the administration refused her request and did not provide additional compensation. While this rankled her a bit, she continued in her work and one year later, the same situation occurred. Only this time, an applicant into her area was male and the request for additional money was approved. Katherine shared that the "situation…still bothers me to this day". Her spouse encouraged her to change career fields, but she chose to stay. She wishes she had the courage and know-how to advocate for herself in the earlier situation but admitted that she is better at advocating for others than herself. Katherine then moved to co-found an organization on campus that supports employees and creates a community of mentorship for women.

While women are increasing in leadership roles, this does not necessarily transform the organization into 'open doors' for women (Eddy & Boggs, 2010; Oikelome, 2017). The college culture still carries echoes of its patriarchal past which creates invisible barriers to women looking to advance into executive positions (Oikelome, 2017). To delve deeper, Eddy and Boggs (2010) suggest that "instead of viewing gender, language, and leadership as dichotomies that pit male and female gender roles against one another, we have learned that it is important to view these ideals in a more complex manner" that gender responses and roles are on a spectrum, allowing space for individuals to choose their individual approaches to leadership (p. 134).

Joy mentioned male colleagues often treating her as a subordinate with orders of "find that" or "you handle that" where tedious office responsibilities fell to her to complete. She joked that an article she read mentioned a husband and wife both wanted a wife that would "make the appointments and take care of all of the household chores and that sort of thing". She felt that men at the college often expect tasks to be taken care of for them or become puzzled when "things [don't] just automatically happen" and they take for granted the behind the scenes work that keeps the college running smoothly. Joy did feel that she had a supportive supervisor however she also felt the need to emphasize that this was not an emotional response, that she has thought this through and is not displaying stereotypical women feelings.

In Tara's experience, she found that males climbed the executive ladder faster than females in her college culture, so she felt obligated to earn her doctorate degree in order to level the playing field. She also shared that men have "not had to jump through hoops that

I've seen women have to jump through" and her female mentor was passed over for positions often by men with less education.

Elizabeth reminisces about a situation early in her current role where assumptions were made about her level of decisiveness and if she would have the fortitude to make tough decisions. She admits "being a woman and being from within the organization, I think I had to work a little bit harder to establish my authority and prove my worthiness of the position".

Not all participants shared in this experience as Kristen mentioned her unique experience of serving women supervisors for most of her career. This is supported by Oikelome (2017) who noted in her study that women college presidents did endure challenges from their gender identity but "there was a wide spectrum in how the women perceived the impact of gender on their progression" with some only feeling the impact once they pursued senior roles (p. 28).

Conclusion

The transformative journeys shared by these eight women in the North Carolina Community College system show how their experiences influenced their *epistemological germination*, their leadership choices, and their decisions. Developing the ability for reflective discourse is not out of scope for marginalized populations for Belenky and Stanton (2000) believe that it is "of the utmost importance for people who have been excluded and silenced" to learn to obtain these skills (p. 99). For first-generation women entering into the white-collar educational field, looking to achieve executive-level leadership, learning this reflection process assists them with continuing to gather new knowledge to meld, reject, or transform the old. Critical reflection will allow women leaders to adjust former beliefs while they experience new elements on their journey, as their perspective and view of education

will impact how they lead their organization (Eddy & Boggs, 2010). This action leads to emancipatory learning, which Cranton (1996) states allows leaders to "[become] free from forces that have limited our options, forces that have been taken for granted or seen as beyond our control" therefore transforming our view of the world (p. 2).

Women continue to shape the community college organization Eddy and Boggs (2010) encourages that "changes on individual campuses [can] begin to create a social construction of integrated leadership locally that can contribute to larger changes" (p. 136). As Kristen so eloquently shared,

> I think sometimes…it's easier to look at somebody and think…'You know she's got her life together'. That must have been easy, but you know we've all paved our own road, and have something to be proud of there. And so that's really cool that you're highlighting those stories.

As women begin to navigate these new waters in our current social climate, they are molding the future pathways for women while showing that it is possible to shatter the glass ceiling to achieve their goals (Oikelome, 2017).

Article One Reflection: The Exigency of My Calling to Education

The daughter of a stepfather and the mother of an adopted son, I have always been fascinated by the nature versus nurture debate. What has led me to become the person I am today? Am I an educator because my mother passed along this desire or because of my experiences as a first-generation, low-socioeconomic status student? While I may never truly know the answers to these questions, I do know what drives me as an educator. For me, education is about the possibilities. These possibilities are even more potent to underserved populations such as our first-generation, low-socioeconomic status community college students, the students that are the true core of my passion for education. This drive is also reflected in my choice of research as well. I wanted to know what happens to these first-generation students once they achieve their educational goals.

When selecting an educational theory for this project I was drawn to the work of Mezirow and transformative learning theory because it mirrored my experiences as a first-generation college student. The three core elements in *Tiptoeing on the Glass Ceiling: Community College Women in Executive Roles* spoke to the overarching experience of a first-generation student along with the professional they seek to become. Individual experience, the first of these elements shared by Mezirow and Taylor (2009), speaks to the knowledge and experience an individual brings into the classroom that subsequently incorporates learning experienced in the environment. For myself, this included watching my mother complete community college classes while I was a teenager, coordinating and visiting college campuses on my own as both parents worked, and learning quickly through a poor grade that although the professor may not open the textbook, students must listen to lectures *and* read the text on their own. With no familial knowledge of how to navigate the college

atmosphere I learned hard lessons and became familiar with the college catalog. These experiences shaped my entrance into the working world as well. I read every word of the benefits package with my first full-time position, trying to decipher information my parents were unsure of, and still made mistakes that cost me years of retirement with our state employee system. As the college catalog had been my guide before, I have learned to turn to the human resources office and ask questions regardless of how ignorant I feel. Previous experiences that I carried with me have built into a "deeper well" of knowledge that Mezirow and Taylor (2009) recommend individuals can continue to "draw on" as they participate in reflection and dialogue (p. 6). They have also expanded my *epistemological germination*, continuing to shape my outlook as an educator.

Critical reflection, the second of the core elements in Mezirow's theory, is the process of looking at your well of knowledge and how it interacts with newly obtained knowledge (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Carrie's experience exemplified this in the first article. When she entered into the community college system in an entry-level position, she felt at home. Carrie gained additional knowledge, she reflected on her previous thoughts of contentment and belongingness, and realized they were in conflict. As she learned she realized she could impact practices at her college in administrative roles, she eventually rose to the position of dean in her area. During my first year as a doctoral student at Appalachian State University, my epistemological outlook was challenged repeatedly as I began to review my assumptions of knowledge and perceptions of other's experiences. This experience was encouraged by the doctoral program emphasis on writing, which Mezirow and Taylor (2009) indicate assists individuals with deepening reflection by making meaning of prior knowledge as well as current contemplation.

Finally, Mezirow and Taylor (2009) highlight the social construction of transformative learning, that dialogue must take place between the individual and others to cement new perspectives into current knowledge. This dialogue is not simply our everyday conversations, but moments in time, such as our study interviews, when an individual actively reflects on their outlook, how it was developed, and articulates how their experiences have led them to their current place in society (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). The interviews I conducted have not only allowed me to learn more about others first-generation experience, but also caused me to reflect on my own experience. My first study interview with Kristen had moments where I became emotional along with her, recalling the sacrifices of the past and how these have impacted me and how I perceive my role in education. As the first in my family to enter the white-collar world, my current experiences are now foreign to my loved ones, where we struggle to relate when swapping work stories. Few of my family truly understand my career and I was asked during our last family holiday, "Now what is it you do again?", about a job which I have held (and discussed) for four years. Each interview was a personal journey for me as well, relating to portions of the participants' experience, and navigating and reflecting on my own journey. Ultimately this is the positive loop that transformative learning theory encourages. Through acknowledging your individual experience, critically reflecting when new knowledge enters your framework, and sharing and discussing this integration with others, you will consistently expand your learning and engage with your environment.

Onward to Article Two: *Navigating the Labyrinth: Executive Women's Experience in the*

Community College

In the next section we view the research question of the impact of the first-generation experience on women that are serving in executive roles from the lens of the community college. How has the community college institution influenced the women leaders participating in the study? This article begins with participants sharing how the community college system is a complicated opportunity for women. Our system in North Carolina consists of 58 community colleges with over 100 campuses serving our students. Our state emphasizes local autonomy, so we often say we do things '58 different ways'. This provides a complicated environment for leadership, but all of our participants shared how they navigated this system and were surprised and pleased when advancement opportunities were provided for their development. This is reflected statistically as North Carolina is on par with the national average in that 29% of our community college presidents are female compared to 30% as the national average (Eddy & Boggs, 2010). Our educational system is transforming and providing opportunities for women to excel into executive leadership positions. The next section reflects these advancements and how the community college system may be the best start for women looking into the educational career field. Finally, the article shares the participant's joy of serving a disparate population. The North Carolina Community College System boasts that all citizens are 30 minutes away from a community college campus. This leads to proximity, however many of our students experience societal and economic barriers to attending college. Assisting these students, many of whom only dreamt of a college degree, is rewarding work that fuels educators in this system.

The audience for this second article is educational leaders, specifically those working in the community college system. *Navigating the Labyrinth* will be submitted to the *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* whose primary audience are community college leaders. The goal of this piece is to provide depth to research on women's leadership in the community college.

Article Two: *Navigating the Labyrinth: Executive Women's Experience in the Community College*

This article examined how the community college system influenced the women executive leaders participating in this study. As we examine the research question, what is the impact of the first-generation experience on women that are serving in executive roles at the community college, we hone in on the role of community colleges and its effect on the participants. During interviews individuals discussed navigating the labyrinth of bureaucracy. As they rose in leadership, they were empowered to change policies and implement programs to meet student's needs. When reflecting on their career trajectory, participants shared that the community college system was a surprising career ladder for them. Several participants began in entry-level positions and are now serving as Deans and Vice Presidents. Lastly, participants expounded on the joy of serving a disparate population. Seeing the significant impact of students achieving their degree and the leader's specific policy implementations on students fed their passion for working at the community college.

Higher Education was transformed with the development of community colleges after World War II. These new institutions provided economic mobility to marginalized individuals across the nation (Beach, 2011). Prior to the creation of community colleges, Beach (2011) notes that "only five percent of the 19-to-22-year-old population was enrolled in an institution of higher education" (p. 2). In 1947, United States President Harry Truman created the Commission on Higher Education to support the continued development of postsecondary education in America (Zook, 1947). In his summary of The President's Commission on Higher Education, George Zook (1947) outlined the goals to be

accomplished by this group, with social understanding at the forefront. Social understanding nourished through the institution of higher education would develop citizens that could carry on the promotion of democracy in our society (Zook, 1947). In this vein, community colleges were given two divergent tasks: creating an educated workforce and providing foundational education programming for students that would continue to four-year colleges or universities.

I agree with the Commission's report that education provides a pathway of expanding the outlook of citizens. My own education was the foundation of my epistemological germination, where I challenged my previous knowledge and began broadening my worldview. These experiences have provided me with an opportunity to examine and critique my individual experiences, reflect on new knowledge, and consistently transform my perspective of leadership in education.

Literature Review

The Carnegie Commission of Higher Education, founded decades after the creation of community colleges, published a report that boosted community colleges in the public eye as open-door institutions that would provide economic equality (Beach, 2011). This transformation led to enrollment increases from populations previously excluded from higher education such as women, minorities, and individuals with low socioeconomic status. This 'open door' unlocked a new world for these groups that exposed them to novel epistemological views. Individuals that did not have the social or economic capital for college preparation often entered the doors with trepidation. As a first-generation college student, myself, I know that I felt unprepared and perplexed with higher education expectations that were vastly different from my formative schooling. As an employee of the

North Carolina Community College System, I now have a part in preparing and training individuals to provide specialized resources for students who enter the 'open door' without the privilege of preparation.

North Carolina Community College System

After World War II a study was commissioned in 1950 to determine if North Carolina could support a community college system (*NC Community Colleges* 2018). The birth of the system (NCCCS) came from a merging of public two-year colleges and industrial education centers (*NC Community Colleges* 2018). Two years later the report determined there was need and support for this system, and in 1957 the legislature authorized the Community College Act (*NC Community Colleges* 2018). Through the support of Governor Terry Sanford and the State Board of Education, the system began in 1963 with 19 industrial education centers and two community colleges (Wiggs, 1989). Now in 2022, there are 58 colleges with 165 campuses across North Carolina. The North Carolina Community College System served 574,181 students in 2021-2022 (*NCCCS,* 2019). In 2021-2022, over 50% of North Carolina community college students are 25 years or older (*NCCCS,* 2019).

Theoretical Framework

Jack Mezirow developed transformational learning theory during the late 1970s through his work at Columbia University (Hoggan & Browning, 2019). Through his study in 1978, Mezirow observed women participating in re-entry programs, designed to assist them in the return to the workforce, and how they began to challenge societal norms and previously held beliefs during the implementation of the program (Hoggan & Browning, 2019). As explained in Daloz and Mezirow (2000), Mezirow looked at this transformation as "shifts in…our very epistemology - the way in which we know and make meaning" (p. 104).

In the previous article, I examined the three core elements of transformative learning theory: individual experience, critical reflection, and dialogue. In this piece we will examine Mezirow's thoughts on learning, particularly communicative learning and how this influences educators and their environment. The possibilities of transformative learning are in each individual; however, their circumstances and the pulls of societal norms mean that not everyone reaches this state (Daloz & Mezirow, 2000).

Mezirow's Definition of Learning

Mezirow (1991) found a disconnect between established theories and the practice of adult learning. Traditional learning can be defined "as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience to guide future action" whereas under the theory, transformative learning is "that [which] transforms problematic frames of references to make them more inclusive, discriminatory, reflective, open and emotionally able to change" (Mezirow, 2009, p. 22). These problematic references he mentions are concepts such as fairness and love which can be warped through the environmental context of the learner (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009).

According to Mezirow and Taylor (2009), there are two types of learning, instrumental learning and communicative learning. Instrumental learning is categorized as the stereotypical positivist view of controlling the environment and the elements within (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Communicative learning is focused on communication between two individuals and discourse is key (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Those participating in discourse must be open, free from coercion, able to recognize their own biases, and must seek understanding in order to successfully continue the process through validity challenges until new experiences are integrated (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). The context of the

environment also affects learning. The individuals who participate in the learning process and the conditions where learning occurs, place all factors into the acquisition of new knowledge (Mezirow, 2000). Other factors impacting our point of view include ideology, socioeconomic status, community, mass media, family relationships, and inequality. All of these factors formulate our authentic selves which becomes our social identity (Mezirow, 2000).

Methodology

Phenomenology has become an increasingly popular methodology in education as an avenue to explore the experiences of others. In its essence, phenomenology seeks to create a thick description of the phenomena, where the reader can understand the basic concepts that constitute the phenomena in question (Donalek, 2004). As a qualitative approach, phenomenology is

> distinctive [in its] strictness with which all reference to objective reality is set aside. This is the so-called epoche or 'bracketing'. It is a fundamental concept for any phenomenologically-based work, because it points to the locus of all relevant research. Reality is bracketed and, in the selfsame move, attention is turned to experience alone. In other words, all phenomenological investigation is exclusively concerned with the subjectivity of the individual. (Ashworth & Greasley, 2009)

As such, community college executive leaders were recruited for this qualitative study to examine their experience as first-generation professionals. These individuals were the first in their family to graduate from a four-year college and many were the first in their family to enter into the white-collar career field. Executive leaders were chosen because their roles are influential in the student experience at their institution.

Phenomenology as an examination of knowledge began under the auspices of Edmund Husserl, who began publishing his philosophical work in 1891 (Sokolowski, 2010). His academic career began in mathematics before his attendance of philosophy lectures changed his trajectory (Farber, 1968). Husserl approached philosophy, and once created, phenomenology, as a vocation best defined by modern day philosopher Parker Palmer (2000) as "something I can't not do, for reasons I'm unable to explain to anyone else and don't fully understand myself but that are nonetheless compelling" (p. 25).

While phenomenology began as a philosophy by Husserl, it was appreciated by other disciplines looking to examine the experiences of individuals in their field. A methodology needed to be created to transition the approach from a philosophical area to research. Many attempted to pursue this avenue, but modern-day researchers rely heavily on the approach established by Clark Moustakas in his book *Phenomenological Research Methods* published in 1994.

To begin inquiry, the researcher must develop their research question. In formulating the question, the researcher must select an experience that has personal meaning and societal significance (Moustakas, 1994). This begins with a process of wonder, allowing the mind to contemplate the examined experience before narrowing the topic to articulate research questions (Moustakas, 1994). The question must be stated in clear language with the focus and purpose transparent and Moustakas (1994) asserts it must include these features:

- It seeks to reveal more fully the essences and meanings of human experience.
- It seeks to uncover the qualitative rather than the quantitative factors in behavior and experience.

- It engages the total self of the research participant and sustains personal and passionate involvement.

- It does not seek to predict or to determine causal relationships.

- It is illuminated through careful, comprehensive descriptions, vivid and accurate renderings of the experience, rather than measurements, ratings, or scores. (p. 90)

Participants involved in the phenomenological study should be demographically diverse volunteers that have experienced the phenomena under investigation, understand the study requirements, and agree to allow the collected data to be published (Moustakas, 1994). An ethical phenomenological study, according to Moustakas (1994), ensures that participants are provided a clear description of the study, their confidentiality will be maintained, and they read and sign an informed consent document. Participants are allowed to engage in the process and quit at any time of the progression of the study (Moustakas, 1994). Part of this engagement will involve member checks where participants read the interpretation of data collected during their interviews, providing feedback, or submitting requests for editing or removal of material (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology lends itself to primarily gathering knowledge from participants in lengthy interviews. During these interviews the researcher establishes trust, brings the focus of the interview to the experience, and then listens to the emotions and narrative woven by the participant (Moustakas, 1994).

When analyzing transcripts from in depth interviews, the researcher must first perform a reduction where the phenomena is isolated through steps (Farrell, 2020). The first step shared by Farrell (2020) is bracketing, setting aside previous knowledge, assumptions, and bias to 'go back to the things.' Phenomena will be examined with wonder with a new lens of naivete (Moustakas, 1994). Next will be to complete a transcendental

phenomenological reduction where the meaning and essence of the phenomena is described (Farrell, 2020). In this phase Moustakas (1994) goes further and states that the experience must be naively viewed, with each experience examined alone and separate. Content is then horizonalized according to Moustakas (1994) where the researcher "regard[s] every horizon or statement relevant to the topic and question as having equal value" (p. 98). After numerous reviews, the knowledge is categorized into meaning units (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) then states that "a complete description is given of its essential constituents, variations of perceptions, thoughts, feelings, sounds, colors, and shapes" (p. 35). Finally, free imaginative variation takes place where Farrell (2020) notes the description is pondered as the researcher examines what can be removed until only the essence of the experience remains.

The phenomenological research approach as a methodology, centers on examining the essence of an experience to enlighten others. Utilizing this methodology allowed me space for inquiry into the experiences of women in executive level leadership positions who were also former first-generation college students. To develop a rich understanding of their experience, three interview questions were asked:

1. Describe your first professional higher education job experience after obtaining your undergraduate degree?;

2. How did that experience impact you as a community college leader?; and

3. What do you think about how your leadership experience may have differed from your male colleagues?

Through phenomenological inquiry I hope to understand their experiences and the essence of those experiences while delving into the meaning-making that resulted from their odyssey (Gurwitsch, 2005).

Participants and Sampling

To recruit participants for this study, an email was sent on a shared listserv serving college presidents, vice presidents, deans and executive directors. A survey was administered to leaders in the North Carolina Community College System with parameters of selecting executive level women that were first-generation college students. Interested individuals were asked to complete a short survey that requested their name, institution, role, and gender. From this list individuals were chosen for this qualitative study from executive leaders serving in the North Carolina Community College System. Selection for participation was influenced by the idea from Barbour and Schostak (2011) that layers of experiences by different individuals will provide a deeper understanding of the phenomena that is examined. While all of the eight women that participated in this study were executive leaders, their college culture and role at the community college differed, from Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Deans. They also represented different areas of the college with curriculum and continuing education areas participating. Executive leaders were chosen as they are in positions of authority that allow for an impact within the institutions they serve.

Data Collection and Analysis

Once selected, individuals participated in semi-structured interviews with Zoom recording session transcriptions. The goal of the interview was to provide the time and prompts necessary to deepen the understanding of the individual's experience, and how they develop meaning as an interpretation of that experience (Titchen & Hobson, 2011). While

research questions guided conversations, rapport developed between the researcher and participant allowed for voluntary stories that reflected the individuality of each participant (Titchen & Hobson, 2011).

Transcriptions of the recorded sessions were sent to participants to serve as a member check to allow participants to review for soundness and elaborate if desired (Creswell, 2018). These member checks were sent via emails and participants were encouraged to elaborate or clarify to ensure the clarity in the voice of their experience. Pseudonyms were utilized for all participants in this study. At the conclusion of the interviews, the researcher read the data in its entirety several times as suggested by Ravitch and Carl (2016), allowing for open coding to take place and common themes among participants to emerge.

Results

The women interviewed for this study reflected on their careers within the community college system to share the impact these educational institutions had on their lives. The ability to reflect critically is an important concept for higher education. This practice of unveiling previously held assumptions and challenging yourself with new information can lead to transformational change in thought (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). It can also impact your worldview therefore I created the term *epistemological germination* to encompass these experiences. *Epistemological germination* is the process of knowledge development through life experiences.

The reflection taking place during this study is content reflection, focused on "reflecting on what we perceive, think, feel, and act" as these executive women leaders share their experiences within their educational institutions (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). As they articulated their stories, three themes emerged from the group: navigating the community

college as a complex system, the unanticipated career ladder the system provided, and the joy of serving a disparate population.

Navigating the Community College as a Complex System

The first theme that emerged from this study was how each participant navigated the complex community college system. Community colleges were created with diverging missions: to create a workforce and to serve as a transfer institution. Since its inception these missions have pushed and pulled at the system, competing dynamics that depend on a leader to balance their influence and implement policies and procedures to reflect both priorities. While working in the community college system I have found that our institutions are complex organizations, reporting to state-level structures but integrating their local needs while balancing these missions. I have pondered…can community colleges learn? Can these organizations adapt? Miller (2021) discusses the question of whether higher education institutions can learn in his study which examined the ability of higher education organizations to learn after the COVID-19 pandemic shook up institutions and caused immediate changes in spending and policy. The results were not promising as many organizations made short-term changes but did not utilize the situation to make transformative change at their institution (Miller, 2021).

Within educational institutions, learning (or change) achieves the best results when it is student centered. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted many areas where education has failed and among these is the achievement gap for our underrepresented students. Temporary solutions in the North Carolina Community College System to address these needs were related to policy change such as the new implementation of a *WE,* withdraw exempt, or *IE,* incomplete exempt, grade for the spring 2020 semester. These grades were specifically for

students that have experienced adverse effects due to COVID-19. These changes meant students would not be penalized academically for withdrawing from classes late in the semester and they would not be responsible for compensating the institution for their financial aid award during spring and fall 2020. The focus of this change is to not burden the students with additional worries and encourage them to return to complete their courses in the fall. The pitfall however is that most of these COVID changes were tied to federal dollars, monies that will end in 2023. Will these new student-centric resources dry up when the federal dollars disappear? While that remains to be seen, the interviews where dynamic women spoke of changes they have made at their institutions, ones that have changed the culture of their organization even if in small ways.

During the interviews, women leaders frequently mentioned policies and procedures as the largest hindrances to student success. Battling these outdated systems and winning were a common success mentioned by participants. Carrie has worked at her community college for 12 years, having previously served as a full-time mother to her children. She has implemented policy and procedural changes at her community college that have streamlined workflows and eliminated barriers to student success. Many of our geo-constrained colleges deal regularly with a lack of resources due to their rural nature. Carrie mentioned wading through file cabinets filled with outdated documents that she tackled, scanning, and then shredding, to upgrade her department. Many of the academic paper forms were transitioned to quicker electronic forms under her leadership. She also worked with her Information Technology (IT) department to make the academic advisor assignment process efficient. Originally incoming students would not populate into the faculty members software platform until the first day of class, too late to establish a relationship with students and assist them

with their transition into higher education. Through Carrie's collaboration efforts during her tenure, her institution is now more equipped to serve students.

Elizabeth also shared about removing clunky, vague policies from her community college that allowed her institution to adapt to our changing world. Her experience in marketing, writing, and other fields provided a unique perspective to educational work. Revising an exercise policy became a chance to evaluate how the organization values overall health, including mental health. This was taken further in the creation of a fund that provides financial assistance to employees. While many colleges across America implemented assistance to students during and after COVID, fewer recognized the economic struggles of their employees. Elizabeth also notes that they changed their employee support plan to include improved counseling resources for staff as well. Elizabeth rose to the top level of her community college but still maintains a connection to students by teaching one class each year. She acknowledges,

> students are why we're here, so it's easy to get separated from the students when you have a lot of other things going on, but you always have to remember your mission and for me, being student centered is really important.

While community colleges can be unwieldy, antiquated organizations in some instances, they also have the power of adaptability that is more easily managed than their university counterparts.

Angie worked in healthcare for over 20 years before joining her local community college. Her previous experiences gave her a unique lens to COVID concerns and other recent problems facing education. Angie also spoke of her college's flexibility to support staff and faculty. In reaction to increased gas prices in 2022, they "provide employees a flex

day to help with gas prices" as well as counseling in response to the rising mental health crisis the same year.

The language spoken by community college staff can also be an unintentional barrier to students. Joy previously worked as a counselor and with individuals involved with the justice system. Joy speaks of assisting students and cultivating a safe space in her work. She escorts students into financial aid as "they don't understand all the rules…it's a lot of information". She made a practice of listening to the staff and summarizing the policies to the student in a way they can understand. She said "their [students] eyes would glaze over, then I would try to summarize, because I know they're lost." Figure 2 is a visual representation of this lost feeling. Joy took the same approach in her
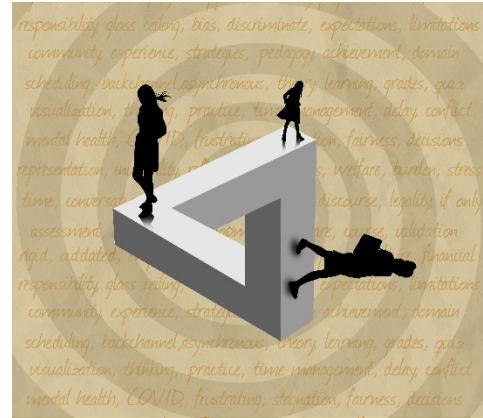

Figure 2

Labyrinth

teaching as she wanted it to be a "safe space", but also challenging students to explain their opinions in a Freire-esque anti-banking mode of education. Freire (2000) fought against the teaching style that strips information of its complexity so that it can be poured or deposited into students like a bank. Joy also mentions measures her institution has implemented to assist students such as implementing the success coach model with accompanying software to track early alerts signaling problems students may be experiencing in class. These alerts allow advisors to reach out to students who may be missing class, or have failed a test, to share institutional wrap-around services that can assist them with academic and nonacademic needs.

For some, this urge to test the flexibility and adaptability of the organization is what led them to executive leadership. These examples were shared during our interviews after I asked what participants were most proud of in their leadership role. Kristen as worked at her community college for over 20 years. She recalls

every role I would think…if I were [leadership position] I could change this process and then it would be easier for the student. When I obtained that role…then I thought well, if I were [executive position] I could change this college procedure or this college policy and make it easier for students. So I just wanted to have my hands in all the pots, and not just in that one department that I was part of.

Kristen laughs when recalling one of her first positions at the college. She wanted to answer incoming student questions, so she became self-taught on the college catalog. She quickly learned its usefulness as well as how to leverage her resources. Now she in turn encourages students to read the catalog admitting that it is not thrilling reading, but the information will be practical during their academic journey. When navigating another thorny, complex policy she spoke of meeting with a student regarding the repeat policy. The repeat policy allows a student to repeat a course and replace the former grade with the newly earned grade. The student reached out to meet with her and during their meeting explained his current situation that caused conflict with the policy. Kristen listened to his story, explained the financial aid aspect, and then quickly agreed to waive the policy to allow a repeat of the course. The student, prepared for a major battle, was stunned, and admitted to spending hours in preparation for their meeting, reviewing policies from other colleges and printing his evidence. He thanked her and explained "I was really expecting a fight" but Kristen shared, "I'm not here to fight with you. I am here to support you, that's my role" but the experience

hit a nerve with her, and she reviewed the policy to adjust it, remove barriers and "be the voice for the student…to make sure they're represented and that they're not overlooked". The community college system is complicated but the individuals serving students typically know the heart of education is to serve the students well.

When answering the same question Tara revealed that "this is where I belong" when discussing leadership at the community college. Tara's parents did not complete high school, but she was provided a rock of support from her grandmother. This support allowed her to continue her educational pursuits when her parents resisted her dreams. Tara has tackled policies that have hamstrung students, including one that left many qualified students off the Dean's list each semester. For these students, their developmental coursework grades were hindering their inclusion. Tara said "that's not fair" as for some students this is "a momentum point" to encourage them to continue in their journey. The second policy she mentioned needed to be adapted to the new community college population that includes Career and College Promise students, high school students that have qualified to take college courses. At her college, these students now consist of the majority of enrolled students. The academic forgiveness policy was based on full-time enrollment while these high school students are typically part-time students. If they performed poorly in a course, they must earn 12 credit hours before they are considered for academic forgiveness. As a part-time student, this would take longer and impact financial aid, causing a suspension of funds. When sharing the impact of this policy, she said if students must pay their way out of academic suspension, "you're never going to keep them, you're never gonna get them back", this policy "was hurting students more than it was helping them" so she resolved to amend the policy and takes a futuristic view of other policies and how changes in student characteristics mean the policy

should be adjusted. When wrapping up our interview she summarized her work as "doing what I love". May all educators continue the fight against institutional stagnation and keep the heart of education at the forefront of our minds.

The Unanticipated Career Ladder

The second theme to emerge was the unanticipated career ladder the community college system provided. For Ann, she was a student at her local community college and left the area once she achieved her degree. After six years she craved a transition that would provide her additional time with her family so on a lark she applied for a 9-month position on the last day of the application deadline. Once she transitioned, she found

> It was a love…I had the opportunity to take what I knew and help the students learn that, and then every patient that they touched I would have an influence, so I felt like my societal impact was much greater.

After more than twenty-five years at her community college working as faculty, then department chair, Ann has ascended into the highest role in her organization, college president. She joins select others in this role as only fifteen of the fifty-eight community colleges in the North Carolina system are women. She realizes this impact and shares that "a community college education has changed our [families] lives forever."

Tara had a journey like Ann's, she also attended her local community college before joining the workforce, only to return into the arms of the institution that made her "feel very welcomed". Tara originally planned to attend a four-year university to earn a medical degree, but an unexpected life change had her utilizing her earned scholarship at her community college. After graduation she worked for a local family business before realizing there was no room for advancement, and she turned to an entry-level position at the community

college. With the mentorship of a female colleague, Tara earned another associate's degree and advanced to assistant to the Vice President. At the encouragement of her mentor, she pursued a bachelor's degree with an intent to utilize the elective courses to switch to the faculty area of the college. In North Carolina, faculty can teach a subject area if they have earned 15 hours in that subject matter at the master's level. Tara quickly realized that she preferred working more intensely with the students as "this is where I belong" and completed counseling courses to allow her to continue serving because "I am passionate about what I do." The melding of education and counseling is unsurprising, I serve as an example in my work, and this is supported by the work of Carl Rogers, my favorite counseling theorist. Rogers (1980) notes when discussing learning that "whole person" learning, not just cognitive or affective, where the individual's attitudes are considered, "these conditions…hold for the classroom as well as the therapist's office" (p. 270). hooks (1994) speaks of engaging with students to watch them grow, to "teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (p. 13). This attitude is more demanding on the educator, but the rewards are sweet (hooks, 1994).

Carrie's path was slightly different but no less impactful on her life. She was offered an entry level position after years working part time in the local public school system. She recalled, "I loved it, and I was perfectly fine…. figured I would do it for ten or fifteen years…and then things changed". What changed for Carrie was she had a supportive system in her colleagues, particularly a female vice president, and began moving up in positions at the college. She obtained her master's degree and before she knew it, she earned a position as Director. Then an opportunity arose that challenged her view of her career trajectory. She

thought she would retire as Director, but when the Deans position was advertised, she thought she would put forth her best effort so at least she tried. She obtained the position and is currently enrolled in a doctoral program although she quickly assures me "I'm good right where I'm at." As Carrie continues her *epistemological germination*, only time will tell where she truly lands.

Kristen's story is a marketing dream for the possibilities within the community college system. She began as a community college student after discovering the family financial situation would be strained if she attended a four-year university. Once enrolled she became a work study student through the Pell grant program. Kristen impressed her instructors, and one recommended her for an evening switchboard operator position that was open. From there she earned a position in Student Services, from receptionist to assistant to Director. Now Kristen, who has served at her college since she was nineteen years old calls the institution "home" because she loved "the culture and the environment" and now serves as Vice President. "I ended up going to [local community college] because I knew I wanted to go to college, and I knew at that time that was what was affordable for me, and so [it is] part of my little story" and story that has seen her rise to different positions because she wanted "to be in a position where I could fix things" and have an effect on the students.

When she first began her career at the community college, Kristen was impacted by a local policy that allowed community college employees to take one free class. She discovered this while she was earning her associate's degree and working an entry level position at the college. She admits "I felt like I just won the lottery, getting that free tuition was so helpful" and she has not forgotten her journey as a student. She divulged that "I have a true place in my heart for the community college student because I am one."

65

Other participants "kind of happened into the community college system." Joy had previous positions in social service-oriented work when she moved to another area and found a position in a southern state community college. When she moved to North Carolina she worked in other positions but felt the pull to return to community college work. She began as a counselor in a rural North Carolina community college, advanced into a director's position and after obtaining an advanced degree she became faculty and moved into a dean position.

Katherine had a similar route in that she moved quite a bit before settling into North Carolina. While her degree was focused on early childhood, she also spent time in the corporate healthcare environment. Katherine found her calling when she began to work with adult students in another state. While waiting to obtain credentials for early childhood work, she began teaching English as a second language to adult students in a western state. She felt that it "changed her world". When she moved to North Carolina, she immediately began teaching similar courses at a local community college and moved from a part time teacher to an associate vice president position in twenty years.

Elizabeth knew that education was her childhood dream, but that dream was postponed due to the parental encouragement of obtaining a business degree for her Bachelors. The call to teaching was not to be dampened. After working at a major business leader in the northeast United States, she realized

> I was young and idealistic, and I said, 'Gosh, I'm just helping people who already
>
> have money make more money, and I really have strayed from my desire to be a
>
> teacher'. I always wanted to be a teacher, and I want to go back to school at night.

Elizabeth went back to school and needed undergraduate credits to finish her master's degree. Her choice of obtaining these at a community college changed her life. She

reminisces, "that's when I knew it was my calling to work in community college and be an educator" that the experience of joining people of "all walks of life and experiences" made an impression and it was a "rich learning environment." After moving to North Carolina, she was able to obtain an adjunct position at a community college where she worked as department chair. While Elizabeth has taken a more "circuitous route," she has achieved her "dream…to become a president of a community college."

Mezirow (2000) shared that in human society, our existence is intermingled with other individuals who serve to influence our perspectives. This communicative learning takes place through discourse as seen by many of our participants engaging with a mentor at their institution. This discourse paired with reflective thinking generates growth as leaders. As Kristen shared about an individual that impacted her community college experience,

> it started to dawn on me that I could be somebody's Rita. I could help somebody through that process and be that person that they found comfort in leaning on to figure out 'what am I doing here?'. And so that's kind of what planted that seed in that idea.

Rita helped Kristen adjust to college and ultimately spurred her to pursue her graduate degree and advance at her institution. Eddy and Boggs (2010) state that while "leaders often rely on old mental models developed by previous experiences and beliefs, by engaging in reflection and continuous feedback loops, they can adjust their schema and allow for greater flexibility in their approach to problems on campus" (p. 140). "Interaction with others", as articulated by Cranton (1996), "is a vital component of transformative learning" (p. 78). By speaking and sharing with others, these leaders transformed their thinking by critically

reflecting on their beliefs regarding their capacity for success and the discourse provided by their interactions with their mentors propelled them into new thought and possibilities.

The Joy of Serving a Disparate Student Population

The final theme noted in the interview data was the joy of serving a disparate student population. In North Carolina, many of our students attend their local community college due to proximity and are constrained by finances, family obligations, and work schedules. The community colleges located in impoverished or rural North Carolina often have the least number of resources and the largest vulnerable student populations. Despite a multitude of grant programs to serve inequity, our community college system in North Carolina still reflects the cultural majority. First-generation, poor, and underrepresented students are often those that make up the attrition data for our state (*2019 Equity Report*, 2019). In the 2019 equity report, the North Carolina Community College System state average for accumulated college credit hours was 6.7, with students of color ranging from 4.5-6.4 hours accumulated (*NCCCS*, 2019). It is frustrating when there are access programs such as the Male Minority Success Initiative, First in the World grants, TRIO programs, Single Stop grants, success coaching, College Advising Corps, and GEAR UP. These programs seem only to make dents in inequity in our system as the systemic roots go unaddressed.

Community colleges, as succinctly stated by McPhail and Beatty (2021), "are a microcosm of their large communities, and they can be a focal point to address larger societal issues" (p. 1). The leaders interviewed for this study have impacted the students at their institutions and feel that the students' transformations are their career legacy. Carrie recalled when she was recognized during a ceremony by a student that had nominated her due to her impact on the students' journey. Carrie said, "I made a difference, because they told me."

During the ceremony, the student shared, "If all else failed, I could go see Miss Carrie, and she was going to get me the help I needed" and so Carrie summarized this story as her goal as a leader is "trying to get them through [school]...[as] that's what we're here for."

For Angie, she felt that "you have to be mindful…a lot of people are just stressed at the moment when they're coming in with problems…it goes a long way to be respectful of people and their different opinions". She also stressed active listening to individuals and making sure to check in with them, to not "leave them out hanging." She spoke at length that her first priority when joining her institution was to develop trust within her department, so she built relationships that allowed people to come to her with their problems. She shared that when she receives visits from students, sometimes they feel that "their life's falling apart" so she strives for a non-judgmental space where everyone is listened to with respect.

Elizabeth feels strongly that leaders should remain connected to their community college student population. She summarized her perspective in this way:

> I knew it was my calling to work in community college and be an educator, because the variety of people in the classroom, young people…just people from all walks of life and experiences, and it was this rich, rich learning environment.

Conclusion

As educational leaders, consistent reflection and examination of world view and beliefs keep our perspectives relevant to the needs facing students and our colleagues daily. In this study I found three themes that were consistent with participants. These themes were navigating the community college as a complex system, the unanticipated career ladder the system provided, and the joy of serving a disparate population. As educators we want our students to learn content but to also examine the essence of their outlook, reflect on the

impact of society on their perspectives, and exit the educational environment with a deeper understanding of who they are and their values (Mezirow, 1991). This learning is echoed in our colleagues, learning new information and reflecting on how to incorporate this new learning into our values and beliefs. The primary purpose of higher education is to provide an opportunity for individuals to learn skills that will help transform them into progressive citizens with new skill sets and frameworks that can transform society. As these interviews have indicated, this work is continuing in the community college system where mentors assist incoming staff members to challenge them to become leaders of the future.

Reflection on Article Two: The Agile Educator

In working in education for 20 years I have shared in the experiences of many students from our community colleges. When listening to participants and writing the previous piece, I thought to my own practice and lived experiences. One example of a policy barrier I have encountered is assisting community college students with their applications to transfer universities. For North Carolina students that are interested in postsecondary education, several processes must be completed before entering the doors of economic advancement. Many navigating this process have experienced frustration with the Residency Determination Services platform. One such student was determined to be out of state due to a documentation error and requested that I assist her through the reaffirmation process. We met several times and provided many different types of documentation to the platform before her in-state residency was granted. Completion of this hurdle was necessary before the student could finalize her four-year university application. As a student from a low socioeconomic status juggling family while working part-time, this created undue stress for her and was a frustrating process. I empathized with the participants that were navigating outdated policies and I am thrilled they were empowered to implement changes for student success. My leadership experiences have taught me many things and cemented my value of the diverse, first-generation, student-focused approach. I also learned hard lessons in the nature of bureaucratic systems and leadership while advocating for my students.

In the previous article we saw how the women interviewed for this study navigated the North Carolina Community College system, the surprise career opportunities it provided and the delight they received from serving its diverse population of students. The experiences of these leaders navigating bureaucracy and implementing change is reflected in Mezirow's

transformative learning theory. Mezirow drew on his own life experiences and the work of other educators. Jurgen Habermas impacted Mezirow and was one of the early architects of critical theory, identified in the 1940s (Merriam et al., 2007). Habermas believed individuals had the capacity to critically review humanity and as Merriam et al. (2007) shared, "engage in critique and action to bring about a more just, free, and equitable society (p. 250). We see this transformation in the previous article where women entered the postsecondary world with trepidation but soon learned its intricacies and became empowered to help others. By viewing the academic policies or barriers with a critical mindset, participants sought to create an equitable environment by listening to student needs and advocating for change.

This also ties in with the first article in that the participants were utilizing their individual experience, critical reflection, and dialogue. Their individual experience as first-generation students provide a unique perspective on the machinations of the educational system. Mezirow incorporated aspects of John Dewey's work, particularly his concept of reflective thinking in developing his definition of learning (Mezirow, 1991). Designing thought processes with an intentionality to examine problems, Dewey (1933) sets forward the idea to think reflectively as an act that "involves a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty, in which thinking originates as an act of searching, hunting, inquiring, to find material that will resolve the doubt, settle and dispose of the perplexity" (p. 12). Internal cognitive processes allowing space for adults to contemplate how to implement ideas to achieve problem resolution, is the essence of reflective thinking (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow (1991) goes beyond reflective thinking to demonstrate the process that occurs once a decision has been made, creating space for individuals to reflect and think of how new knowledge interacts with prior knowledge and develops a new meaning. So, while the participants are

engaging in the three core elements of transformative learning theory, they are also

implementing Mezirow's concept of communicative learning by engaging in dialogue with

their peers, administration, and students to analyze the problems they face.

Onward to Article Three: ***First-Gen Impact: How the First-Generation Journey Impacts***

Executive Women's Leadership

In the final article, I will look back with participants at their childhood, college, and

early career experiences, and how these experiences impacted their approach to executive

leadership. I will review the impact of their family dynamics, their interconnected identities,

and how each step of their *epistemological germination* has led them to share their stories

with the community college students they serve. Sharing our journeys with students

establishes a trusting relationship that can impact the student and the leader that is willing to

be vulnerable. This connection can lead to life changing relationships as this spring I will

attend the master's graduation ceremony of one of my students from early in my career. She

has encouraged me in my doctoral journey, and I have cheered her on as she completes her

long-awaited master's degree.

The audience for this article is first-generation leaders, specifically those working in

the community college system. *First-Gen Impact: How the First-Generation Journey*

Impacts Executive Women's Leadership will be submitted to the *Journal of First-generation*

Student Success whose audience are student affairs personnel working to support first-

generation student success. The journal was established by The Center for First-Generation

Success.

Article Three: *First-Gen Impact: How the First-Generation Journey Impacts Executive Women's Leadership*

In this piece, I will explore how the first-generation experience impacted women executive leaders at the community college. The dynamics of family support was varied among participants and impacted their journeys as a result. Cultural capital is discussed as a factor in this experience. The participants also shared interconnected identities as some were of low socioeconomic status during their educational journey or working full-time and juggling a family while they pursued their degree. Ultimately, their story shaped their approach to leadership and shaped how they engage with colleagues and students.

For many American citizens, the pull of higher education echoes similarly to the dreams of the golden ticket in the movie *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Terenzini et al. (1995) notes that post-secondary institutions "have been a major policy instrument in promoting upward mobility and educational, social, and economic equity for traditionally disadvantaged groups" (p. 5). Some individuals dream of this degree that will provide them with a ticket to economic mobility, believing the gap of inequality will be filled, and they will achieve their dream of finding their place in society. For the first-generation college student, societal hurdles do not end when they complete their degree.

These individuals then transform into first-generation professionals, individuals entering the white-collar workforce with similar barriers of hidden norms and jargon as their postsecondary experience. The Center for First-Generation Success, an initiative of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the Suder Foundation, was created in 2017 and seeks to "be the premier source of evidence-based

practices, professional development, and knowledge creation for the higher education community to advance the success of first-generation students" (*Center for First-Generation Student Success*, 2022a). The Center has released new research into the experience of first-generation professionals in the last five years (*Center for First-Generation Student Success*, 2022b). Their recently published facts sheets chronicle the underemployment of first-generation professionals, their hesitation to enroll in graduate school, and their underutilization of career services at their postsecondary institution (*Center for First-Generation Students* n.d.). These complexities show that economic mobility is not accomplished simply by obtaining a degree, but includes other elusive factors as well. While the research provided by The Center for First-Generation Success is applauded, more work needs to be done to share the dynamic perspectives and experiences of first-generation professionals in reflecting their identity and intersectionality.

My own first-generation professional experience was transformative and part of my epistemological germination. This broadening of my worldview came from my postsecondary experiences as well as the barriers and hidden norms I faced in the white-collar world. This journey stoked my curiosity and provided the impetus for this research project. This article will review the literature on first-generation students and professionals and share the experience of eight women that navigated the first-generation journey before becoming executive leaders at a North Carolina Community College.

Literature Review

The impact of the first-generation higher education experience echoes into an individual's service as an educational leader. First-generation students enter educational institutions that are a completely different culture from high school and the pressure of

learning vast amounts of new information that could not be conveyed by their parents or family members. This can be linked to social capital, which is defined by Bourdieu (1986) as "made up of social obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital..." (p. 16). In the educational culture, social capital is information students collect from their network that assists them with achieving their goals (Jabbar et al., 2019). For first-generation students this information is imperative to their transition to post-secondary enrollment as the knowledge they collect will allow them to access resources that will support their college success (Jabbar et al., 2019). They do not always find allies in the education system. As Delpit (1992) laments, educators are often taught a deficit-model outlook on their students, particularly those of low socioeconomic status. Delpit (1992) shares that the educational system views "children of poverty [as] developmentally slower than other children" and they "cannot be expected to achieve as well as White, middle-class children" (p. 245).

There are a few voices that contrast the deficit minded view of many researchers reflected in the literature on first-generation students. Jabbar et al. (2019) point out that marginalized students often have capital in the form of family support and resiliency. This view critiques the values of society and assesses the cultural capital available to first-generation students (Jabbar et al., 2019). This cultural capital could be obtained through extended family members, communities, peers, or school staff encouragement (Jabbar et al., 2019). Jabbar et. al (2019) notes that parents of marginalized students often do not know of funding resources for college expenses. While they do not understand the intricacies of searching for fiscal aid, families understand the importance of a degree on the livelihood of their children.

The Origin of First-generation

The term first-generation, as referencing college students, initially appeared in the American vocabulary in 1980. Within the amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1965, Congress gave educators the definition for first-generation which was "a person neither of whose parents completed a baccalaureate degree" (1980). This reference was included in the legislation referring to the "Special Programs for Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds" (Higher Education Act of 1965). These special programs came to be known as TRIO, a nickname earned for the original three programs: Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Special Services for Disadvantaged Students (now Student Support Services). These programs focus on assisting marginalized students with successful preparation and completion of their post-secondary education.

Many educational institutions continue to use the TRIO definition which has ballooned to a three-part statement that to qualify as first-generation an individual is:

> 1) A student neither of whose natural or adoptive parents received a baccalaureate degree; 2) A student who, prior to the age of 18, regularly resided with and received support from only one parent and whose supporting parent did not receive a baccalaureate degree; or 3) An individual who, prior to the age of 18, did not regularly reside with or receive support from a natural or an adoptive parent (Student Support Services Program, 1996).

While this is a thorough definition, frequently colleges will create their own definition of a first-generation student, tying the qualification to financial aid resources. In a study conducted by Toutkoushian et al. (2015), their research team considered eight definitions for first-generation college student status. Based on which term was applied to their sample, the

eligibility ranged from 22% to 77% as qualifying as first-generation (Toutkoushian et al., 2015). The higher percentage group had the broadest definition of first-generation where they qualified unless both parents had not earned a baccalaureate degree and the smaller group had the meticulous definition of only qualifying if both parents had not enrolled in post-secondary education (Toutkoushian et al., 2015). Their study definitions were as follows:

> (1) parent(s) have at most a high school degree; (2) parent(s) have at most started (but not completed) an associate's degree; (3) parent(s) have at most completed an associate's degree; and (4) parent(s) have at most started (but not completed) a bachelor's degree. For each of these categories, we created two variables depending on whether both parents or at least one parent needed to meet the education criteria.
>
> (Toutkoushian, et al., p. 12, 2015)

This study shows that while the term was only introduced forty years ago, it has now morphed into many variations across educational institutions and organizations. The results of the Toutkoushian et al. (2015) study indicate that regardless of the variation of definitions, all of the students that qualified as first-generation were statistically less likely to enroll in post-secondary education. This definition variance adds confusion in determining which students are eligible for federal programs and financial aid opportunities.

First-generation college students seek to remedy the economic disparity they face within our society. What they face upon entering through the doors of the institution may be exacerbated by their childhood experiences and culture.

Intersectional Identities of First-generation College Students

Despite the lack of a firm definition of first-generation, researchers agree that these students tend to share similar characteristics. These characteristics can form overlapping

identities creating an intersectionality that "for some individuals who have multiple minority statuses (e.g., racial minority and poor), being in a collegiate environment highlighted their many identities and statuses" (Rice et al., 2017, p. 432). Examples of these characteristics are low-socioeconomic status, family dynamics, relationships with peers, self-efficacy, and employment during their educational career.

Low-Socioeconomic Status

First-generation students tend to be low-socioeconomic status and are statistically less likely to pursue college (Terenzini et al., 1995). The Center for First-Generation Student Success indicates that the median household income for first-generation families is less than half of the income for families that have college-experienced members (*NASPA Fact Sheet*, 2020). As noted in Evans (2016), first-generation students may also struggle with tuition costs due to the lack of information about financial aid and scholarships.

Family Dynamics

Parents that have completed a post-secondary degree recognize their increased social capital and communicate this benefit to their children (Toutkoushian et al., 2015). Participants in the study conducted by Rice et. al (2017) "remembered family members communicating potential advantages to social class advancement, including gaining respect from others, and more fulfilling, better-paying, and less physically demanding jobs" (p. 421). For some students, this encouragement escalated into insistence they graduate college (Rice et al., 2017). First-generation students experience pride that they are the first in the family to attend college while understanding their parents cannot provide them with the information for college access (Rice et al., 2017). Overall, the participants stated they received motivation from their family members and peers to attend college (Rice et al., 2017).

Relationships with Peers

When compared with their peers, first-generation students were shown to spend less time socializing in high school and experienced a lack of support from their network of friends (Terenzini et al., 1995). The lack of social experience can lead to less engagement in college which exacerbates isolation for the student (Evans, 2016). The pressure of changes in friendships when students leave for college is another obstacle these students must overcome (Terenzini et al., 1995). Whether due to lack of experience or isolation from friends, the resulting social network of first-generation students is less developed than their continuing-generation peers. This is concerning as Padgett et. al (2012) found that "first-generation students derived greater net cognitive and psychosocial benefits from frequent interaction with peers …than did their non-first-generation peers" (p. 259).

Self-efficacy

While college choice can be an arduous process for many students, first-generation students find that they must seek resources and develop relationships on their own, without parental guidance or assistance. When entering the college environment, a new student can be overwhelmed with the new jargon and policies shared with them upon enrolling at an institution. Adjusting to this setting is difficult as first-generation students must navigate the hidden norms of higher education (Wallace, 2018).

Clemens (2016) follows a first-generation student entering their first year of college. He analyzed the student's experience from a social capital lens, including the student's social networks as well as their access to resources (Clemens, 2016). Clemens (2016) noted that attending college expanded the student's social capital and enabled their economic mobility as a first-generation student. He highlights that their avid use of networks and supportive

family nurtured the student's goal to attend college (Clemens, 2016). As Clemens (2016) notes, more research is needed on the role of social capital for first-generation students.

Employment

The personal lives of first-generation students also impact their academic life. Along with the burden of insufficient support, first-generation students enroll in fewer courses in their first semester and tend to spend more time working than studying (Terenzini et al., 1995). Outside forces pulling on their time, as well as the likelihood that they have children, result in the student taking longer to complete their degree (Terenzini et al., 1995). Colleges and universities tend to frown upon these students, scrutinizing them for taking classes part-time or taking longer to complete their degree (Hodgkinson, 1985).

History of First-Generation Professional

When accepting their first white-collar position, these burgeoning first-generation professionals experience disorienting environments where their family and friends are unable to assist with the prolonged interview process, the stacks of insurance and benefits forms they receive on their first day, as well as a new version of small talk they did not encounter during their college years. In her study, Olson (2016) found that first-generation professionals fell into three themes: those facing a new position, occurrences within the job, and acknowledging previous experiences. For those that are beginning a new job, the grit and tenacity that propelled them through their academic career assists them with meeting the challenges of this new environment. Once they become acclimated, they discover the hidden norms of white-collar work including the proclivity to use broad, vague language rather than straight talk and meanings that are often veiled due to political maneuvering. Olson also shared that a dichotomy arose in the individual's life where their exposure to college ideas

and the white-collar world created strain with family members that possessed a different outlook. She termed these individuals 'straddlers' - moving between two contrasting worlds (Olson, 2016).

These experiences can lead to the development of imposter syndrome. Mull (2022) shares her view that she "worked to unlearn that false narrative I once constructed for myself" including the feeling that she did not belong (p. 20). The lack of supportive resources in the white-collar world contribute to feeling less, that "I did not have generational footholds of educational attainment firmly guiding my path, yet I knew the expectations were high" (p. 27). These opposing forces are the recipe for developing imposter syndrome, and first-generation professionals therefore feel the pressure to over-prepare in their assigned projects, hoping that hard work will overcome their self-determined deficits (Mull, 2022).

To remedy these feelings and gain support, first-generation professionals can seek others within the first-generation identity. By creating a community of support, cultural knowledge is shared, and hidden norms are unveiled, resources are shared, and skills are developed (Mull, 2022). When we examine the professionals that begin moving into higher education leadership, their first-generation student experience impacts how they approach decision making, particularly regarding policies that impact students. Banks (2022) notes personal experience with misunderstanding the financial aid package as an undergraduate allows for them to share how "this story also provided an opportunity to discuss how my vision and decision-making process for the Division of Student Affairs had been shaped by my experiences as a first-generation college student" (p. 53). Banks (2022) also recommends that first-generation professionals cultivate a community of support to provide a network that can maneuver political barriers. Wallace (2022) agrees and encourage individuals to "never

apologize for asking questions and seeking support" and pointing out that building a network amplifies your voice.

The journey of first-generation professionals mimics their experiences in higher education encountering disorienting dilemmas, reflecting on novel experiences and incorporating new information into their perspective of self (Wallace, 2022). While previous research has focused on the deficit lens of first-generation experiences, modern researchers are touting the resilience displayed by these individuals (Wallace, 2022). Their unique experiences allow them to bring a complex and multi-faceted approach to their work, regardless of the career field in which they serve.

Theoretical Framework

Upon entering into higher education, the epistemological frameworks of first-generation students are challenged. In the first article of this series, we reflected on the three core elements of transformative learning theory: individual experience, critical reflection, and dialogue. We then transitioned in the second article to delve into communicative learning. In this final article, we will examine the ten phases of learning as postulated by Mezirow.

Mezirow became interested in the experience of adults returning to educational institutions in adulthood and conducted a study in 1978 investigating re-entry programs. In his study, Mezirow (2000) examined 350 of these programs that consisted mainly of middle-class homemakers. In these re-entry programs women began to critically reflect on their inherited and unexamined assumptions of their roles in society (Mezirow, 1978). Participation in the group allowed women to try alternatives to the cultural norms and build confidence on their capacity to metamorphose into a new woman (Mezirow, 1978). Moving through the process of engaging in new learning opportunities in education promoting self-

actualization, was often a painful process filled with doubt, backsliding, and retching pain (Mezirow, 1978). For some of those who navigated the painful questions - 'if I am not a wife, mother, or club member, then who am I?'- it was an overwhelming pain they could not pursue and they reverted back to their previous roles (Mezirow, 1978). It was the process of this potential for metamorphosis that prompted Mezirow to develop transformative learning theory.

Phases of Learning

When examining the progression of acquiring knowledge Mezirow and Taylor (2009) prioritized openness, discourse, and critical reflection as the means of processing new information that conflicts with assumptions learned in early childhood and secondary schooling. Until adulthood, learning is a formative process (Mezirow, 1978). First-generation students have a slightly altered phase of learning than traditional learners who enter postsecondary education, they are confronted with novel ways of thinking and are often overwhelmed with new information. If not adequately prepared, students may close their minds to new information and halt the learning process (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). When evaluating these learning transition phases which occur in adulthood, Mezirow and Taylor (2009) created ten phases of learning:

- a disorienting dilemma
- self-examination
- a critical assessment of assumptions
- recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation
- exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action
- planning a course of action
- acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan
- provisional trying of new roles
- building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
- a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (p. 19)

84

These phases were first shared in his foundational 1978 study, but Mezirow (2000) did acknowledge that these were not steps that learners proceed through, but stages that may be repeated, regressed, and transitioned out of order. As the phases begin, perhaps the most challenging phase is the first phase.

A disorienting dilemma. The first phase of learning is most difficult for the learner. As mentioned above, vulnerability is a key aspect of this transformation and there will be individuals who stall their progress due to the feeling of discomfort. Initiation of the dilemma can be life circumstances, an educator, or the learner themselves (Mezirow, 1991). In a 1978 study conducted by Mezirow, triggering events for women were broken down into outward events such as divorce, unemployment, children leaving the home, or inward dissatisfaction of their current station in life (Mezirow, 1978).

Self-examination. Response to the disorienting dilemma places the individual at the precipice of change. Some will be overburdened and will respond with actions, observed by Mezirow (1991) as "negotiation, compromise, stalling, backsliding, self-deception, and failure" in the process of transformation (p. 100). As the key term indicates, the collision of previous experiences combined with new knowledge is overwhelming for the learner and leaves them bewildered and left examining their trusted belief mechanisms. To advance during this emotional and intellectual upheaval will require effort to navigate and acknowledge the emotions before the information can be integrated into new learning (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow (1991) states that others will "backslide" by "acquiring an insight that results in a transformation in meaning scheme that may contribute over time toward a change in meaning perspective but at the moment comes into conflict with the established meaning perspective and is overwhelmed by it" (p. 100). Flooded with emotion, the learner

must choose to progress into the difficult work of transformation despite the triggers or halt the work and seek the comfort of previous experiences, disregarding any new meanings (Mezirow, 1991). If the discord reaches unmanageable levels, the learner will dim the volume on the learning process creating the feeling of discomfort, due to the friction connected to their current meaning framework (Mezirow, 1991).

A critical assessment of assumptions. In this phase, the individual becomes aware of their dependence on social realities posited by others and begins to look more closely at these experiences, weighing them in light of their own values (Mezirow, 1991). This is not a simple reflection of past experiences, but a deeper examination of the assumptions, bias, and cultural influence that impact how we see the world (Merriam et al., 2007). Progression in this stage is predicated upon the contextual environment of the individual and their desire to act on this new knowledge (Mezirow, 1978). My own positionality as a first-generation professional, led to an eye-opening experience in my first career. In this position, I encountered laissez-faire leadership, unethical colleagues, and subtle racism, all experiences which challenged my values and expectations of white-collar environments.

Recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation. Women in the Mezirow (1978) re-entry program research study often entered into the group with the established norm of dictation expected and were transitioned when the staff offered them choices to develop confidence. Building confidence was developed through two aspects observed by Mezirow (1978), redirection and reduction of anxiety. Programs encouraged women to redirect their self-talk towards empowerment (Mezirow, 1978). Staff also used a technique similar to Carl Rogers person-centered therapy approach to reflect feelings shared by participants, to assist them in developing their own perspective

86

change (Mezirow, 1978). Reducing the anxiety of entering into a new environment filled

with novel and exciting challenges was another strategy implemented by staff (Mezirow,

1978). Information was shared about supportive services and academic resources; in

addition, new participants were provided the opportunity to meet women who were currently

involved or who had successfully completed the coursework (Mezirow, 1978). Once

enrolled, the formation of a new self took time and commitment (Mezirow, 1978). True

progress was made when women experienced 'aha' moments, whether they were from

successfully completing coursework or connecting with an opportunity to mentor other

women (Mezirow, 1978).

 Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action. Mezirow (1978)

documented that the re-entry curriculum was centered on female empowerment and designed

to assist individuals with defining their values, making their own choices, and plotting their

next steps. Once primary courses were completed, the lens of focus pivoted from an inward,

value-defining focus to an outward, action-oriented focus (Mezirow, 1978). With the support

of peers and staff, small steps were taken towards the new self-concept (Mezirow, 1978).

This assistance was needed when some women faced resistance from their family, with

Mezirow (1978) finding that peers often encouraged a balance between their new academic

or career-oriented work and their traditional roles. A modern example of this phase is

displayed when a first-generation professional becomes more secure in the white-collar

environment and begins to advocate for new responsibilities or form engaging relationships

with more experienced colleagues.

 Planning a course of action. Once women who participated in the study reified their

self-development, they began to seek options to express a new identity (Mezirow, 1978). The

size of these steps into a new world were dependent on the context of the individual and displays of confidence were cheered on by staff (Mezirow, 1978). Steps were taken not only in the program, but also in the real world, where some experienced opposition from their spouses and children, or allowed themselves to become flummoxed by a creeping sense of doubt (Mezirow, 1978). Mezirow (1978) shared that those continuing in the program receive feedback on these steps through graded coursework, peer interactions and their family members. This stage marks a point where individuals begin to feel confident and see new opportunities available for success. Reaching out to experienced colleagues to request mentorship is a modern example of this phase.

Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan. During this phase, Mezirow (1978) observed that individuals begin preparing for their new vocation and new life based upon their perspective transformation. In his study, Mezirow (1978) noted that completing academic courses and vocational training continues to build confidence for the learner and allows them to continually adjust on a path that allows for conclusive self-actualization to occur. For first-generation students, this phase may be taking the step to seek academic or career resources to further their personal goals. When they transition as professionals, this step could occur when seeking additional postsecondary degrees further enabling their career advancement. The biggest accomplishment in this phase is the definitive outlook that 'I can do this' (Mezirow, 1978).

Provisional trying of new roles. For women participating in his study, Mezirow (1978) found that at this stage program staff referred women to higher educational institutions to continue their academic work or to businesses in the local job market. The transition from program curriculum to real world application was discussed and explored in

courses and with staff (Mezirow, 1978). In concert with supportive staff, Mezirow (1978) indicated that individuals identified their educational, personal, and vocational goals and next steps were planned based on the skill level of the individual and the local economic market. For others in this stage, joining an interest group, trying a new activity or taking other small steps to assert their modified self may take place.

Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships. In their *Creating Alternative Realities* chapter of Mezirow's book, *Transformative Learning in Practice*, Butterwick et al. (2009) highlight utilizing artistic expression to provide reflection and the provisional trying of different roles in response to new learning. They also share that individuals may not be cognizant of knowledge retained within their bodies and that learning is not exclusive to the mind (Butterwick et al., 2009). With this viewpoint, they coordinated activities with theater techniques where individuals volunteered to share an oppressive experience, 'molded' other group members to non-verbally demonstrate that experience, discussed the emotions involved, and then practiced new alternatives with the group (Butterwick et al., 2009). Making use of expressive arts transformed the perspective of these experiences and emboldened participants to develop strategies for future oppressive situations (Butterwick et al., 2009).

A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. Now that an individual has become emancipated from previous meaning schemes, formed new perspectives, and practiced these new roles, it is time to put this new reformed identity into practice. The ultimate goal of adulthood from Mezirow's (2000) perspective is to be "more liberated, socially responsible, and autonomous learners" and to make "informed choices" (p. 30). Mezirow (1991) was adamant that action was an integral

element of transformative learning theory. This last stage is one where the individual has the opportunity to apply newly acquired knowledge to their everyday life to become a transformer themselves. Mezirow (1991) shared that it is not simply behavior that indicates transformative learning, but the incorporation of this outlook as habit in life.

Methodology

There is a paucity of literature examining the experience of first-generation professionals in higher education. While research is extensive investigating the experiences of first-generation college students, only recently has inquisition stretched to the experiences of these individuals after their higher education journey. Phenomenology was chosen as the methodology for this study due to the focus on capturing the lived experiences of the participants (Brinkmann et al. 2014). This approach assumes "knowledge about phenomena comes from the individuals who have directly experienced it" and their frame of reference is socially constructed (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 377).

Phenomenology has risen in popularity in educational circles as noted by Dall'alba (2009), to assist educators in understanding our complex modern world. This may be due in part to the flexibility of the approach and its ability to partner with other qualitative approaches (Dall'alba, 2009). The role of the researchers is to unveil what is taken for granted by the interviewee (Brinkmann et al., 2014). Husserl claimed that one must lose their knowledge to begin the first step of inquiry (Himanka, 2019). As a method, transcendental phenomenology relies more on extensive interviews rather than observation of the individual (Titchen & Hobson, 2011). To understand meaning, the individual, typically called participants, is asked open-ended questions and research questions are articulated to understand the essence of the context of the experience (Titchen & Hobson, 2011).

First-Generation Focused Research in Phenomenology

The focus of experience as an essential path to knowledge lends phenomenology well to the inquiry of the first-generation college student journey. For their first-generation study, Hirudayaraj and McLean (2018) examined the impact of family dynamics, hurdles experienced in securing appropriate employment, and insufficient career support provided by their alma mater. By highlighting the experience of these individuals, the researchers uncovered systemic oppressive norms that were underlying the journeys of these students, barriers that they did not realize until examining the past (Hirudayaraj & McLean, 2018). This study can in turn inform educators in the field that work with first-generation college students, allowing them to critique existing systemic structures and build supportive frameworks for these students as they transition into the white-collar sector. By examining these experiences through phenomenology, educators can learn how to best prepare these students for this shift and add aspects such as networking or internships to their curriculum to set them up for success (Hirudayaraj & McLean, 2018).

The experience of being the first to attend college in their family as well as attain executive level leadership roles as women facing societal oppression, is a unique journey with fascinating facets to examine. Utilizing phenomenology allowed me time to create an assuring environment during the interview process where I can undertake a more insightful view of the experiences from forthright answers from the participants (Moustakas, 1994). My own experience as a first-generation professional has stoked my curiosity in the journey taken by others, especially women who continue to face barriers in the workplace when seeking executive level leadership roles.

Examining First-Generation Professionals Through Phenomenological Lens

The phenomenological research approach as a methodology, centers on examining the essence of an experience to enlighten others. Utilizing this methodology allowed me a space for inquiry into the experiences of women in executive level leadership positions who are also former first-generation college students. Through phenomenological inquiry I hope to understand their experiences and the essence of those experiences while delving into the meaning-making that resulted from their odyssey (Gurwitsch, 2005). The experience of being the first to attend college in their family as well as attain executive level leadership roles as women facing societal oppression, is a unique journey with fascinating facets to examine. Phenomenology provided me time to create an assuring environment during the interview process where I can undertake a more insightful view of the experiences from forthright answers from the participants (Moustakas, 1994). My own experience as a first-generation professional has stoked my curiosity in the journey taken by others, especially women who continue to face barriers in the workplace when seeking executive level leadership roles.

Methods and Analysis for this Study

The researcher's experiences often provide a depth of knowledge to the context they are investigating. To maintain a quality qualitative study, strategies such as examining the phenomenon for a long period of time are implemented (Merriam, 2007). The aim of a constructionist researcher is not to create a replicable study, but to delve into the meaning constructed by the participants and provide new explanations (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Often this shows in their description of the study, including first-person views and a focus on the participants' voice (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Working in tandem, the researcher and participant create an interpretive dialogue to analyze the effectiveness of college advising. Utilizing one-on-one interviews, I asked the

participants about their leadership role and the influence of their first-generation identity and provided follow-up questions to confirm the interpretation of the participant's response. The focus of one-on-one interactions allows the researcher time to develop a rapport with the participant and to confirm their interpretation is in line with the participant's reality. The participants' voice is key to developing a depth of understanding of the case as the researcher aims to view the phenomena from their point of view (Chadderton & Torrance, 2011). By taking time to understand participants' reality, construct knowledge with them, and create an interpretive dialogue, a thorough snapshot of the participant's point of view is captured to inform educator practitioners.

Participants. The participants in this study are all women first-generation college students that now serve at a community college in an executive leadership position. This choice reflects my interest in how the first-generation experience guides women who, through their leadership roles, can now impact students they serve. To select participants, a survey was sent to email groups that include all Presidents, Vice Presidents, Deans, and Executive Directors working in the North Carolina Community College System. The survey asked for their contact information, the name of their community college, their role at the college, and their gender (short answer open-ended question). The gender section was a short answer question. Eight women were selected with various roles ranging from President to Executive Director.

Interview Protocol. Each semi-structured interview was conducted on the Zoom platform which allowed for recording and transcription. Developing rapport with the participant is a priority at the start of the interview process. To facilitate this process, I asked general questions to allow the participant to relax and understand the rhythm of the interview. These

questions, 'How long have you worked in education?' and 'What brought you to work in this field?' allowed time for the individual to adjust to the recording and transcription process before we begin the interview questions.

To understand the experience of participants, three questions were asked of each participant. These "common or shared" experiences noted by Creswell (2018) of the first-generation professional experience will be examined by asking:

1. Could you please describe your first professional higher education job experience after obtaining your undergraduate degree?;

2. How did that experience impact you as a community college leader?; and

3. What do you think about how your leadership experience may have differed from your male colleagues?

(p. 128).

Data analysis. Once the interviews concluded, I sent copies of the transcription for the participant to review to serve as a member check. Member checks, or participant validation as suggested by Ravitch and Carl (2016), is "a more process-oriented and person-centered approach to challenging interpretations by creating the conditions for study participants to speak into and about a study" (p. 198). Participants in this study were encouraged to add comments to their transcription and provided opportunities for follow-up interviews if requested to provide space for their involvement with the study. I also asked during that time if they would like to select a pseudonym. The use of pseudonyms is to shield the identification of specific individuals in the final study results (Seidman, 2006) All participants were provided with a pseudonym to allow for confidentiality. After their approval of the transcription, I utilized an open-coding process noted in Ravitch and Carl

(2016) of reading all of the interviews in their entirety before reducing the data into common themes shared among the participants. I implemented the process mentioned by Ravitch and Carl (2016) where coding is "done by hand, [where] it might include circling, color coding with markers or highlighters and/or underlining key words or phrases that stand out, writing notes or questions in the margins, jotting your first impressions, noting specific terminology, and so on" as this method suited my approach to data analysis (p. 239). At the completion of this process, this study found three themes shared among participants: the dynamics of family support, interconnected identities, and how their story shaped their leadership.

Results

American society proclaims that education is the pathway to economic mobility and so, seeking opportunity, first-generation students begin the pursuit of post-secondary enrollment. Perseverance serves them well as they face many challenges in higher education, including assimilating new information into their previous knowledge. This process of transformation leads them into new worlds, that while their family and friends are supportive, they must navigate on their own. I created the term *epistemological germination* to describe the experience of knowledge development through life experiences. The transformative experiences of the participants in this study are examples of the *epistemological germination* process as experienced by first-generation professionals. Through the qualitative interviews of this study, several themes emerged from the participant data. These themes were: the dynamics of family support, interconnected identities, and how their story shaped their approach to leadership.

Dynamics of Family Support

The first theme shown through the qualitative interviews was the impact of familial

support. As reflected in the literature review of research with first-generation students, many

studies examining first-generation students use a deficit-based model. Study after study

examines the lower academic scores of first-generation students and their lack of academic

rigor upon entering college (Padgett et. al, 2012; Terry & Fobia, 2019; Terenzini, 1995;

Toutkoushian et al., 2015). Reading another study leads to discussions of the deficiency of

parental assistance when accessing college. As a first-generation student myself, it is

frustrating that researchers, and if we are honest, society, see these students as 'less.' I was

heartened to find a small selection of studies that focused on the resources that first-

generation students can access in their college pursuit. These studies examined the familial

relationship more in-depth and from a different angle. For some first-generation students,

their parents are their biggest advocate. They push the students to achieve their college dream

and reduce economic inequality.

During our interview, Joy explained that her parents were supportive of her pursuing

her postsecondary education. They shared how proud they were of her accomplishments,

even when they were unable to counsel her on the process of enrollment. Joy has worked at

her community college for almost ten years. She shared that in her current position she

wonders if the college truly empowers and educates parents on how they can assist their child

while they are enrolled. Joy was so interested in the first-generation experience she focused

on this topic for her dissertation sharing, "my focus groups would say, [of their parents]

they're proud of me, and they support me, but they don't know how to support me." Joy

found this was a common experience in her research, and this study reflects that many first-

generation students are encouraged by their parents, but they do not know how to navigate the policies and processes of postsecondary education.

Carrie, previously a full-time stay-at-home mother, had a unique experience in that she firmly encouraged her children to pursue education after high school and then her children, in turn, later encouraged her to finish the degree she left when she married their father. Carrie was encouraged by her mother and grandmother to attend college, but she laments that because she lacked guidance, her choices ended with dropping out of school. She regretted this choice for thirty years before receiving a call from her son that changed her life. Her son was on track for graduation and insisted "it's time for you to go back to school" and when she refused, he reminded her she could take online courses and he had already spoken to college staff who pulled her records and were ready for her to contact them. She reached out to the college and completed the eight classes needed to achieve her bachelor's degree. This achievement stoked a fire in Carrie that led her to return to work full-time at her local community college and begin pursuing graduate school. She now is enrolled in a doctoral program and is in an executive leadership position at her college.

Familial encouragement was a driving force for Angie and Elizabeth as well. Angie's parents were supportive in providing motivation and childcare to support her completion of coursework. Her mother and father worked in manufacturing and wanted Angie to find work that was not as physically intensive as working in the factory. Angie said they told her repeatedly, "You can do it, you can do it" when she struggled to balance her full-time job, schoolwork, and her family. Her husband increased his support at home with cooking or cleaning to provide her with space to attend class or complete course work. Elizabeth's experience was similar in that her father was a blue-collar worker and her parents encouraged

her and financially sacrificed for her to attend college. They saw her academic excellence and Elizabeth confessed, "they really felt like they owed it to me to support my going to college." Her parents' support paid off in that Elizabeth and her sibling both attended college and now Elizabeth serves as a community college president in North Carolina.

Kristen, raised by her mother who worked part-time in a local school, shared that while there was "an expectation in our house that we would go to college" her guidance counselors could only offer her minimum support, so she felt it was up to her to make sense of college processes and it "was a scary place to be." While her sibling attended a large state university, Kristen found her home in the local community college. Her journey has continued at the college, and she now serves in an executive level position. This allowed her to enter into the white-collar world, a world that her parents do not understand. As a first-generation professional she now has the experience of engaging with leaders in the community that her parents do not know, and the feelings of juggling both the blue-collar and white-collar worlds. She divulged, "it [took] me a little bit of time to feel comfortable in the space" and she mentioned earlier in the interview that she initially struggled with imposter syndrome which had its origins in her first-generation identity. As she has progressed in her career, navigating her own journey she reflects that "I've earned the seat I'm sitting in."

In contrast, Tara did not have parental support. Her parents did not complete their high school education and did not encourage her dreams. When she ventured into her local community college she reveals, "I was lost. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to pay for financial aid. I didn't know how you schedule courses. I didn't know what a course plan was. [I knew] zip." Both of her parents dropped out of high school and Tara, "decided at a very young age that I was going to college, even though no one in my immediate family

had done that... I was going to do it" after watching them struggle financially. After an unexpected life experience that delayed her college enrollment, she was told she can't go to college with her father explicitly saying, "You will never do it." This discouragement stimulated Tara to continue with her postsecondary pursuit, but she admits "I had to scrape and climb and fall down and get back up." It was especially true later in her journey when she was juggling doctoral work with providing care for her grandmother, her only familial support for college. Tara struggled to juggle her grandmother's needs with her work and school load during the COVID pandemic and admits "I burnt that candle with both ends for a long time." Tara's first-generation outlook continued into her first professional job where she was baffled when handed a tax withholding sheet during the hiring process. She spent time researching and learning as her parents were not able to explain many of the benefits she was receiving in her new career. I relate to Kristen and Tara as a member of the first-generation group as I shared this experience as well. When I brought the benefits package of my first professional job to my parents, they were unable to provide guidance about the choices I needed to make about insurance(s) and investments.

First-generation students demonstrate a tremendous adaptability quotient, navigating their way through the complex college process. Individuals who are the first in their family to attend college can utilize the norms they learn to educate family and friends and encourage their pursuits of higher education. When exposed to new knowledge, meaning schemes come under reflection and become more complex and internalized (Mezirow, 1991). If the scheme is not a good fit or no longer valid, transformative learning can take place and new knowledge is internalized (Mezirow, 1991). This increased competence and self-confidence from their leadership roles can be shared among family members to educate the next

generation of college graduates. Tara is an example of this emancipatory learning phase, whereby reflecting on the context of the meanings of prior knowledge and those she developed in postsecondary education, she left behind her deficit outlook to become a doctoral graduate and executive leader at her community college (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Mezirow, 1991).

Interconnected Identities

As with many first-generation professionals, the participants in this study had interconnected identities along with their academic accomplishments. Ann was reared in a single parent household that consistently relied on government assistance. She shared that while the household was "very poor", there "was a lot of love in the family" with relatives stepping in to provide care when her mother struggled with mental illness. Figure 3 illustrates

Figure 3

I*nterconnected*

these interconnected identities. Eventually Ann enrolled at a large university but felt lost and received little guidance when she faltered academically. She worked as a custodian for a short period of time before enrolling in the Army, where she met her husband. She later enrolled in her local community college, earning a healthcare degree, where she worked for several years before returning to the college as a faculty member. Ann's passion is summarized when she speaks of the community college students, that "many of them have a lot of difficulties in life just like I had….it gives me an opportunity to know where they come from" and to reduce the stigma of first-generation students.

Several participants shared the experience of minimal household or college funds. For Katherine, an early childhood major, her parents insisted that she enroll in college but "it was all on me to take care of paying for my college education…[and] that was a wakeup call". Her parents did not want her to work while taking classes, frustrating Katherine in their ignorance of college costs. Katherine worked through most of her college years, leading her to confess, "I did not feel like I had that typical college experience" as she was struggling to save. After two years, Katherine took time off to work full-time, returning to college after convincing her parents to allow her to file her taxes as an individual. This shift allowed her to qualify for financial aid, which when paired with her savings, allowed her breathing room for the final college years. She felt "like a weight had been lifted" and admits that during her lean years "a food pantry probably would have been a benefit."

National data shows that the median income of families of first-generation students is half that of their continuing-education peers (Center for First Generation Student Success, 2018a). First-generation students also worked almost twice as many hours as continuing-education students (Center for First Generation Student Success, 2018b). These factors lead to a different experience in college that can impact comfort level with peers as well as the time spent in academic preparation. While the deficit-outlook may see these students as less than, those that have lived the experience like myself and the study participants, know that this breeds resilience which serves us when we enter into the workforce. We are accustomed to disorienting dilemmas, but through trying on new roles and planning a course of action, we become effective administrators. As community college leaders, the participants parlay these experiences into providing compassionate leadership to students, many of whom are walking a similar path at their institution.

My Story Shaped My Leadership

The experience of familial support, or lack thereof, and intersectional identities leads first-generation professionals into a unique space where they can identify with the students they serve. They have lived the disorienting dilemmas, reflection of new information, and trying on new roles. These experiences happened at the postsecondary level as well as their engagement in the white-collar workforce. Grappling with new jargon, navigating experiences their family members did not understand, and overcoming hidden norms are a part of their story that, I argue, makes them significantly more effective as leaders.

Joy thrives serving her students at her rural community college, imparting her knowledge of navigating the system as they don't understand the complexities and demands of becoming a full-time college student. As she explains it, "I try to be supportive and encouraging while also helping them to be kind of realistic…it's important to demonstrate flexibility and understanding [for assignments]" and set appropriate boundaries. Her previous work in TRIO programs, serving first-generation, low-socioeconomic status students, helps her assist students that in their over eagerness to graduate, may enroll in too many classes. She knows they are trying to escape the poverty of the county but she would rather set reasonable goals so they can achieve success and continue their academic path.

Carrie reflects this passion as well, insisting that she is doing "just what I need to do" when she is working with individual students for weeks to collect their paperwork to enroll at the college. Even when she was given a student-selected honor, Carrie insists "that's what we're here for…to walk them through it." She too works in a high poverty county in North Carolina and knows that the students she is working with need the guidance as many of them are first-generation. Ann reiterates the same message in our interview. For her, she uses her

life story to motivate students through the difficult moments they will face. She shares about failing one undergraduate course and eventually dropping out of school. She wants them to know that "one failure does not define you…two failures don't define you" and while it took her longer, she found her place. She now has multiple degrees and serves as president of her college.

Society places labels on individuals to determine their place in the social structure. Summarized in Wallace (2002), "these labels contribute to a dominant narrative that promotes misunderstanding and limits the capacity of practitioners, researchers, and policymakers to effectively grasp how the backgrounds and identities of students shape their decisions and relationships to others", overlooking the resilience and adaptability of first-generation individuals (p. 93). The participants in this study flip this label by using it to empower their leadership and connect with students. Vulnerability in sharing their story and their *epistemological germination* is impactful and resonates with the student population, leading them to believe that they too can have success.

Conclusion

The experience of first-generation students is often infused with their grit, drive to succeed, and calling to carve a pathway for future generations of their family. This determination propels them through barriers they face in higher education. This tenacity continues as they transition from higher education students to white collar workers. Often the same skills that assisted them in their academic journey then arm them for the transition into this new world, fraught with a new vocabulary to learn and unspoken standards they must translate. Overcoming imposter syndrome and making influential changes for students

empowers these leaders to share their knowledge; with family, peers, and students, in an effort to show others that while difficult, this journey is possible and transformative.

Reflection on Article Three: The Resilient Educator

According to Crotty (1998) one's theoretical perspective is "the philosophical stance ...providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria" (p. 3). As educational leaders, consistent reflection and examination of our world view and beliefs will keep our perspectives relevant to the needs facing our students daily. This study provides an asset-based lens to the experience of first-generation professionals and extends the research materials for this relatively new section of educational analysis.

In the last article, participants shared their first-generation journeys and how these experiences modeled them into the leaders they are today. Some participants received encouragement from family members, although financial support was a struggle for most. At least one participant received open hostility from her family when she shared her academic goals. This myriad of experiences was tangled with interconnected identities that complicated postsecondary achievement and early career paths. One participant shared how she dropped school for one full year so she could work full-time to save money to finish her degree. Another spoke of juggling extended family obligations that left them with little time to sleep, much less complete work for their educational pursuits. These foundational experiences begin the construction of their story, powerful examples of resilience, and ultimately a deep connection to the educational odyssey. These stories become the mantra shared with students, that they understand elements of the student's struggles and will eliminate barriers and provide assistance in their roles as executive leaders.

Transformative learning theory describes the process of adult learners in the classroom, but it can also be applied to individuals experiencing the college or professional business world for the first time. This study has examined the paths taken by first-generation

women as they found their place in the world within the community college system. In the first article, I discussed the three core elements of individual experience, critical reflection, and dialogue. In the second article I focused on Mezirow's definition of learning and how communicative learning shaped the participants as they grew as educational leaders. In this final article we examined the transitional phases of learning. As learners these are not to be misunderstood as linear phases but areas where we may move between different phases at any point in the learning process. Executive leaders face disorienting dilemmas in their field and must incorporate self-examination and critical reflection to fight stagnation in their work. The COVID-19 pandemic is a recent example of how these phases are implemented in educational work. Most educators were disoriented by the shutdown of educational facilities in 2020. By examining practices, learning about digital platforms, planning a course of action, and acquiring knowledge to implement these plans, we were all navigating Mezirow's learning phases.

Synopsis of the First-Generation Professional Experience

In the first article, *Tiptoeing on the Glass Ceiling: Community College Women in Executive Roles*, the research focus was on the role of gender in the participant's experiences. As women, they shared the experience of the majority culture pressure of emotional labor in their roles. Emotion was accepted by some as a compassionate style of leadership with others favoring a rejection of this notion and leading with facts at the forefront. Participants divulged their wide variety of experiences in healthcare, marketing, social work, counseling, grant writing, and secondary education. All participants shared the urgent calling of education, specifically the community college system. Finally, the article shared their experience of the gender dichotomy in leadership. Implicit bias and assumptions of the capabilities of women were common experiences during their leadership.

For *Navigating the Labyrinth: Executive Women's Experience in the Community College*, the community college organization became the focus and how the institution impacted the women executive leaders. As mentioned above, the participants had wide ranging career experiences and yet they all are now leading at a community college. Learning of the unplanned events that navigated their career trajectory was fascinating. They expressed how the community college was a surprising career ladder that they appreciated. This article also shared how the participants negotiated the complex system of the community college, tearing down barriers when needed and aligning policies with current educational expectations. Concluding this article was a discussion of the joy of serving a disparate population. Each participant shared a story of how a student had impacted their lives and made their work satisfying.

Lastly, *First-Gen Impact: How the First-Generation Journey Impacts Executive Women's Leadership* explored the influence of the first-generation experience on

participants. This experience for myself led to the epistemological germination of my worldview and I enjoyed learning how others experienced this journey. What I found was that family support and dynamics were divergent among individuals in the study. These differences altered their career path as a result. The participants also shared interconnected identities as some were of low socioeconomic status during their educational journey or working full-time and juggling a family while they pursued their degree. These dynamics allow the leaders to empathize with their students and their stories shaped their style of leadership.

Underlying Themes

When I began to bring the articles together, reviewing the themes that emerged from the disclosures of the women that participated in this study, I found three additional overarching themes woven through their narratives: mentorship programs, leading with your soul, and navigating with your heart. Many of the women spoke of the role of a mentor in their lives. Kristen mentioned Rita, her neighbor, that answered all of her questions upon entering into college and Tara sang the praises of a former supervisor that guided her career.

Leading with your soul was a common thread as well. Ann stressed the importance of sharing her story with students, her failures and even childhood traumas she experienced, to highlight to students that educational achievement is within their grasp. Finally, the women in this project navigated their leadership with their heart. Carrie spoke of assisting students

> I just do what I need to do, and I have been on the phone with students for a long time
> and dealt with them for several weeks trying to get them through. But you know that's
> what we're here for, you know I mean at the community college level, if … you don't

walk them through it, we have so many…students that don't have anybody that can

help them with anything.

She along with other participants were heartfelt when sharing stories of assisting students in

their time of need.

Mentorship

The participant's experience as first-generation students altered their lens of career

trajectory. Some participants benefitted from mentorship and dialogue with other women.

Mentorship models have been successful in supporting students navigating postsecondary

education where faculty members shared their personal stories and advice as encouragement

for the students to progress towards their academic and career goals (Byrd et. al, 2019). This

is reinforced by studies such as Person and Yao (2021) that found that women pursuing

senior level positions rely on outer support and inner strengths. I admit to feeling tugs of

jealousy listening to participants share their stories of encouragement received from women

colleagues. Carrie mentioned a supervisor that encouraged her professional development that

also boosted her confidence when she assumed leadership roles. During my postsecondary

journey I had a first-generation peer group that shared information but did not find a

colleague group until much later in my career.

When I learned of the First-Generation Professionals Initiative through the

Department of Commerce, I was intrigued at their framework of training incoming

employees (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2021). The framework for the program is

phrased in an encouraging, positive light that looks at first-generation professionals as an

asset to the organization. A study conducted by Terry and Fobia (2019) in connection with

this initiative, found that participants had experiences and circumstances that reflect a lack of

resources that are typically available to people with middle-and upper-SES backgrounds.

This disparity can result in barriers to workplace inclusion and career advancement.

However, they also identified several efforts they said would help to reduce these barriers,

including orientations to workplace culture, networking skills training, and career

advancement counseling. These barriers as first-generation professionals also become layered

with the experience of striving for administrative roles that are primarily occupied by men.

As women we often face the dilemma shared by Abrams (2018) of "... knowing what we

want means, often, wanting more than we're supposed to" according to society's standards

(p. 47).

Leading with Your Soul

In my journey as an educational leader, I have relied on my soul to guide my

decisions and to serve students with compassion. Dantley (2002) cites bell hooks for the

concept of the soul, "...the idea of the intellectual as someone who sought to be whole—well-

grounded in a context where there was little emphasis on spiritual wellbeing, on care of the

soul" (p. 350). To define the term deeper I look to Bolman and Deal (2008) who assert

that "...ethics must reside in soul, a sense of bedrock character that anchors core beliefs and

values" to educational leaders, "...[for] an organization, group, or family, soul can also be

viewed as a resolute sense of character, a deep confidence about who we are, what we care

about, and what we deeply believe in" (pp. 387-388).

As educational leaders, we bring not only our story to the institution we serve, but we

must also bring our whole selves, our soul into this work. We must listen to student's needs

and advocate against injustice. The participants in this study reflected this perspective by

changing their environment to meet student's needs. Kristen provided an excellent example

of this when she advocated for a student that was unable to pay a late graduation fee and again when the student could not afford a graduation gown. By seeking out financial assistance to meet the fee and creating a donation program for graduation gowns, she is true to her ethics and leading with her soul. We may not be able to meet every need, but we must strain against inequity in our institutions. The statement by Thompson (2008) emphasizes the ongoing process of wholeness, "make no mistake: creating and sustaining this shift in consciousness is enormously difficult" (p. 163). The first and most important part of leadership to me is to listen. As administrators, we must be cognizant of this effort but in making this change leaders will begin to lead in a genuine way that is taking into account the wholeness of reality (Thompson, 2008).

To lead in this way, we must not isolate ourselves from the changing environment of education (Wheatley, 2007). Wheatley (2007) warns that our team may look to us to provide authority during uncertain times, but this technique will fail. To provide leadership Wheatley (2007) shares that we must understand that change is certain, we can walk through chaos to learn what it can teach us, and we can look to the meaning of our work to find joy. First-generation professionals leading in the educational field must continue their *epistemological germination*, growing their knowledge and adjusting their outlook to incorporate new information. The resilience that led our participants to achieve their educational goals can also sustain them during unsettling institutional periods.

In my work in education, I am most content when I am helping others. It is important during times of stress that I remind myself of the meaning of my work so I can return reenergized, ready to make a difference in a student's lives. This external focus on serving others can lead to burnout if we do not practice self-care. By beginning our day with an

activity that brings us peace, practicing mindfulness throughout the day, and cultivating an awareness of gratitude, Wheatley (2007) states these practices will assist us with becoming balanced leaders.

Navigating with your Heart

In *All About Love*, bell hooks (2000) laments of the lack of love in the fabric of American society. Generations of children are reacting to the vulnerability of love with fear and fill this vacuum with materialism and consumerism (hooks, 2000). hooks (2000) counters that "a culture that is dead to love can only be resurrected by spiritual awakening" (p. 71). By providing a loving environment, we allow others to learn how to love (hooks, 2000). hooks (2000) then transitions to the faith community by pondering "how different our lives would be if all the individuals who claim to be Christians, or who claim to be religious, were setting an example for everyone by being loving" (p. 74). My faith has led me throughout my life, and in particular, for leadership, I find the following scriptures imperative:

> For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice and watching over the way of his saints" then later in the same chapter, "Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path; for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; discretion will watch over you, understanding will guard you. (Proverbs 2:6-11, English Standard Version)

My faith guides me, and it was refreshing to see hooks reference scripture when writing about engaging in love. She speaks of the ethics of love that assumes everyone is to live freely and fully (hooks, 2000). Those that value this ethic are willing to make the changes

112

they wish to see in the world, commit to a vision of education and embrace our relationships within education (hooks, 2000). Our personal integrity shows in the decisions we make in our careers, the large and the small. Participants shared their stories of changing academic forgiveness policies and navigating financial aid barriers on behalf of students. Tara noticed a problem with her institution's academic forgiveness policy that did not adjust with the population of students they serve. In order to receive forgiveness for a failing grade students were required to complete 12 hours in the previous year. With the increase of dual enrollment, many of her community college's students were enrolling part-time. This unintentionally erected a barrier for students, and she advocated with administration to change the policy. When as educators we choose to advocate for a student in a situation where we think the administration is wrong, we are taking a stance that reflects our beliefs.

The underlying themes of mentorship programs, leading with your soul, and navigating with your heart arose after further analysis of participant experiences. Mentorship programs organized by the educational institution would be beneficial to incoming employees, not just first-generation professionals. Leading with your soul and navigating with your heart was highlighted by the narratives shared by participants of their proudest moments as a leader.

Epistemological Flowering: My Continuing Journey as an Educator

In my early career I thought that if I worked hard there would be no question that I was qualified for the job. This hard-working ethic was beneficial in retail work while I pursued my degree but did not translate to the discrimination I faced upon entering the educational career field. Like many of the participants in this study, I was faced with how society viewed my contributions to education and leadership. When I was assertive in trying

113

to empower my students, I often faced masculine disapproval and often found myself implementing creative solutions to assist my students. When financial resources were exhausted in our college offerings, I sought assistance from community organizations. Serving as a TRIO director for most of my career was a delightful experience as I was able to serve students with interconnected identities that I experienced during my journey. I empathized with the pressures to juggle schoolwork, family expectations, and a job.

I will echo the participants in this study that my story has shaped my leadership. I felt the calling of education early and have worked in this field for over 20 years. I was thrilled in my early years when a leadership opportunity at our local community college was advertised and quickly moved from my position at a four-year university. This entrance into the community college system was unexpectedly the best move for my future career. I have been able to serve at two community colleges and now serve in the administrative offices for North Carolina's community college system. My position there was based on listening to my heart and the thrill of being able to impact students across the state. While the bureaucracy is much more prevalent in this organization, I continue to bring my whole self into the role, reminding myself of the potential positive impact I may bring to others.

As a result of these experiences, my *epistemological germination* has morphed into an epistemological flowering. Serving as a leader I have made many mistakes that have allowed me to grow and adjust my management style. I have reached the point in my career where I am also focused on mentoring other women in higher education to promote their growth as well. As the buds of my flowering continue, I will remain on this journey of development, critically reflecting my worldview, and incorporating new knowledge into my outlook.

Limitations

This study was created to examine a specific population within the North Carolina Community College system. As such, the study had a limited sample size and is unable to represent all women in community colleges. While all women in the study were executive leaders, there was variation in the nature (Dean, Vice President, President) and administrative areas (Continuing Education and Curriculum) of their roles. The study is not replicable as it focused on a specific population of women executive leaders serving in North Carolina Community Colleges.

Recommendations for the Future

While progress has been made, there are still many systemic structural barriers to female leadership (Elmuti et al., 2009). To address these systemic barriers, three recommendations are addressed to support women, as well as first-generation professionals. These recommendations are: mentorship as a path to success, leadership development programs, and developing community. These recommendations will address barriers faced by first-generation professionals and enhance the employee environment at the community college.

Mentorship as a Path to Success

Creating a mentorship program for incoming employees of the community college could support both new and seasoned professionals. Research conducted by Olson (2016) examined six first-generation graduates who were currently employed in white collar fields. Olson (2016) focused on three areas in her semi-structured interviews: the participants' biography, aspects of their experience, and contemplating the meaning of the first-generation journey. Again, after data analysis three themes surged forward: their first days in white

collar work, the current experience within the job, and reflecting on their history (Olson, 2016). When shining the phenomenological light on these disclosures it reveals the essence of the first-generation graduate experience.

When entering the professional sector doors there was little guidance on acclimating to the work and exposure to professional politics left participants unsure of their bearings (Olson, 2016). This produced a disorienting dilemma where the resilience and assertiveness that assisted them in college was an asset in adjusting to these new cultural norms but fell short when dealing with family dynamics strained by the new social capital gained by the first-generation graduate (Olson, 2016). As first-generation students transition into professional sectors believing their degree is a pathway to prosperity, many find barriers to greet them at the white-collar workforce doors. A possible solution to this bumpy transition is to provide structured mentorship programs, especially for first generation, future women leaders.

Leadership Development Programs

Community colleges can also develop leadership development programming that encourages current staff and provides a career ladder to individuals interested in future leadership positions. Aasen and Stensaker (2007) found higher education leadership programming increased the confidence of participants and created a larger personal network for the individual. By boosting the confidence of participants, leadership programs can negate the internal dialogue of imposter syndrome. The increased personal networks also support women by providing a community and potential contacts for future leadership positions.

For those already in leadership positions, learning about different styles of leadership can improve their approach to managing a team. A leadership program centered on transformative leadership was tested by Zulfqar et. al (2021) and the researchers found individuals increased articulation in core concepts of transformative leadership such as conveying a vision, serving as a role model, and providing support to individual team members. These elements can improve leadership approaches and strengthen management of the team.

Providing Community

The aforementioned leadership development programs can also serve as a conduit to community. In their faculty mentoring model, Koontz et al. (2019) designed a program where women faculty met in large groups focused on relevant topics, and small groups that were self-guided. They found that not only were women who participated in this community more empowered, participants were also retained at the institution. According to Koontz et al. (2019), building a community empowers women in higher education and allows them to "make their own definitions of success concrete and, accordingly, can discover the resources for realizing those definitions of success" (p. 114).

Katherine, a participant that is a leader in one of our larger community colleges, co-founded an organization on her community college campus that created a community of mentorship for women. In a previous position at a community college, I was part of a leadership pilot where individuals across the institution were brought together for professional development regularly throughout the semester. We naturally formed a community, and I am in contact with several members years later. Community can provide a

sense of belonging, especially to those that grapple with imposter syndrome. Building relationships with peers is one of the strategies to mitigate imposter feelings.

Conclusion

First-generation students are similar to the population originally studied by Mezirow in 1978 in that higher education is a new opportunity with unanticipated norms and epistemological challenges. Provided a trusting environment these individuals can develop new meanings, transform their knowledge, and put these experiences into practice as first-generation professionals. These professionals have traveled the bumpy road as first-generation students and share their stories to encourage current and future students. First-generation professional's epistemological germination was nurtured in the postsecondary environment, and they continued to grow in the workforce to develop their worldview.

While the ascendency of women into college presidential roles has gathered momentum in research, there is a dearth of research of women in senior roles that lead to these positions. Focusing on this population and analyzing the barriers they have experienced will allow higher education institutions to navigate changes that will support women in these roles which will in turn provide support for additional women in executive leadership. Women executive leaders in education have made strides in equity the past few decades in terms of representation and visibility. While progress has been made, there is still much to be done to ensure that women have equal access to leadership opportunities in the education sector. It is important for educational institutions to continue to create and support initiatives that will foster the growth of women leaders in education. Examples include providing access to mentorship, professional development, and career advancement opportunities, as well as

advocating for policies that promote gender equity. By doing so, colleges can help create a

more equitable and diverse education system that can benefit everyone.

References

NC Community College System- 2019 Equity Report. (2019, May). 2019 Equity Report.

    Retrieved February 5, 2023, from

    https://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/sites/default/files/data-

    warehouse/equity_report_20190516.pdf.

Aasen, P., & Stensaker, B. (2007). Balancing trust and technocracy? Leadership training in

    higher education. *International Journal of Educational Management*, *21*(5), 371–383.

    https://doi.org/10.1108/09513540710760165

Abrams, S. (2018). *Minority leader: How to lead from the outside and make real change*.

    Henry Holt and Company.

Advancing Women in Leadership Journal. (n.d.). *About the journal*. About the Journal |

    Advancing Women in Leadership Journal. Retrieved June 6, 2022, from https://awl-

    ojs-tamu.tdl.org/awl/index.php/awl/about.

Adedoyin, O. (2022, November 2). *How colleges' presidential searches weed out candidates*

    of color and women. The Chronicle of Higher Education. Retrieved November 20,

    2022, from https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-colleges-presidential-searches-

    weed-out-candidates-of-color-and-

    women?cid2=gen_login_refresh&cid=gen_sign_in.

Ashworth, P., & Greasley, K. (2009). The phenomenology of 'approach to studying': The

    idiographic turn. *Studies in Higher Education*, *34*(5), 561–576.

Banks, W. (2022). Navigating bureaucracy and politics. In M. Wallace (Ed.), *First-*

    generation professionals in higher education: Strategies for the world of work (M.

    Wallace, Ed.) (pp. 49–64). National Association of Student Personnel

    Administrators.

Barbour, R. S., & Schostak, J. (2011). Interviewing and focus groups. In B. Somekh & C. Lewin (Eds.), *Theory and methods in social research* (pp. 121–130). SAGE.

BBC. (2017, December 13). *100 women: 'why I invented the glass ceiling phrase'.* BBC News. Retrieved March 7, 2023, from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-42026266.

Beach, J. (2011). *Gateway to opportunity?: A history of the community college in the United States.* Stylus Pub.

Belenky, M., & Stanton, A. (2000). Inequality, development, and connected knowing. In J. Mezirow (Ed.) & Associates, *Learning as Transformation* (pp. 71–102). Jossey-Bass.

Benech-Arnold, R. L., & Sanchez, R. A. (2004). *Handbook of Seed Physiology: Applications to agriculture.* Food Products Press.

Bernet, R., Welton, D., Zavota, G., & Holenstein, E. (2005). Jakobson and Husserl: A contribution to the genealogy of structuralism. In Edmund Husserl*, Critical assessments of leading philosophers: The web of meaning: Language, Noema and subjectivity and intersubjectivity* (pp. 11–48). Routledge.

Boggs, G. R., & McPhail, C. J. (2016). *Practical leadership in community colleges.* Jossey-Bass.

Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2008). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.) *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241-258). Greenwood Press.

Brinkmann, S., Jacobsen, M., & Kristiansen, S. (2014). Historical overview of qualitative
research in the social sciences. In P. Leavy (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of qualitative
research* (pp. 17–42). Oxford University Press.

Butterwick, S., Lawrence, R., & Taylor, E. (2009). Creating alternative realities: Arts-based
approaches to transformative learning. In J. Mezirow & E. Taylor, (Eds.),
Transformative learning in practice (pp. 35–45). Jossey-Bass.

Byrd, W.C., Brunn-Bevel, R.J., & Ovink, S.M. (2019). *Intersectionality and higher
education: Identity and inequality on college campuses* [eBook edition]. Rutgers
University Press.

Center for First Generation Student Success. (2018a). First-generation college students:
Demographic characteristics and postsecondary enrollment. Retrieved January 28,
2023, from https://firstgen.naspa.org/files/dmfile/FactSheet-01.pdf.

Center for First Generation Student Success. (2018b). First-generation college graduates'
employment and finances - NASPA. First-generation college students' employment.
Retrieved January 28, 2023, from
https://firstgen.naspa.org/files/dmfile/FactSheet_04.pdf.

Center for First-generation Student Success. (n.d.a). *First-Gen Forward*. Retrieved January
23, 2022, from https://firstgen.naspa.org/first-
forward#:~:text=About%20First%2Dgen%20Forward,success%20of%20first%2Dge
neration%20students.

Center for First-Generation Student Success. (n.d.b). *How research is critical for first-
generation student success*. Research To Help Students Succeed. Retrieved January
23, 2022, from https://firstgen.naspa.org/journal-and-research

Center for First-generation Students. (n.d.). *National Data Fact Sheets*. About the Center for

First-generation Students. Retrieved January 28, 2023, from

https://firstgen.naspa.org/journal-and-research/national-data-fact-sheets-on-first-

generation-college-students/7A515490-E6AA-11E9-BAEC0242AC100002.

Chadderton, C., & Torrance, H. (2011). *Case study*. In B. Somekh & C. Lewin (Eds.),

Theory and methods in social research (pp. 53-60). London: Sage.

Clemens, R. F. (2016). Transitioning from high school to college: Examining the sources and

influences of social capital for a first-generation Latina student. *The Qualitative

Report*, *21*(11), 2044–2072.

Cranton, P. (1996). *Professional development as transformative learning: New perspectives

for teachers of adults*. Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Creswell, J. W. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five

approaches*. Sage.

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the

research process*. SAGE Publications Inc.

Dall'Alba, G. (2009). *Exploring education through phenomenology: Diverse approaches*.

Wiley-Blackwell.

Daloz, L. P., & Mezirow, J. (2000). Transformative learning for the common good . In J.

Mezirow (Ed.), *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in

progress* (pp. 103–124). Jossey-Bass.

Dantley, M. E. (2002). Uprooting and replacing positivism, the melting pot, multiculturalism,

and other impotent notions in educational leadership through an African American

perspective. *Education and Urban Society*, *34*(3), 334–352.

Delpit, L. D. (1992). Education in a multicultural society: Our future's greatest challenge. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 61(3), 237.

Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A testament of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*. Heath.

Donalek, J. (2004). Phenomenology as a qualitative research method. *Urologic Nursing*, *24*(6), 516–517.

Dominguez, R. (2006). Completing the dissertation: It's not only about academics. *College Teaching Methods & Styles Journal (CTMS)*, *2*(2), 21–24.

Drummond, J. (1990). *Husserlian intentionality and non-foundational realism* (Vol. 4). Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Eddy, P. L., & Boggs, G. R. (2010). *Community college leadership: A multidimensional model for leading change*. Stylus.

Eddy, P. L., & Khwaja, T. (2019). What happened to re-visioning community college leadership? A 25-year retrospective. *Community College Review*, *47*(1), 53–78. https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552118818742

Elmuti, D., Jia, H., & Davis, H. (2009). Challenges women face in leadership positions and organizational effectiveness: An investigation. *Journal of Leadership Education*, *8*(2), 167–187.

Evans, R. (2016) "A Qualitative Exploration of First-Generation Student Experiences at a Rural Community College". [Doctoral Dissertation, Old Dominion University]. DOI: 0.25777/6kj6-4087

Farber, M. (1968). In *The foundation of phenomenology Edmund Husserl and the quest for a rigorous science of philosophy*. State University of New York Press.

Farrell, E. (2020). Researching lived experience in education: Misunderstood or missed opportunity? *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 19*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920942066

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.

Gagliardi J., Espinosa L., Turk J., & Taylor M. (2017). *American college president study 2017*. American Council on Education.

Gurwitsch, A. (2005). Husserl's theory of the intentionality of consciousness in historical perspective. In R. Bernet, D. Welton, & G. Zavota (Eds.), In *Edmund Husserl: Critical assessments of leading philosophers (Volume IV)*. (pp. 137-160). Routledge.

Higher Education Act of 1965, 96 U.S.C. § 5192 (1980).

Himanka, J. (2019). Reduction in practice: Tracing Husserl's real-life accomplishment of reduction as evidenced by his idea of phenomenology lectures. *Phenomenology & Practice*, *13*(1), 7–19. https://doi.org/10.29173/pandpr29371

Hirudayaraj, M., & McLean, G. N. (2018). First-generation college graduates. *European Journal of Training and Development*, *42*(1-2), 91–109. https://doi.org/10.1108/ejtd-06-2017-0055

Hodgkinson, H. L. (1985). *All one system: Demographics of education, kindergarten through graduate school* (pp. 1–22). EXXON Education Foundation.

Hoggan, C., & Browning, B. (2019). *Transformational learning in community colleges: Charting a course for academic and personal success*. Harvard Education Press.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.

hooks, b. (2000). *All about love: New visions*. William Morrow.

Jabbar, H., McKinnon-Crowley, S., & Serrata, C. (2019). Complex pathways to transfer: A qualitative comparative analysis of the transition from community college to 4-Year university. *AERA Open*, *5*(2).

Koontz, A., Walters, L., & Edkin, S. (2019). Positively supporting women faculty in the Academy through a novel mentoring community model. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, *11*(1), 102–117. https://doi.org/10.1108/jarhe-04-2018-0050

Madsen, S. R., & Holton, V. (2015). Women leaders in the United Kingdom, their careers, and the organizational culture. In K. A. Longman & S. R. Madsen (Eds.) *Women and leadership around the world* (pp. 127–146). Information Age Publishing Inc.

Madsen, S. R., & Ngunjiri, F. W. (2015). Women as community leaders: A portrait of authentic, collaborative, and transformational leadership. In *Women and leadership around the world* (pp. 187–206). Information Age Publishing, Inc.

McLean, J.A. (2023). *Journey*. [Graphic Art]

McLean, J.A. (2023) *Labyrinth*. [Graphic Art]

McPhail, C. J., & Beatty, K. (2021). *Transformational change in community colleges: Becoming an equity-centered higher education institution*. Stylus Publishing, LLC.

Merriam, S. B., Baumgartner, L. M., & Caffarella, R. S. (2007). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide*. John Wiley.

Mezirow, J. (1978). Perspective transformation. *Adult Education*, 28(2), 100–110. https://doi.org/10.1177/074171367802800202

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *74*, 5–12.

Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. Jossey-Bass a Wiley Company.

Mezirow, J., & Taylor, E. (2009). *Transformative learning in practice: Insights from community, workplace, and higher education*. John Wiley & Sons.

Miller, M. T. (2021). Do learning organizations learn? Higher education institutions and pandemic response strategies. *The Learning Organization*, 28(1), 84–93. https://doi.org/10.1108/tlo-09-2020-0159

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. SAGE Publications, Inc.

Mull, D. A. (2022). Imposter syndrome revisited: A journey of learning and unlearning. In M. Wallace (Ed.), *First-generation professionals in higher education: Strategies for the world of work* (pp. 19–48). essay, National Association of Study Personnel Administrators.

NASPA. (n.d.). Fact Sheet. Retrieved June 13, 2020, from https://firstgen.naspa.org/files/dmfile/FactSheet-01.pdf

National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *The NCES Fast Facts Tool provides quick answers to many education questions (National Center for Education Statistics)*. Retrieved November 21, 2022, from https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=72

NC Community College System. (2018, September 5). *Mission & History.* Retrieved December 14, 2022, from https://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/mission-history

NC Community College System. (2019, September 12). *NCCCS Dashboards*. Retrieved December 11, 2022, from https://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/analytics/dashboards

Nealon, J. T., & Giroux, S. S. (2012). *The theory toolbox: critical concepts for the humanities, arts, and social sciences.* 2nd ed. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Oikelome, G. (2017). Pathway to the president:the perceived impact of identity structures on the journey experiences of women college presidents. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, *19*(3), 23–40. https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v19i3.1377

Olson, J. S. (2016). "Chasing a passion": First-generation college graduates at work. *Education + Training*, *58*(4), 358–371. https://doi.org/10.1108/et-03-2015-0023

Padgett, R.D., Johnson, M.P., & Pascarella, E.T. (2012). First-generation undergraduate students and the impacts of the first year of college: Additional evidence. *Journal of College Student Development 53*(2), 243-266.

Palmer, P. (2000). *Let your life speak: Listening for the voice of vocation*. Jossey-Bass.

Payton, S., & LeBanc, B. H. (2022). The power of community: The importance of professional networks and resources. In M. Wallace (Ed.), *First-generation professionals in higher education: Strategies for the world of work* (pp. 111–134). National Association of Student Personnel Association.

Person, K., & Yao, C. (2021). Navigating the academic labyrinth: The influence of leadership and professional development for women engineering department chairs. *Faculty Development and the Advancement of Women in Higher Education*, *35*(1), 63–69

Peterson, T., Slack, A., & Pemberton, C. (2016). Interweaving life and career: The recursive impact of life and career decisions among female higher education faculty. *Advancing Women in Leadership*, *36*, 89–100.

Ravitch, S. M., & Carl, N. M. (2016). *Qualitative research: Bridging the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological*. Sage.

Rice, A. J., Colbow, A. J., Gibbons, S., Cederberg, C., Sahker, E., Liu, W. M., & Wurster, K. (2017). The social class worldviews of first-generation college students. *Counseling Psychology Quarterly*, *30*(4), 415–440. https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070.2016.1179170

Rogers, C. R. (1995). *Way of being*. Houghton Mifflin.

Rubin, H.J., Rubin, I.S. (2012) *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data, 3rd Edition, Sage Publications*.

Sangha-Rico, R., & Hernández, S. (2021). Latina senior leaders in California community colleges: Leadership as disruption and resistance. *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*, *28*(2), 17–32.

Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: a guide for researchers in education and the social sciences.* 3rd ed. New York, Teachers College Press.

Shreffler, M. B., Shreffler, J. R., & Murfree, J. R. (2019). Barriers to advancement of female faculty in higher education: An examination of student evaluations of teaching, work-family conflict and perceived organizational support. *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice*, *19*(8), 72–85. https://doi.org/10.33423/jhetp.v19i8.2673

Slaughter, A.M. (2015). *Unfinished business*. Random House.

Sokolowski, R. (2010). Husserl on first philosophy. In C. Ierna, H. Jacobs, & F. Mattens (Eds.), *Philosophy, phenomenology, sciences: Essays in commemoration of Edmund Husserl* (pp. 3–24). Springer.

Student Support Services Program, 20 U.S.C. §646.7 (1996).

Taylor, E. (2000). Fostering Mezirow's transformative learning theory in the adult education classroom: A critical review. *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education, 14*(2), 1-28.

Terenzini, P., Springer, L., Yeager, P., Pascarella, E., & Nora, A. (1995). *First-generation college students: Characteristics, experiences, and cognitive development. Air 1995 Annual Forum Paper.* (pp. 1–31). National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment.

Terry, R., & Fobia, A. (2019). *Qualitative research on barriers to workplace inclusion for first generation professionals*. Research and Methodology Directorate, Center for Behavioral Science Methods Research Report Series (Survey Methodology 2019-03). U.S. Census Bureau.

Thompson, S. (2008). Spiritual Leadership—The invisible revolution. In P. Houston, A. Blankstein, R. Cole (Eds.), *Spirituality in Educational Leadership. The Soul of Educational Leadership Series* (Vol. 4, pp. 151–169). SAGE Publications Company.

Titchen, A., & Hobson, D. (2011). Understanding phenomenology through reverse perspectives. In B. Somekh & C. Lewin (Eds.), *Theory and methods in social research* (pp. 121–130). SAGE.

Toutkoushian, R. K., Stollberg, R. S., & Slaton, K. A. (2015). *Talking 'bout my generation: Defining 'first-generation students' in higher education research* (pp. 1–48). National Science Foundation and the Association for Institutional Research grant # RG14-5499.

U.S. Department of Commerce. (2021, January 26). *First Generation Professionals Initiative*. Retrieved February 8, 2023, from https://www.commerce.gov/cr/programs-and-services/first-generation-professionals-initiative.

Wallace, J. D. (2018). *The exploration of first-generation low-income students experiencing survivor guilt and how college leaders can help*. Retrieved from https://login.proxy006.nclive.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/2053998770?accountid=8337

Wallace, M. B. (2022). *First-generation professionals in higher education: Strategies for the world of work*. National Association of Student Personnel Administrators.

Wheatley, M. J. (2007). *Finding our way: Leadership for an uncertain time*. Berrett-Koehler.

Wiggs, J. L. (1989). *The community college system in North Carolina: A silver anniversary history, 1963-1988*. North Carolina State Board of Community Colleges.

Yu, X. (2014). Do organizations learn?: A conceptual exploration and integrative review on organizational learning from a human resource development perspective. *The International Journal of Educational Organization and Leadership*, *20*(1), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.18848/2329-1656/cgp/v20i01/48473

Zook, G. F. (1947). The president's commission on higher education. *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors (1915-1955)*, *33*(1), 10–28. https://doi.org/10.2307/40221180

Zulfqar, A., Valcke, M., Quraishi, U., & Devos, G. (2021). Developing academic leaders: Evaluation of a leadership development intervention in higher education. *SAGE Open*, *11*(1), 215824402199181. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244021991815

Appendix A
Participant Interest Survey

Please complete this survey if you are interested in becoming a participant in this research study. The study will focus on the experiences of women in executive leadership that were first-generation college students. These individuals are called first-generation professionals. If you qualify, you will be contacted by the researcher to schedule an hour-long interview via the Zoom platform.

Note: The information provided in this survey will remain confidential. Only individuals associated with this study will have access to your responses.

1. What is your first name?

2. What is your last name?

3. What is your email address?

4. At which North Carolina Community College are you employed? (Drop down list with all community colleges listed)

5. What is your role at the community college?

6. What is your gender? (comment box where individuals type in answer)

Vita

Jennifer McLean was born in Lumberton, North Carolina. She graduated from the University of North Carolina at Pembroke with a degree in Psychology in August 2000. She entered into the master's program for Community Counseling at Appalachian State University that same fall and was awarded the degree in Fall 2002. During her career within the North Carolina Community College system, she enrolled at Appalachian State University to begin work toward her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership. In May 2023, Jennifer completed this work focused on first-generation women in executive leadership within the community college system.

Mrs. McLean resides in Raleigh, North Carolina with her husband and son.