Experiences of African American Women and their Ascension to Senior Academic Leadership Positions in Higher Education Institutions

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Experiences of African American Women
and Their Ascension to Senior Academic Leadership Positions in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Previous research has noted that African American women are absent in senior administrative positions in institutions of higher education. Few studies have provided detailed insight into the experiences of African American women during their transition to senior-level leadership roles in the academy. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to document the experiences of African American women during their ascension to senior academic leadership positions in higher education institutions. This research employed purposeful sampling and snowball sampling to recruit five African American women in Midwestern U.S. who ascended to a leadership role within the Office of Academic Affairs. This study was guided by the cultural competence framework, and utilized a phenomenological approach to record the experiences of these five African American women who successfully obtained a senior-level administrative role in academia.

Data from this research contributes to the body of scholarship regarding the experiences of African American women and their ascension to senior academic administration in postsecondary institutions. In addition, African American women who aspire to pursue a senior-level leadership role might find this data useful. This research can also help to facilitate institutional change and encourage college and university administrators to ensure that their leadership pipeline includes an equal representation of African American women in senior administration within academe.
Acknowledgments

“I don’t think of myself as a poor deprived ghetto girl who made good. I think of myself as somebody who, from an early age, knew I was responsible for myself, and I had to make good” (Oprah Winfrey).

Giving God the glory, thank you Lord for hearing my prayers and seeing me through this process…but God! Thank you for blessing me with a regulated mind, and a village of supporters to help me along this journey.

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Thank you to my colleagues, faculty, and staff who checked on my progress, kept me grounded and held me accountable. You all are very much appreciated!

Mom, thank you so very much for all the sacrifices you’ve made for me to have a better life and for being an example of hard work, strength, and determination. I will never forget waking up as a child and looking out of the window so that I could watch you leave for work. You were so tired when you returned home, but you always made
sure that we had dinner on the table and our homework was done. I became a mother
before I became a woman. You never judged me, and you didn’t allow anyone else to. I
can never repay you for everything that you’ve done, but I hope this demonstrates to you
that I was paying attention. I love you.

To my family, loved ones, and friends thank you for your patience, love and
emotional support. I’ve missed many events, said no to outings, and delayed return of
phone calls, but I am so grateful to you all for your understanding. To my son,
Christopher, and my daughter, Christian this one is for you. Remember, no matter what it
looks like, it all has purpose. Love you both!

To the African American women who participated in this study, thank you for
being a bridge for me to cross. The work that you’re doing in the academy is amazing and
necessary. Thank you for sharing your stories and supporting my research.
Dedication

“Stand up straight and realize who you are. That you tower over your circumstances. You are a child of God. Stand up straight” (Dr. Maya Angelou).

I dedicate my dissertation to my courageous son, Christopher Lamar Spearman and my brave heart daughter, Christian Michelle Simms. My heartbeats! God thought enough of me to bless me with two of his most amazing children. I love you both beyond words. Thank you so much for demonstrating to this world what love looks like and thank you for walking with me on this dissertation journey.
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Chapter I: Introduction

"Institutions of higher education have an obligation, both for themselves and for the nation, to fully develop and utilize all the creative talent available”


According to a Census Bureau report, 56 percent of the United States population will be minority by the year 2060 (Colby & Ortman, 2015). Some studies have suggested that by the year 2020, white children may become the minority population (Chun & Evans, 2016; Frey, 2012; Frey & Ebrary, 2015). This shift in demographics could potentially enhance student body diversity at higher education institutions across the nation. If postsecondary institutions are to continue to provide foundational knowledge for the growing number of students with diverse backgrounds, there must also be adequate representation of leadership at all levels to provide support for the academic enrichment of all students, helping them to explore new ways of thinking, enhancing their access to more diverse perspectives, and increasing the visibility of the commitment to diversity (Benjamin, 1997; Bensimon, 2018; Clauss-Ehlers & Parham, 2014; Flaherty, 2016). So the question is: How will institutions of higher education align their leadership to support the change in student demographics?

Background for this Study

Most of the research conducted on African American women in higher education has focused on their lack of representation in leadership roles, barriers to leadership and the leadership and career development of African American women (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Gamble & Turner, 2015). While these studies add value to the existing body of knowledge, the paucity of research regarding the experiences of African
American women who advanced to senior administration makes it difficult to gain a clear understanding of the factors that contribute to African American women obtaining a senior academic leadership role in academe. Furthermore, the absence of research regarding African American women who achieved academic leadership positions, signals the need for more targeted research related to the experiences of these women as they navigated to senior academic leadership roles in institutions of higher education (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Therefore, the focus of this study was to understand the experiences of African American women during their ascension to senior academic leadership positions in postsecondary institutions. For the purposes of this study, these positions fall within the Office of Academic Affairs and typically include the following titles: chancellor, president, provost, dean, chair and director. Traditionally, many senior academic administrators have advanced from the ranks of tenured professor into a leadership role in academic affairs (Marchant, Bhatteacharya, & Carnes, 2007; Venegas & Kezar, 2014). Yet, African American women remain underrepresented in tenure-track faculty positions in institutions of higher education and the disproportionate number of African American women faculty in tenure-track positions constrains opportunities for advancement to senior academic leadership roles for these women (Fries-Britt, Rowan-Kenyon, Perna, Milem, & Howard, 2011; Gasman, Kim, & Nguyen, 2011; Kelly & Fetridge, 2012; Reid, 2012). Davis and Maldonado (2015) argued that African American women still have not garnered an equal share of mid to senior-level leadership positions in institutions of higher education.

While the focus of this study is African American women, it is important to note the goal of this research is not to discount the contributions of other racial and ethnic
minority groups whose experiences and ascension to senior administration in higher education institutions has not been well documented in the literature. (Flowers & Moore, 2008; Gasman, Abiola, & Travers, 2015; Li & Beckett, 2006). Historically, African American women have been pioneers in advancing their education while helping to increase access to educational opportunities for other African American women in particular, and all women in general (Brazzell & Jones, 2012; Solomon, 1985). In her book, *In the Company of Educated Women*, author Solomon wrote, “At every stage of their progress, individual women persisted in exploiting opportunities. Public controversy over women’s academic training surrounded each struggle for access, whether to an academy, college or professional school” (p. xviii). African American women’s entrance into higher education dates back more than a century when Oberlin College opened its doors to women and African Americans (Solomon, 1985; West, 2015). Once the doors of higher education cracked open for a few African American women, this momentous turning point helped to transform access for other African American women who desired to pursue postsecondary opportunities (Brazzell & Jones, 2012). Because African American women fought for education and were determined to attain it, they also earned postgraduate degrees and certifications (Brazzell & Jones, 2012; Solomon, 1985). African American women also earned degrees from historically black colleges and universities (Brazzell & Jones, 2012).

Although African American women gained limited entrance into higher education institutions, they continued to pursue equal access to educational opportunities (Brazzell & Jones, 2012). African American women’s legacy of leadership includes the establishment of schools for blacks, the attainment of advanced degrees and appointments
to leadership roles in higher education institutions (Solomon, 1985). Consequently, it is worthwhile to examine the experiences of these women whose notable contributions, early on, paved the way for future generations of African American women and men leaders. Davis and Maldonado (2015) acknowledged that studies to date have not focused on the experiences of African American women in higher education. Given that the current research regarding African American women and their experiences in higher education is limited, this research adds to the body of scholarship by examining the experiences of African American women and their ascension to senior-level leadership positions in institutions of higher education. Additionally, this research presents an opportunity for a more robust understanding of the personal and professional encounters of African American women along their journeys to senior-level administrative positions in the academy.

Senior academic administrators have a fundamental role in advancing the mission of an institution (Hendrickson & Ikenberry, 2013). They perform a variety of functions in colleges and universities, including (but not limited to) recruitment recommendations, assessment of faculty performance, supporting faculty teaching initiatives, policy development, strategic planning and budget preparation (Coats, 2000; Hendrickson & Ikenberry, 2013; Hoppe, 2003). In addition, senior academic administrators are responsible for promoting campus diversity initiatives (Hendrickson & Ikenberry, 2013; Williams, 2013). Nevertheless, higher education institutions continue to lag behind corporations and non-profits in their diversity efforts (Williams, 2013). Furthermore, a substantial amount of the existing literature supports the claim that African American women are underrepresented in senior-level leadership roles in higher education.
institutions (Chun & Evans, 2016; Dowdy & Hamilton, 2011; Flowers & Moore, 2008; Jackson & Johnson III, 2011).

For more than a century, African American women have made significant contributions in higher education, yet they continue to lack adequate representation in university administration (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Gregory, 2001; Zamani, 2003). In 1990, of the 133 institutions of higher education led by African Americans, 13 percent were African American women (Bower & Wolverton, 2009). In addition, Bower and Wolverton (2009) reported that in 1998, there were 38 African American women who were college or university presidents; however, most of these positions were held at community colleges or historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). In 1999, African American women held 5 percent of the 159,888 administrative positions in degree-granting institutions (Snyder, 2003). In 2001, women accounted for 27 percent of community college presidents, however only 4.5 percent of these positions were held by African American women (Weisman & Vaughn, 2002). In 2006, African Americans accounted for 6 percent of college presidency positions and African American women comprised one third of that number (American Council on Education, 2007).

In 2007, African American women accounted for 7 percent of senior administrative roles at postsecondary institutions (King & Gomez, 2008). During the same year, African American women held 3 percent of chief academic officer or provost positions (King & Gomez, 2008). Catalyst reported that the number of women who held presidency positions increased from 10 percent to 30 percent between 1986 and 2016 (Catalyst, 2017), yet the number of African American women presidents declined from 14 percent to 13 percent between 2006 and 2011 (Cook, 2012). According to the
American Council on Education (2012), women accounted for 26 percent of presidency positions, yet African American women made up 4 percent of that number. Wallace, Budden, Juban, and Budden (2014) reported findings from an ongoing longitudinal study regarding the status of university Presidents. The data revealed that African American women still are not equally represented in presidency positions at postsecondary institutions. In 2016, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) released its report on the status of women in leadership, which revealed that African American women still do not represent a significant number of leadership positions in institutions of higher education (Hill, Miller, Benson, & Handley, 2016).

Based on a report regarding educational attainment in the United States, African Americans lag behind Asians and non-Hispanic whites as it pertains to degree completion at postsecondary institutions (Ryan & Bauman, 2016, p.1), yet African American women exceed their male counterparts in college enrollment and degree attainment (Davis & Otto, 2016; Jones-DeWeever, 2014, p.13). By 1990, the number of PhD degrees earned by African American women jumped from 550 to 1,298 (The Journal of Blacks, 2009). Between 2007-2008, African American women earned 66.4 percent of doctoral degrees awarded (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010). During the 2012-13 academic year, African American women earned 64 percent of doctoral degrees (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016, p.118); 16 percent of doctoral degrees were awarded to African Americans in the field of education (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016, p.124). In 2014, 98,000 African American women held doctoral degrees (The Journal of Blacks, 2015). Based on a report regarding doctorate recipients from U.S. universities, the number of doctoral degrees earned by African Americans increased from 4.1 percent in 1994 to 6.4 percent in 2014. Findings
also revealed that African Americans were the largest population interested in the field of education (National Science, 2015).

African American women continue to make progress in higher education; maintaining enrollment advantage over their male counterparts (Davis & Otto, 2016; Garibaldi, 2014; Jones-DeWeever, 2014). In addition, advanced degree completion rates for these women has steadily improved (Catalyst, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). However, African American women still hold a disproportionate share of faculty and tenured positions in institutions of higher education across the nation (Catalyst, 2017). Furthermore, African American women tend to comprise lower-level faculty positions in the academy (Catalyst, 2017; Wingfield, 2016). Moreover, African American women are more likely than white women to hold a non-tenure track position (Matchett & National Research, 2013). In 2013, African American women accounted for 3 percent of all full-time faculty positions (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). During the same year, African American women comprised 3.7 percent of tenure-track positions and 2.2 percent of tenured positions (IPEDS Survey, 2013). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2012), African American women comprise 10 percent of all assistant, 7 percent of all associate and 3 percent of all full professor positions at U.S. degree-granting institutions. African American women held 3.6 percent of tenure-track positions, and 2.3 percent of tenured positions, according to a Catalyst, October 2017 report.

Madsen and Longman (2014) asserted that faculty might desire to move beyond teaching, research and service in order to transition into a higher-level administrative position. Nevertheless, African American women tend to comprise the majority of non-
tenure-track positions in the academy, making it difficult for them to acquire positions of leadership since most institutions select tenured faculty to occupy senior-level leadership roles (Madsen & Longman, 2014). These senior administrators are responsible for administering the academic goals of the institution and supporting its mission (Morris & Laipple, 2015; Todd, 2014). In addition, they are responsible for policy implementation and strategic initiatives that support the mission of the institution (Hendrickson & Ikdenberry, 2013; Walton & McDade, 2001). As stated above, the current research on African American women in higher education is limited; specifically, as it relates to their experiences during their ascension to senior academic leadership roles. The dearth of research makes it difficult to understand why these women are underrepresented in such fundamental roles in postsecondary institutions (Madsen & Longman, 2014). Most of the literature on African American women in higher education focuses on their absence in senior administration however, to date; little attention has been given to the experiences of African American women who attained a senior administrative role in the academy (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Evans & Chun, 2015).

Rusher (1996) believed that the lack of studies available might be the result of the underrepresentation of African American women in leadership positions and the neglect of colleges and universities to maintain data on women of different ethnic and racial groups. Similarly, Valverde & Castenell (1998) asserted that existing literature focuses on why there are a limited number of African American female faculty and administrators, rather than focusing on contributing factors to their absence in these roles. Taylor and Stein (2014) suggested that most of the research conducted on women in higher education often groups them into one category instead of examining the
differences among and between women. The need to understand why African American women are not adequately represented in senior leadership positions in higher education has intensified. As the student population at colleges and universities across the nation continue to evolve with increasing numbers of minorities, the demand for more diversified leadership at all levels to support the change in student demographics also rises (Supiano, 2015; The Chronicle of, 2016). Betancur and Livingstone (2018) stated, “The homogeneous makeup of the professoriate proves that many institutions fail to keep pace with the demographic changes of their student bodies” (para.3). According to Bensimon (2018) many higher education institutions have neglected to develop a strong enough pipeline for faculty of color, resulting in racial disparities between the student body and faculty members. The voices of African American women regarding their experiences in the academy are rarely found in the research (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Therefore, this present study contributes to the literature by offering useful insights that can help to improve African American women’s representation at the senior-level and encourage campus leaders to evaluate their institutional practices. In addition, the information from this research can help other African American women who aspire to attain a senior academic leadership position understand the dynamics of pursuing such a role.

**Statement of the Problem**

A review of several studies regarding African American female journeys to senior academic leadership positions revealed that these women continue to be underrepresented in senior academic leadership positions in the academy (Catalyst, 2017; Davis & Maldonado, 2015). When conducting a search on this topic utilizing several academic
databases and a combination of the terms, *African American women* or *women of color* and *higher education leadership* or *senior-level leadership*, the results yielded studies that primarily focused on student affairs leadership, barriers to leadership and the leadership and career development of these women (Brazzell & Jones, 2012; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Gamble & Turner, 2015). While much of the literature acknowledges the low number of African American women in senior-level leadership roles, the challenges and opportunities they face during their ascension to senior administration are rarely mentioned in the literature. Specifically, absent from most studies are the personal and professional experiences of African American women as they navigated the process of obtaining a senior academic leadership position (Beckwith, Carter, & Peters, 2016). Furthermore, a search of the available research conducted on African American women in higher education leadership tends to cluster Caucasian and African American women together, making it difficult to understand the unique encounters of African American women as they transitioned to senior administration in the academy (Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015; Stefanco, 2014; Taylor & Stein, 2014).

Understanding the experiences of African American women who have attained a senior academic leadership role is important, particularly, as it relates to increasing their presence in such roles in higher education institutions. This research will enhance the body of knowledge by extending the focus on African American women to include their personal and professional experiences during their transition to senior administration.

**Purpose of Study**

There are several reasons to inquire about the experiences of African American women who navigated to senior academic leadership roles in higher education
institutions. The primary purpose of this research study is to add to the limited body of knowledge by documenting the personal and professional experiences of African American women during their ascension to senior administration in the academy. In addition, the purpose of this study is to use a multidimensional framework in order to build upon the current research and add to the body of scholarship a more intersectional approach to understanding the experiences of African American women as they ascended to senior academic leadership positions. Next, the purpose of this study is to provide African American women who desire to become future academic leaders with invaluable insights regarding the potential challenges and opportunities identified by the participants in this study to ensure that other African American women are successfully prepared to embrace such roles. The final purpose of this study is to encourage higher education leaders to evaluate their institutional policies and practices in order to improve African American women representation in senior administration.

Guiding Questions

According to Creswell (2007):

Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions on inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports details of informants and conducts the study in a natural setting. (p.15)

This study utilized cultural competence framework to expose themes and patterns in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of African American women during their ascension to senior academic leadership roles. The following research question guided this study: What are the personal and professional
experiences of African American women during their ascension to senior academic leadership positions in higher education institutions?

The following research questions were designed to elicit responses that described the lived experiences of African American women who transitioned to senior academic leadership roles in higher education institutions:

1. In what ways did the personal and professional experiences of African American women during their transition to senior academic administration contribute to their success as a leader?

2. What strategies do African American women employ in order to be successful during their ascension to senior academic leadership positions?

3. What does the role of senior academic leader mean to African American women, and to the academy, as we know it?

**Significance of Study**

The primary aim of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to document the experiences of African American women who now hold senior academic leadership positions in the academy. The goal of this study was to understand the personal and professional encounters of African American women during their transition to senior academic administrative roles. This study contributes to the body of scholarship and informs institutional leaders and African American women who aspire to become senior academic leaders. In addition, future research can be directed towards examining the personal and professional experiences of other minority groups in order to enhance their representation in senior-level administrative roles.
First, this study is an attempt to add to the limited body of knowledge regarding the experiences of African American women during their ascension to senior academic leadership positions in postsecondary institutions. Davis and Maldonado (2015) pointed out that research is needed to determine the factors that may be contributing to the underrepresentation of African American women in leadership roles. The current research conducted on African American women in academic leadership roles is scant (Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015; Stefanco, 2014; Taylor & Stein, 2014). Little is known about the personal and professional experiences of these women as they ascended to senior-level leadership positions (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Therefore, the intent of this study is to fill the gap in the literature in hopes of understanding why African American women still have not achieved an equal share of senior academic administrative positions in the academy.

For institutional leaders, this research is timely and necessary. The student population on college campuses is becoming increasingly diverse (Clauss-Ehlers & Parham, 2014). According to Chun and Evans (2016), by 2050, the student minority population at postsecondary institutions will likely become the majority. Surprisingly, the number of diverse faculty and administrators in institutions of higher education does not reflect the student body demographics on many campuses (Chun & Evans, 2012; Flaherty, 2015; Hurtado & Alvarado, 2015). In 2015 and 2016, minority students on college campuses across the nation, organized protests urging campus leaders to hire more diverse faculty, senior administrators and counselors (Flaherty, 2015; Jaschik, 2017; New, 2016). At a number of postsecondary institutions, African American women represent a small number of faculty members and African American women and other
underrepresented minority groups continue to hold a majority of non-tenure-track positions (Flaherty, 2016; Jaschik, 2017). Many senior academic administrators have held tenure-track appointments prior to obtaining a senior-level leadership position (Venegas & Kezar, 2014). This research presents an opportunity for higher education leaders to examine their institutional policies and practices to ensure that they are fostering a more inclusive campus environment, reflective of their student body population.

The researcher hopes that this study will serve as a guide for other African American women who aspire to become senior academic administrators. In addition, it is hoped that African American women who desire to pursue a leadership role in the academy will gain insights into the dynamics of pursuing and attaining such a role. Furthermore, the researcher hopes that this study’s findings will encourage other African American women to share their stories, which may help to increase the representation of African American women in senior-level leadership roles in higher education. Finally, the significance of this study is that it presents an opportunity for future research regarding the underrepresentation of other minority groups in senior-level leadership roles. In addition, the use of a cultural competence model offers a multidimensional lens that can be used to examine the experiences of other underrepresented groups in higher education (Chun & Evans, 2012; Chun & Evans, 2016; Cook, 2012; Hurtado & Alvarado, 2015).

**Preview of Theoretical Framework**

Anfarersa and Mertz (2006) asserted, “It is, indeed, this diversity and richness of theoretical frameworks that allow us to see in new and different ways what seems to be ordinary and familiar” (p.xxvii). Merriam (2009) contended that the theoretical
framework serves as the foundation for your research study. According to Neumann (2014), researchers who utilize a qualitative approach are interested in acquiring a “deep understanding of a phenomenon as it is experienced in a particular setting rather than to draw broad conclusions about a particular aspect of human behavior” (p.71). Barczak (2014) emphasized the value of including a theoretical framework in a research study. He suggested that, “It is important to place the study within a theoretical framework and clearly identify the theoretical gap being explored” (p. 878). In accordance with this study, it is beneficial to utilize cultural competence as the framework in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the experiences of African American women during their ascension to senior academic leadership roles in higher education institutions. Here, cultural competence will be briefly introduced; the framework will be explored further in Chapter two.

Various terms such as diversity competence, cultural diversity and multicultural competence have been used in the literature interchangeably to explain cultural competence (Chun & Evans, 2016; Mitchell & Westbrook, 2016; Smith, 2015). Likewise, many definitions of cultural competence exist in the literature, but in general it refers to a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, policies, and structures that come together in a system or agency or among professionals to enable the system, agency, or professionals to work effectively in cross cultural situations (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989, p. 13). Bhui, Warfa, Edonya, McKenzie, and Bhugra (2007), pointed out that the numerous definitions of cultural competence and the wide array of cultural competence models demonstrate how one’s culture shapes their attitudes, perceptions, values and beliefs. Cultural competence is based on the belief that racial and ethnic disparities among
professionals are a result of culture and cultural differences (Dreachslin, Gilbert, & Malone, 2013). Kumasi and Hill (2013) suggested that cultural competence is the ability to recognize and appreciate ethnic and cultural groups different from your own. The aim of cultural competence is to eliminate disparities by instituting policies, fostering practices, and creating structures that will enable organizations to become more culturally competent (Chun & Evans, 2016; Dreachslin, Gilbert, & Malone, 2013; Smith, 2015). By applying an intersectional approach, professionals can increase their cultural awareness, knowledge and skills in order to identify with other culturally diverse groups (Chun & Evans, 2016; Cooper, Levin, & He, 2011). Dreachslin, Gilbert, and Malone (2013) have argued that becoming culturally competent is an ongoing process that should be achieved at both the individual and organizational level.

Many professions, such as health care, gerontology, psychology, social work and nursing have adopted cultural competence as a standard in practice and research in order to eliminate cultural biases and enhance inclusion in the workplace (Flaskerud, 2007; Marzilli & Assistant Professor, 2016; Nelson, Bustamante, Sawyer, & Sloan, 2015; Overall, 2009; Saunders, Haskins, & Vasquez, 2015). In addition, cultural competency models have been integrated in the educational arena and other fields in which professionals from different cultures and backgrounds interact and work together (Chun & Evans, 2016; Perez & Luquis, 2008; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992; Sue et al., 1982). Chang (2013) has noted that when research is based on gender, race and ethnic disparities, a multidimensional lens is appropriate in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the dynamics that occur when African American women seek senior administrative roles in the academy. Chun and Evans (2016) found that culture
competence provided a comprehensive framework that institutional leaders can use to examine the disparities in higher education leadership.

**The Need for Cultural Competent Leaders in Higher Education**

The United States demographic landscape is evolving to include a more diverse group of people (Colby & Ortman, 2015). Frey and Ebrary (2015) estimated that over the next 40 years, the minority population will double its present size. The shift in U.S. demographics will likely increase the number of minority student enrollments on college campuses (Chun & Evans, 2016; Smith, 2015). In order for postsecondary institutions to maximize the learning experiences of all students, it is important that institutional leaders are willing to attract, build and retain a more diverse leadership structure (Smith, 2015). Institutions of higher education can no longer afford to ignore the racial disparities in senior-level administrative positions (Smith, 2015). The underrepresentation of African American women in high-ranking administrative roles must be addressed especially if institutions intend to effectively educate all students, promote and foster inclusion and prepare students to be successful in an increasingly diverse society (Chun & Evans, 2016; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Smith, 2015).

Chun and Evans (2016) viewed cultural competence as an essential skill that college graduates need to have in order to be well prepared to contribute to a diverse workforce. However, in order for students to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to become more culturally competent, higher education leaders must be intentional in their efforts to incorporate diversity competence throughout the entire institution, including all levels of campus leadership (Chun & Evans, 2016). Byrd (2008) pointed out that the typical image of a leader has been the middle-class white male and white female.
Furthermore, Byrd (2008) suggested the development of more inclusive images of leadership as a way of eliminating the historical perceptions of what traditional leadership is. Thus, leadership should be seen in terms of multiple subjectivities. Likewise, Cook (2012) contended that since the late 1980’s the portrait of college presidents has traditionally been the “white male, married with children, with a PhD in education” (p.68). Hurtado and Alvarado (2015) suggested that, “The predominant whiteness of leadership raises the question of institutional responsiveness to rapid demographic shifts in student population” (p.67). Chun and Evans (2016) suggested that in order for institutions to foster a more inclusive campus environment reflective of its diverse student body, all campus stakeholders must be willing to share in the commitment to build, promote, encourage and celebrate diversity.

**Leadership**

Leadership is “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2013, p.5). According, to Northouse (2013), effective leaders respond to issues concerning ethnocentrism: the tendency for individuals to make their own group (ethnic, race, cultural) the dominant group in society (p. 384). Effective leaders know how to promote their ideas while supporting the ideas of other cultures. Northouse (2013) found that leaders often face the challenge of dealing with prejudices in the context of race, gender, sex and sexual orientation. Biases tend to impede one’s understanding by creating perceptions that hinder a person’s ability to see the viewpoints of others. Collins (2001) stated, “Good-to- great leaders get the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats – and then they figure out where to drive” (p.13).
Managing Cultural Competence

Smith (2015) has argued that higher education administrators must be committed to cultural diversity in order to remedy the disparities in senior-level administration. Postsecondary institutions are being held accountable by college students across the nation to increase the hiring of African American faculty (Flaherty, 2015; Wells, 2016; Williams, 2016). In addition, institutions of higher education have a fundamental role in improving social equity by providing students with the knowledge, skills and experience necessary to become successful citizens in a diverse society (Chun & Evans, 2016; Nkansah, Youmans, Agness, & Assemi, 2009).

In order for institutions of higher education to meet the needs of its students, administrators must understand and acknowledge the importance of cultural competence (Chun & Evans, 2016; Smith, 2015). The cultural competence framework provides a holistic approach to ensure that institutions properly address the issues surrounding the underrepresentation of African American women in senior administration (Sue et al., 1982; Sue & Sue, 1990; Sue & Sue, 2008). Bennett and Salonen (2007) stated:

Our campuses must offer the opportunity for each of us to be touched by the lives of those different from us. We will never understand racism, class, social justice, international development, or the person sitting next to us without quietly listening to the stories of those who experience the world in different ways. (p. 46)

Noble (1999) offered seven guidelines for groups that promote culture competence which include the following: (1) acceptance and respect for cultural differences; (2) a more inclusive climate where everyone is accepted; (3) an equal voice for multiple
perspectives; (4) integrating creativity and practicality; (5) organizational effectiveness (multiple resources, effective collaboration) in order to solve problems and a positive outlook; (6) integrity; and (7) leadership and advocacy within the extended community (living the values) (p.9).

Racism, sexism, and other prejudices are issues that plague society (Jackson & Johnson III, 2011). Dolan and Kawamura (2015) suggested that institutional leaders could benefit from cross-cultural training in order to enhance cultural awareness, cultural knowledge and cultural skills and improve access to senior administrative roles for African American women (Catalyst, 2017; Chu-Lien, 2012; Chun & Evans, 2016; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Ribeau, 2001). Managing diversity and developing cultural competence standards will guide institutions in creating a more inclusive environment (Chun & Evans, 2016; Smith, 2015). With the rapidly increasing change in student demographics, institutions must find ways to remedy the racial imbalance in senior-level leadership positions (Biggs & Daniel, 2001; Chun & Evans, 2016; Clauss-Ehlers & Parham, 2014; Smith, 2015).

Limitations

This study focused on the experiences of African American women and their ascension to senior academic leadership roles in higher education. The researcher collected data through in-depth interviews; in addition, purposeful sampling and snowball sampling were used to select participants. This study involved a select group of African American women; therefore, no generalizations can be made regarding the experiences of all African American women and their ascension to senior academic leadership positions in higher education institutions.
Delimitations

The researcher acknowledges that there are other racial and ethnic minority groups who are also underrepresented in senior administrative roles in the academy; however, for the purposes of this study the experiences of African American women were explored. Focusing on a single group allows for a richer study, which is paramount in order to understand the experiences of these women who are underrepresented in vital senior academic leadership roles. This study is also limited due to purposefully selecting African American women who currently hold senior academic leadership positions at a two-year or four-year private or public institution in the Midwestern U.S.

Assumptions

It is assumed that semi-structured interviews were appropriate for collecting data regarding the personal and professional experiences of African American women in senior administration. It is assumed that the participants in this study were honest in sharing their personal and professional experiences about their ascension to senior academic leadership positions in institutions of higher education. It is further assumed that the information in this study might be useful to aspiring African American female senior administrators, as well as institutional leaders. Finally, it is assumed that this study might help to advance future research regarding the personal and professional experiences of other underrepresented groups in senior-level positions in the academy.

Definition of Terms

The following terms will be used throughout this study.

**Academic affairs** - Higher education unit comprised of senior-level academic administrators who are charged with a number of responsibilities, including, but not
limited to overseeing the direction of academic programs, development of the universities strategic plan, financial resources, faculty evaluations and providing resources that support faculty initiatives for teaching and learning (Hendrickson & Ikenberry, 2013). Faculty members are generally organized into academic departments. In larger institutions, several departments are grouped into schools or colleges, which are led by academic deans. The academic dean reports to the provost or vice president of academic affairs (Hendrickson & Ikenberry, 2013, p.38).

**African American** – “Americans of African descent” (Sigelman, Tuch, & Martin, 2005, p.429).

**Civil rights movement** – “Social movement begun in the 1950’s in the U.S. to end discrimination against and extend full legal, social, and economic equality to African Americans” (Buckley, 2011, p. 102).

**Cross-cultural** – Refers to different cultures and/or geographic locations (Pizam, 2014).

**Culture** – “The learned beliefs, values, rules, norms, symbols and traditions that are common to a group of people” (Northouse, 2013, p.384).

**Cultural competence** - “Set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, policies, and structures that come together in a system or agency or among professionals and enables the system, agency, or professionals to work effectively in cross cultural situations” (Cross et al., 1989, p.13).

**Cultural identity** – “The identification of communications of a shared system of symbolic verbal and nonverbal behavior that are meaningful to group members who have a sense of belonging and who share traditions, heritage, language and similar norms of behavior” (Fong & Chuang, 2004, p.14).
**Diversity** – “The inclusion of a variety of ethnic, racial, and gender-based groups” (Buckley, 2011, p. 102).

**Diversity competence** – “The awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to effectively communicate, collaborate, and engage with others who are different from oneself in meaningful ways through interactions characterized by reciprocity, mutual understanding and respect” (Chun & Evans, 2016, p. 45).

**Glass ceiling** - Perceived as an invisible barrier preventing women from ascending into elite leadership positions (Northouse, 2013).

**Higher education institutions** – Two-year and four-year public or private degree-granting colleges or universities, legally authorized to operate in the State in which they operate and accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting body or agency (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

**Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs)** – “Existed prior to 1864 with a historic and contemporary mission of educating blacks while being open to all” (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2010).

**Inequity** – “Injustice or unfairness” (Buckley, 2011, p. 102).

**Intercultural competence** – “Behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately in cross-cultural situations to achieve one’s goal to some degree” (Deardorff, 2004, p. 196).

**Intercultural sensitivity** – “Refers to how an individual construes or makes sense of cultural differences and the experiences of difference based on those constructions” (Paige & Bennett, 2015, para. 3).
Leadership - A process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2013).


Pipeline – “Women with the appropriate education and background are not available” (Carli & Eagly, 2001, p. 631).

Predominantly white institutions – Institution of higher education in which the majority of the student body population is white (Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2016).

Race – “A classification of human beings into distinct groups according to supposedly ‘natural’ biological differences related to genetic inheritance (such as skin color or facial features)” (Race, 2016).

Racism – “The belief that members of a particular race are superior to members of other races” (Pila, 2014, p.578).

Senior academic leadership roles - These positions include the highest-ranking academic administrators in higher education institutions: chancellors, presidents, provosts, deans, chairs and directors (Hendrickson & Ikenberry, 2013).

Organization of Study

This research is organized in the following manner. Chapter one provides the introduction to this study, which will address the following research question: What are the personal and professional experiences of African American women during their ascension to senior academic leadership positions in higher education institutions? The central research question led to the following set of related questions: In what ways did the personal and professional experiences of African American women during their
transition to senior academic leadership roles contribute to their success as a leader? What strategies do African American women employ in order to be successful during their ascension to senior academic leadership positions? What does the role of senior academic leader mean to African American women, and to the academy, as we know it?

Additional sections in the first chapter include background for this study, statement of problem, purpose of study, significance of study, preview of theoretical framework, limitations, delimitations, assumptions and the definition of terms used throughout this research. Chapter two provides an overview of the existing research available regarding the underrepresentation of African American women in higher education. Then, the chapter explores African American women in senior-level leadership roles in postsecondary institutions. The next section discusses two challenges African American women face as they pursue senior-level leadership roles in higher education. After that, the representation of African American women in corporate leadership positions is discussed. Next, the chapter examines two theoretical constructs and then introduces phenomenology, a method of philosophical inquiry. Finally, chapter two reviews the literature on cultural competence and presents a review of several cultural competence models. Chapter three describes the methodology and data collection used in this study. Chapter four begins with a description of the study’s participants, a reinstatement of the research questions, and then presents the findings of the study, along with a summary of the findings. Finally, chapter five will provide a discussion and summary of this study, recommendations, and conclusions.
Chapter II: Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to document the experiences of African American women during their ascension to senior administrative roles by answering the following research question: What are the personal and professional experiences of African American women during their ascension to senior academic leadership positions in higher education institutions? In order to establish a context for discussion regarding African American women and their experiences during their ascension to senior administration, this review begins with an historical overview of African American women in higher education and a subsequent explanation of representation of African American women in senior administrative roles in higher education. In addition, an examination of two of the challenges encountered by African American women during their transition to senior-level leadership positions in higher education will be presented. In order to gain a better understanding of African American women’s representation in senior-level leadership positions, it is appropriate to look at the career paths of these women in business organizations as well. Therefore, African American women in corporate leadership positions will be discussed.

Next, Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought, two theoretical frameworks commonly used in the literature to examine the experiences of African Americans, will be reviewed (Chambers, Frierson, & Sharpe, 2011; Grant, 2012; Griffin & Bennett, 2013; Howard-Hamilton, 2003). This qualitative research study utilized a phenomenological approach; this chapter will introduce phenomenology as a philosophical inquiry. The framework utilized throughout this study is culture competence, and several cultural competence models will be explored. Sue et al. (1982)
and Sue and Sue (1990, 2013) proposed a model of multicultural standards as a framework for counselors to use in order to enhance their understanding of culturally diverse clients. Sperry’s (2012) model identified five basic principles of cultural competence. Banks (2004) examined cultural identity, Bennett (2016) is noted for his research on intercultural sensitivity, Slater et al. (2005) explored the cross-cultural leadership of educational administrators in Mexico. In addition, Balcazar, Suarez-Balcazar, and Taylor-Ritzler (2009) reviewed several cultural competence models and integrated several of the components from each model and proposed a framework for enhancing rehabilitation services for culturally diverse populations with disabilities. Finally, Berardo and Deardorff (2012) developed a process model of intercultural competence framework.

**Historical Overview of African American Women in Higher Education**

Despite the obstacles in gaining access to education, African American women have long been pioneers who sought formal education in order to build a better life for themselves and their families. Prior to the Civil War, it was illegal to educate black slaves (Jones, Dawkins, McClinton, & Glover, 2012); however, educational opportunities for some enslaved African Americans still existed. Some sought formal education in secrecy, some were granted access to training so they could perform work duties, and some were provided with opportunities to read and write for religious purposes (Jones et al., 2012; Solomon, 1985). There were two known African American women teachers prior to the Civil War. In 1793, Catherine Ferguson, an ex-slave, established a school for blacks, whites and poor children during the slavery era. In addition, Ferguson was recognized for being the founder of the first Sunday school in New York. In 1820, Maria Becraft,
known as a “warrior of education,” established the first boarding school for blacks (Solomon, 1985).

In 1833, Oberlin College was founded in Ohio by abolitionists and this helped African Americans and women to gain access to education. African American women who had previously been excluded from higher education made meaningful gains in obtaining degrees from Oberlin College. In 1862, Mary Jane Patterson was the first African American woman to earn a degree from Oberlin, in 1865 Fannie Jackson Coppin was the second African American female to graduate from Oberlin, and in 1884 Mary Church Terrell was the third African American woman to receive a degree from Oberlin (Solomon, 1985).

African American women also attained administrative roles. In 1869, Fannie Jackson Coppin was the first African American female to become principal at the Institute for Colored Youth, the highest educational appointment held by an African American woman. In 1871, Mary Jane Patterson accepted a position as the first African American principal at Dunbar High School in Washington D.C. (Solomon, 1985). In 1889, Josephine A. Silone led the National Sciences Department at Lincoln University (Collins, 2001).

While the end of the Civil War created new opportunities for African American women, there were still barriers. As Solomon (1985) stated, “The utility of full liberal education for women had still to be established” (p.13). Shortly after the Civil War, African Americans position in society reached its lowest point. Although they were free from slavery, they still did not have any rights (Solomon, 1985). Many educated African American women navigated to the South to educate other free men and women. Schools
were established to educate African Americans and help them to become better citizens (Wolfman, 1997).

Meanwhile, legislation helped to expand higher education in the United States. The Morrill Act of 1862, established by Justin Morrill of Vermont, allowed the federal government to grant 30,000 acres of land to the states to develop public higher education institutions that focused on agricultural, mechanical and military training (Jones et al., 2012; Solomon, 1985). In 1890, the second Morrill Act included a provision for African Americans; the act provided separate but equal facilities for African Americans and distributed annual appropriations for land-grant institutions. Although African Americans were granted access to college, postsecondary education remained separate and unequal (Hine, Brown, & Terborg-Penn, 2005).

In 1891, African American women comprised 30 percent of the student population on college campuses (Solomon, 1985). Many African American women elected to obtain degrees from historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). African American women attended several coeducational HBCUs including, Fisk University, Howard University and Wilberforce University. In 1883, Hartshorn Memorial College was created as the first African American women’s college in America to award bachelor’s degrees. While African American women continued to be confronted with obstacles, their desire to explore new frontiers in pursuit of higher education remained unwavering (Jones et al., 2012; Solomon, 1985).

During the next decade, African American women continued to create pathways for future generations of African American female students and administrators. In 1904, Mary McLeod Bethune founded the Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School
for black Girls (Jones et al., 2012). In 1909, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was established (NAACP, 2002). In 1921, Sadie Turner Mossell Alexander became the first African American woman to earn a doctoral degree in economics from the University of Pennsylvania. In 1929, Jan Ellen McAlister became the first black woman to earn a PhD in education in the United States. During the same year, Lucy Diggs Slowe organized the first annual conference of deans and advisors to girls in black schools (Jones et al., 2012).

New legislation and laws helped to facilitate the advancement of African Americans in higher education institutions. During the period between 1950 and 1960, the Civil Rights Movement became one of the largest social movements in the United States, the movement sought to establish equal access to opportunities for African Americans (Lee, 2013). Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was created to prevent discrimination by any employer on the basis of racial and ethnic characteristics, sex or national origin (Manicone, 2008). In addition, in 1964, Title IX of the Civil Rights Act was enacted. This legislation was intended to promote college and university recruitment practices and admissions opportunities for women and other minorities (Jones et al., 2012). In 1972, Title IX of the Education Amendment was passed. The law prohibits sex discrimination in any education program or activity, within an institution receiving any type of federal financial assistance. In 1975, institutions were given a three-year period to comply with Title IX (Jones et al., 2012; Solomon, 1985).

Coleman- Burns (1989) suggested that the African American community was interested in educating African American women instead of African American men because they perceived the education of African American women would raise the status
of their children. In addition, the African American community felt that African American women could obtain better employment than that of an African American male and African American women, like all women, were viewed as the carriers of the culture (p.153). Despite the fact that the educational system was established for wealthy white males, African American women were allowed to obtain education in order to advance the African American community. In doing so, they pushed the edge of the envelope and helped to pave the way for other African American women who desired to be educated (Mabokela & Green, 2001; Solomon, 1985).

The previous section highlighted a few noteworthy African American women education pioneers and significant legislation that helped to enhance opportunities for African American women and transform the educational landscape in the United States. Significant strides have been made in the advancement of opportunities for African American women; however, they still remain underrepresented in senior academic leadership roles in higher education (Biggs & Daniel, 2001; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Jackson & Johnson III, 2011; Jones et al., 2012). The next section will examine African American Women in senior academic leadership roles in higher education.

**African American Women in Senior Academic Leadership Roles in Higher Education**

Holmes (2004) has noted that African Americans have made substantial progress in gaining access to higher education and employment opportunities since the tumultuous 1960’s. Higher education institutions have made improvements in the employment of African Americans; however, research suggests that a gap still exists at various levels of senior-level leadership when African Americans are compared to their white counterparts
(Bichsel & McChesney, 2017; Corrigan, 2002; Fields, 1991; Matchett & National Research, 2013). Holmes (2004) asserted that the focus of higher education institutions has been the enhancement of retention efforts for African American faculty and students, with little emphasis given to professionals in senior-level leadership roles. In addition, research conducted on African American women who occupy senior-level leadership positions tends to be concentrated in student affairs or characterized by administrators who are responsible for the diversity mission of the institution (Holmes, 1999; Rolle, Davies, & Banning, 2000; Watson, 2001; West, 2015).

Data from The American Council on Education (1989) revealed that African American women comprised 2.1 percent of full-time faculty and 2.4 percent of part-time faculty. In 1989, 70 percent of all African American women employed in postsecondary institutions held the ranks of full professor; 1.6 percent associate professor; 2.7 percent assistant professors 3.3 percent lecture; and 4.2 percent held senior-level positions (Benjamin, 1997). Benjamin (1997) further asserted that African American women administrators are largely concentrated in black colleges and institutions.

In 2005, data from the U.S. Department of Education showed that African Americans held 5.2 percent of all full-time faculty positions at two- and four-year institutions combined; in public research institutions, they accounted for only 3.6 percent of senior administrative roles. King and Gomez (2008) studied 852 postsecondary institutions and found that whites held the majority of senior-level leadership positions, while only 16 percent of these positions were held by underrepresented groups.

According to a report from the American College President in 2002, women held 21.1 percent of all presidency positions at colleges and universities and minorities
comprised 12.8 percent of presidency positions (Hamilton, 2004). Hamilton (2004) stated that women and minorities have made progress in obtaining senior-level administrative roles, but compared to their counterparts, they are still underrepresented in higher-level positions in institutions of higher education.

Holmes (2004) investigated the representation of African American administrators in higher education institutions. Data obtained from the American Council on Education (ACE) was used for this study. Findings revealed that the underrepresentation of African American administrators in higher education was most evident in the office of the president. In 2001, African Americans held 6.3 percent (149) of the total 2,366 presidency positions; female presidents represented 21.6 percent (511) of the total number 2,366 (Corrigan, 2002). Broken down to reflect gender, race and ethnicity, the data revealed disparities across groups with African American women comprising a small percentage of presidency positions (Holmes, 2004). While there has been a slight increase in the number of African American female presidents at two-year and four-year institutions of higher education, overall they still remain underrepresented as chief executive officers (Corrigan, 2002). Furthermore, many of the studies attempting to explain the status of African American women in leadership are compared with other women, making it difficult to understand how African American women interpret their experiences (Holmes, 2008; Taylor & Stein, 2014).

In 2000 and 2002, ACE profiled the chief executive officers of colleges and universities across the country. The findings indicated that 25 percent (out of 148 participants) and 24 percent (out of 149 participants) were African American female presidents, respectively (Corrigan, 2002). Men have traditionally held higher-ranking
leadership positions in higher education institutions. Prior to the 1970’s, women held higher-level positions of influence predominantly at women’s colleges. These positions included dean of women, director of library, director of food services and dean of economics (Chamberlain, 1988). In 2001, African American women held less than 1 percent of college presidency positions at HBCUs (Fisher & Koch, 2001). Turner (2007) maintained that the number of African American female executive administrators remains exceedingly low as compared to their white counterparts.

In 2011, African American women held 11 percent of college presidency positions (Hill et al., 2016). Data reported by the American Council on Education (2012) revealed that women increased their representation as college presidents to 26 percent; African American women accounted for 4 percent of presidency positions. In addition, The Chronicle of Higher Education (2013) published data on diversity in academic leadership positions for several elite institutions, including Dartmouth College, Harvard University and Princeton University (Patton, 2013). All three institutions have made progress in increasing minority student enrollment; however, senior-level administration on each of these campuses does not reflect the change in their student demographics (Gasman et al., 2015; Patton, 2013). There are four academic dean positions at Dartmouth, and one is held by an African American woman; of the 13 schools at Harvard, one is led by an African American female dean and two African American women hold academic dean positions at Princeton (Patton, 2013). There are no African American women serving in positions of presidency or provost at these institutions (Gasman et al., 2015).
According to a 2016 report, Pay and Representation of Racial and Ethnic Minorities in Higher Education Administrative Positions, white males account for 86 percent of senior-level administrative positions in higher education (Bichsel & McChesney, 2017). In addition, findings revealed that 7 percent of senior administrative positions, which include division heads, department heads, deans and associate deans are held by African Americans (Bichsel & McChesney, 2017). Bichsel and McChesney (2017) suggested that the representation of minorities in senior administrative positions has not greatly improved over the past 15 years.

From an empirical perspective, little is known about the experiences of African American women during their ascension to senior academic leadership positions in higher education (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). The higher education landscape is shifting to a more multicultural student body population; therefore, diversity at all levels of senior academic leadership is paramount, if higher education institutions intend to serve the needs of all students (Colby & Ortman, 2015; Turner, 2007). Similarly, to other scholars, Turner (2007) asserted that the gap in the research concerning African American women and their experiences in senior academic leadership roles is limited in part due to the underrepresentation of these women in such positions.

The previous section highlighted African American women in senior academic leadership positions in higher education institutions. Examining the experiences of African American female college and university presidents provides a context for further investigation of the experiences of this underrepresented group of women in higher education. At many colleges and universities, the position of president is perceived as the pinnacle of success (Holmes, 2004).
African American Women Presidents

Relatively few studies have focused on the experiences of African American women presidents (Jackson & Harris, 2007; Phelps, Taber, & Smith; 1997; Ribeau, 2001). Phelps, Taber, and Smith (1997) were interested in obtaining information regarding the personal characteristics of African Americans who held presidency positions at community colleges. A survey was conducted to examine the personal characteristics of these leaders and to identify the number of community colleges (by state) that were led by African Americans. The study found that 5 percent (61) out of 1,220 presidents of community colleges were African American; 31 percent (19) community college presidents were African American women. There were a significant number of doctoral degrees earned by the participants in this study. The study also showed faculty members at several of the community colleges led by African American presidents were predominantly white. Phelps et al. (1997) found over half (27) of the states had no African American community college leaders.

In summary, Phelps et al. (1997) concluded African American women community college presidents are underrepresented (69 percent male; 31 percent female) as compared to African American male presidents. The number of African Americans who attained doctoral degrees did not lead to any significant increase in the number of African American leaders in community colleges; and, in comparison to all institutions of higher education, a greater number of African American community college presidents held doctorate degrees.

A study conducted by Ribeau (2001) investigated the support elements necessary to enhance senior-level leadership opportunities for African Americans employed in
higher education institutions. He examined the barriers African American males and females encountered as they pursued senior administrative positions in higher education. Ribeau’s (2001) findings revealed that participants felt access to networking opportunities, mentoring programs, professional organizations and support groups for African Americans who desired to pursue senior-level leadership positions would help to increase the number of African Americans in senior-level leadership roles at predominantly white institutions (PWI’s). Participants believed that the lack of access to mentors, networking opportunities, professional programs and career advancement made it difficult to obtain an executive leadership position at PWI’s.

Jackson and Harris (2007) sought to explore the experiences and perceptions of 43 African American female presidents from historically black colleges and universities and predominantly white two and four year institutions, public and private. They determined that elimination from informal networks, lack of preparation, and career development were three perceived barriers impacting these African American female president participants. Additionally, these women noted their experiences with the glass ceiling phenomenon included stereotyping and informal recruitment practices; however, leadership training helped them to navigate these barriers. Furthermore, the use of several strategies such as selecting a mentor, being visible and developing leadership skills helped to prepare them for the presidency. Jackson and Harris (2007) asserted that these African American women selected a career path towards the presidency with the understanding they needed to work hard, recruit a mentor, enhance their leadership, and professional skills, and attain a doctoral degree.
Jackson and Harris (2007) suggested several institutional best practices to support the career development of African American women which included: (1) access to informal networks; 2) institutional programs that encourage these women to pursue senior-level leadership opportunities; 3) access to mentors and role models; 4) enhancement of recruitment strategies; and 5) a dedication to hard work and discipline from African American women who aspire to become executive administrators.

Gooch (2009) sought to examine the career development of five African American female community college presidents. Each of the five participants stated that is was their calling to serve as community college administrators. In addition, all participants felt they had attained their respective positions of community college president through hard work, sacrifice and “being in the right place at the right time” (p.118).

The preceding section delineated studies regarding African American college and university presidents. The next section will explore the representation of African American women deans, chairs and directors in the academy. A paucity of research exists regarding African American women who hold these positions (Crase, 1994; Jackson, 2004). Yet, deans, chairs and directors are tasked with decisions that influence teaching, scholarship and service; furthermore, they are responsible for maintaining the quality of educational programs despite limited resources (House, Fowler, & Thornton, 2007). In order to better understand the experiences of these women in such positions, it is helpful to review the literature available.
African American Women Deans, Chairs and Directors

Jean-Marie (2006) investigated the experiences of three African American female leaders in historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). The purpose of the study was to examine the experiences of these three African American female leaders and to understand their roles as scholars, agents, and administrators in higher education institutions. The three participants held the title of dean in the school of nursing, president at a private HBCU and vice-chancellor of student affairs. The African American women reported a high level of commitment to other African American women and the communities in which they serve. These women cited the importance of being advocates of social justice in order to transform higher education to ensure that access is impartial for all students (Jean-Marie, 2006). All three African American administrators credit their experiences of racial inequalities and indifferences for awakening their courage to enhance social justice for all students. Jean-Marie (2006) asserted that the most salient theme surrounding all three participants was their pledge to their students; to support their academic journeys and to provide them with the necessary resources to ensure their success in higher education and society.

House and Thornton (2007) explored the professional characteristics and experiences of African American deans and directors in the School of Social Work at higher education institutions throughout the United States. Similar to previous studies, participants suggested that mentoring was important. Participants also indicated having resources of social support, formal and informal, helped them in their leadership positions. Additionally, participants of this study revealed they entered academic administration in the field of social work because of their aspiration to become leaders of
change in their departments (House & Thornton, 2007). House and Thornton (2007) contended that this field of research is limited and more attention should be given to the profession in order to enhance opportunities for aspiring African Americans leaders.

In 2011, Dowdy and Hamilton conducted a qualitative case study to examine the experiences of one African American woman who held the positions of Chair and Associate Dean at a predominantly white institution. Dowdy and Hamilton (2011) explored the principles guiding this African American woman scholar and how she conceptualized culture and servant leadership in the academy (Dowdy & Hamilton, 2011).

On the matter of culture, the African American woman scholar in the Dowdy and Hamilton (2011) study stated:

So my belief is you establish a certain kind of culture in your department, and once that’s established and once it has taken hold…it becomes a part of the establishment. Then…it’s not responsive to day to day issues…So that’s what I’m trying to model and it’s not hard, because…it’s not hard, because…if you’re comfortable where you are then you do become part of the culture, you don’t have to think about it…It is what it is. (p. 205)

With regard to servant leadership, the African American female scholar in the Dowdy and Hamilton (2011) study stated:

My inspiration comes from Spears (1995) who further developed the 10 characteristics identified by Greenleaf (1970) and include listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, growth, and building community. I subscribe to these guiding principles when addressing
issues that confront individuals and groups. I apply them when helping others to not only deal with disappointment and confrontations, but dreams, aspirations, and the like. (p. 199)

The following were additional findings of the study: (1) navigating through the academy as the only African American leader must not discourage one from doing what is right; (2) creating an inclusive academic environment is necessary for effective leadership; (3) regardless of the challenges faced by African American leaders at PWI’s, they must maintain their commitment to be an effective leader and serve as a model for all students; and (4) African American women administrators have a unique opportunity to employ their talents in order to improve higher education institutions (Dowdy and Hamilton, 2011). Dowdy and Hamilton (2011) believed the experiences shared in this study are essential for aspiring African American women leaders in higher education to bear witness to the way this African American scholar carved a path to success.

There is a paucity of research targeting African American women in positions of deans, chairs, and directors. Existing studies tend to group African American women into homogeneous categories with other women or African American groups (Holmes, 2004; House & Thornton, 2007; Perna, Gerald, Baum, & Milem, 2007; Phelps et al., 1997; Ribeau, 2001; Taylor & Stein, 2014), making it difficult to understand the experiences of African American women in senior academic leadership positions. Jackson (2004) pointed out that a major obstacle for higher education institutions in enhancing administrative diversity is the limited number of previous studies that would help to develop a conceptual framework for understanding the experiences of African Americans in executive administrative positions in higher education institutions.
Several studies have identified the need for more information regarding the experiences of African Americans in senior-level leadership roles (Davis, 1994; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Harvey, 1999; Wilson, 1989). Bridges (1996) stated that existing studies regarding African American administrators is limited and the lack of studies makes it challenging to determine the status of African Americans in executive leadership roles in higher education.

**Missing at the top: African American Women Senior Administrators**

Scholars have suggested a number of reasons why African American women are not adequately represented in senior-level leadership positions in higher education institutions (Beckwith et al., 2016; Davis & Maldonado, 2015). The next section will explore two popular themes used to discuss the challenges African American women face during their ascension to senior-level leadership roles in the academy.

**The Pipeline and Senior-level Leadership.** According to Carli and Eagly (2001), one of the contributing factors to the underrepresentation of women in senior-level leadership positions has been described by many as the pipeline problem, which implies that “women with the appropriate education and background are not available” (p.631). However, African American women have made substantial advancements toward college enrollment and degree completion rates (Davis & Otto, 2016; Garibaldi, 2014; Jones-DeWeever, 2014). According to a U.S. Census Bureau report (2017), the educational attainment level for African American women increased between 2011 and 2015. In addition, the college enrollment rates for African American women have doubled since 1980 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). In terms of qualifications, some researchers have asserted that the pipeline problem no longer exists since African
American women, and all women, continue to attain the appropriate educational credentials in order to prepare them to be successful leaders (Dominici, Fried, & Zeger, 2009; Johnson, 2016).

In his book, *Strengthening the African American Educational Pipeline: Informing, Research, Policy and Practice*, Jackson (2007) stated that the educational pipeline is a complex system, with multiple lines, that are not linked together. Because educational pipelines have multiple layers, problems tend to arise; requiring individuals who have the appropriate knowledge, skills and experience to not only locate the problem but to fix it (Jackson, 2007). According to Jackson (2007), higher education institutions have an obligation to strengthen the educational pipeline for students. In order to do so, they must be prepared to correct any of the problems in the educational arena, which may impede student success. Jackson stated, “As the student population becomes more ethnically diverse, the need to have individuals in key decision-making roles on campus becomes paramount” (p.201). Davis and Maldonado (2015) suggested that although women have increased their hiring potential for senior-level leadership roles, they lack the support and resources needed during their transition to such roles. Davis and Maldonado (2015) contended that African American women should not be overlooked from the recruitment and selection process based on race, ethnicity or gender. Furthermore, as society becomes more diverse, “new leadership and ways of managing people will be required” (Davis & Maldonado, 2015, p. 50).

Kellerman and Rhode (2017) noted that in higher education, the pipeline theory suggests there are several phases in the academy that women progress through in order to achieve a senior-level leadership position. According to Kellerman and Rhode (2017), the
pipeline theory proposes, “that the more women students, the more women junior faculty, and the more women lower-level administrators, the more women will rise to the top” (p.12). Nevertheless, Kellerman and Rhode (2017) argued that while women continue to attain degrees and move to lower-level positions in higher education institutions, they still are not making significant progress in obtaining senior-level leadership roles. One of the challenges affecting women’s advancement to senior-level leadership is the stereotypical notion that men make better leaders than women, a bias which makes it difficult to break the status quo in order to develop a more inclusive image of leadership at all levels in the academy (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017). Furthermore, African American women who seek senior-level positions are often met with unrelenting challenges and discrimination, in addition to being required to prove a higher level of competency as they pursue leadership roles in higher education (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017). Kellerman and Rhode (2017) contended that institutional leaders must be intentional in their efforts to promote diversity at the top. Establishing practices and policies to ensure equal access to senior administrative positions, holding administrators accountable for fostering an inclusive campus environment and providing mentoring and career development opportunities for aspiring senior-level leaders are some of the ways higher education leaders can create a more diversified senior-level leadership team (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017).

**Glass Ceiling.** Many scholars have attributed the glass ceiling as one of the barriers African American women face as they pursue senior-level administrative roles in higher education institutions (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986; Marina & Fonteneau, 2012; Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Davis and
Maldonado (2015) defined the glass ceiling as “an invisible barrier to advancement based on attitudinal or organizational biases” (p.51). In their article, *The Glass Ceiling: Why Women Can’t Seem to Break the Invisible Barrier That Blocks Them from the Top Jobs*, Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986) argued that women are able to advance their careers to a certain point and then they hit an invisible barrier, which hinders their progression or prevents them from obtaining senior-level leadership roles. Women face a number of obstacles during their ascension to senior-level leadership, but according to Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986), one of the major challenges is that “Men at the top feel uncomfortable with women beside them” (para. 6). According to Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986), women who achieve senior administrative roles are required to demonstrate their competence and ability to lead far more often than men do.

In their book, *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth about How Women Become Leaders*, Eagly and Carli (2007) suggested that the glass ceiling no longer exists for women. The scholars argued that the problems women face in their quest for senior-level leadership roles are different from those conditions of the glass-ceiling era. Because some women are able to successfully navigate their way to the top, despite the obstacles placed in their paths, the concrete wall is no longer a barrier for many women who aspire to attain senior-level administrative roles (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Eagly and Carli (2007) noted several reasons as to why the glass ceiling metaphor does not accurately characterize the barriers women experience during their ascension to senior-level leadership positions. They include the following: (1) the glass ceiling suggests that women have the same access to lower-level positions; (2) the glass ceiling implies the existence of a definitive barrier when women reach a certain high level during their
ascension to leadership roles; (3) the glass ceiling suggests that all barriers to women are invisible and therefore unforeseen; (4) the glass ceiling does not take into account the unique and complex challenges that women leaders face; (5) the metaphor fails to recognize the diverse strategies that women develop in pursuit of leadership roles; (6) the glass ceiling implies that women cannot overcome challenges in order to achieve a leadership position; and (7) the glass ceiling fails to acknowledge problem solving as a means to enhance women’s paths to leadership roles (p.7). Eagly and Carli (2007) agreed that women have not gained equal access to senior-level leadership positions, however they are no longer excluded from such positions as the glass ceiling metaphor proposes. Instead, the authors described the challenges that women face during their ascension to leadership positions as the labyrinth. They contended that this metaphor takes into account the multiple barriers that women encounter and acknowledges that women’s paths to leadership roles may not be direct; nevertheless, achieving such roles is attainable for African American women, and all women, in general.

Williams (2014) acknowledged that African American women have made some progress in gaining senior-level administrative roles in institutions of higher education, however he maintained that the glass ceiling still exists for African American women who have not garnered a fair share of senior administrative positions in the academy. Williams (2014), asserted that the glass ceiling is one of the barriers that African American women encounter during their ascension to senior-level leadership roles, which may help to explain why so few African American women occupy these roles in postsecondary institutions. Williams (2014) suggested that the glass ceiling persists in higher education institutions because institutional leaders fail to implement meaningful
diversity strategies. Administrators must be willing to evaluate institutional policies, eradicate practices that negatively affect minorities and exclude them from obtaining equal access to advancement opportunities, create a more transparent institutional climate, build on strengths and ensure that approaches used to promote inclusion efforts yield measurable results. Furthermore, inclusion efforts must start at the top and permeate throughout the institutional pipeline. (Williams, 2014). Williams (2014) pointed out that in order to eliminate the glass ceiling, institutional leaders must be willing to take the necessary steps to innovate existing organizational structures, in order to create a more inclusive campus environment.

To further understand the experiences of African American women in senior-level leadership positions the next section explores African American women in corporate leadership roles. Research suggests that African American women are underrepresented in positions of leadership in corporate America (Beckwith, et al., 2016; Davis & Maldonado, 2015).

**African American Women in Corporate Leadership Positions**

According to Catalyst (2004), African American women face challenges in their quest to career advancement in corporate America, as is illustrated by their lack of representation in leadership positions. In 2002, African American women comprised 5.8 percent of the entire labor force; that same year, 5.1 percent of African American women held administrative and managerial positions (Catalyst, 2004). In 2007, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report revealed African American women comprised 31 percent of managerial positions. In 2011, 34 percent of employed African American women worked in managerial and professional occupations; however, employed Asian and white women
(44 percent and 42 percent, respectively) were more likely to occupy higher paying managerial and professional positions (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013, p. 2). In 2014, women held 16 percent of executive level positions in U.S. corporations; African American women accounted for only 5.3 percent of those positions (Beckwith et al., 2016). According to the Missing Pieces Report: The 2016 Board Diversity Census of Women and Minorities on Fortune 500 Boards, African American women increased their share of boards seats from 3 percent in 2012, to nearly 5 percent in 2016 (Alliance for Board Diversity, 2016, pg. 3).

Chemers (1997) contended that research regarding African American women and leadership has been absent from the literature with the exception of a few studies devoted to women and leadership, ignoring the role of race and ethnicity. According to Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010), enhancing the number of women and African American women in leadership positions is a challenge in business organizations. African American women tend to be concentrated in mid-level management positions and disproportionately represented in executive leadership positions (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Women in the Workplace, 2016, a report on the status of women in corporate America found that African American women are the most underrepresented group in corporate leadership positions (Yee, et al., 2016, p. 8). The study also revealed that African American women felt they did not have equal access to opportunities in the workplace (Yee, et al., 2016 p.8). Similarly, Women in the Workplace released its 2017 report, which showed that African American women still face significant challenges, not typically shared by their counterparts in advancing their careers in corporate America. In addition, the findings showed that African American women felt they did not have
leaders advocating for their career advancement, and they were not provided with opportunities to take advantage of “stretch assignments” (Thomas et al., 2017, p.12).

Catalyst (2004) conducted a survey regarding the barriers and opportunities in the workplace for African American women. Quantitative results were obtained from 963 African American women survey respondents and qualitative findings are from 23 focus groups, comprised of entry and mid-level African American women professionals. The findings revealed the following: (1) African American women are not a homogeneous group; their unique experiences and history are different from those of other minority groups; (2) the “glass ceiling” is difficult to break; (3) African American women bring unique perspectives to the workplace; and (4) diversity policies have limited benefits. The participants of the survey felt their opportunities for career advancement would decline over time regardless of diversity standards and practices. Other challenges included lack of access to formal and informal networks, racial stereotyping, lack of visibility and connection with influential people. Cain (2015) conducted a study with a group of African American women who held executive leadership roles in U.S. corporations. Findings of the study revealed that these women encountered social, economic and interpersonal barriers as they pursued their respective positions. Participants indicated that access to mentors, equal opportunities for advancement and more inclusion could help to improve the chances of African American women achieving senior-level leadership roles (Cain, 2015). According to Mehra, Kilduff, and Brass (1998), not having access to informal and formal networks could be linked to the underrepresentation of African American women in leadership positions; these networks help to enhance career advancement.
Catalyst (2006) suggested that managers need to recognize and acknowledge the culturally diverse groups comprising their organizations and be willing to address issues as they occur and link diversity efforts to business initiatives. According to Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010), African American women are required to exhibit leadership competence, while at the same time conform to societal prototypes indicative of racial, ethnic and gender behavior. Additionally, Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010) suggested that it is critical for researchers to understand the manner in which African American women experience the workplace and the issues they face as they climb the corporate ladder to leadership positions. Cain (2015) maintained that employers must be willing to provide African American women with the resources they need to prepare them for senior-level positions and be willing to address the issues that impede opportunities for these women to such positions.

**Theoretical Constructs for African American Women**

According to Byrd (2008), there is a “lack of theory-building research that will support a more culturally inclusive perspective of leadership in organizations” (p. 101). Existing theoretical constructs contend critical race theory and black feminist thought are appropriate frameworks to use when examining the experiences of African American women (Grant, 2012; Griffin & Bennett, 2013; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2009). The next section will provide an overview of these theories.

**Critical Race Theory**

Derrick Bell has been credited as the founder of Critical race theory (CRT), which was established in response to the immobilized civil rights movement to end racism (Douglas, 2012; Hughes, Noblit, & Cleveland, 2013; Quinn & Grumbach, 2015). The
CRT movement has been defined as a “collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p.2). CRT is based upon the notion that racism is deeply rooted in the fabric of society (Delgado, 1995). This framework asserts the following: (1) racism is deeply rooted in U.S. culture; (2) white privilege does exist; and (3) American society sees race as a dominant genetic endowment and all other human attributes are often overlooked (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Hughes, Noblit, & Cleveland, 2013). Critical race theorists strive to uncover the root of racism in order to remove racial subordination (Wallace & Brand, 2012). The idea of CRT is to expose racism and its many parts in an effort to eradicate it (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) argued that racism is so deeply rooted in U.S. society that it is imperceptible.

According to Bell (1995), the needs of African Americans take second place to white Americans unless their needs respond to those of white Americans. Bell (1995) further asserted that white superiority and racial power evolved in American society over time. Theorists suggest avoiding issues of race allows individuals to respond only to extreme racial issues, ignoring other forms of racial oppression (Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

The use of CRT in education attempts to address race and discrimination in the research and confronts traditional ideas and practices, and separates rhetoric on race, gender and ethnicity by showing how these societal constructs intersect to impinge upon underrepresented individuals (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). CRT focuses on the challenges faced by African American women including racism, sexism, classism, and
other prejudices. According to Davis, Mack, Washington and Cantey (2010), certain individuals in society obtain power and opportunities based on race, gender and class. Systemic and institutionalized racism is attributed to issues in the workforce, such as the inequities in compensation for women and the underrepresentation of African American women in leadership positions (Davis et al., 2010).

According to Wolfe and Dilworth (2015), CRT framework can be used to identify the inequities in higher education as it relates to the hiring and advancement of minorities. In addition, CRT can be utilized to examine institutional policies in order to reveal practices that may have an adverse impact on minority groups (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). Because racism is seen as the norm in society (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015), it may appear to be “ordinary and natural to many people” (Delgado, 1995, p.xiv). As a result, it becomes socially acceptable, deemed normal; and therefore carried over into the workplace (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). CRT provides an analytical lens to examine diversity initiatives and their impact on African American women and other minorities in higher education (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). Wolfe and Dilworth (2015) emphasized that institutional leaders must be willing to adopt a new organizational structure that promotes, respects and includes the entire campus community.

**Black Feminist Thought**

Black feminist thought (BFT) is built around the experiences of African American women. The framework was developed in part, because black women’s experiences were seen as inferior to those of black men, white men and white women, whose experiences were viewed as the norm (Willingham, 2011, p. 58). Black women were regarded as not
being worthy of literary attention; in response black women scholars established a black feminist criticism with black women’s literature as its primary focus (McDowell, 1980). Black feminists emphasize that although African American women face similar challenges; a result of living in a world that does not value them, each has their own unique experiences (Collins, 2000). Black women’s literature creates a forum that enables the voices of these women to be heard; their stories told, in their own words, regardless of their shared experiences.

BFT contends that black women all have something to add to the literature (Collins, 2000; Grant, 2012). The theory focuses on the hardships of these women and assumes commonalities exist between them (Grant, 2012; Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Collins (2002) perspective on black feminist thought asserted that African American women have been consistently positioned in lower-ranking positions in higher education for quite some time. Howard-Hamilton (2003) pointed out that although African American women have gained entrance into the academy, their voices remain inferior to those of the dominant group; therefore, they occupy an “outsider within” status, where they feel isolated and struggle for equal access (p.21). Collins (2002) stated there are three main premises of black feminist thought: (1) this theory is shaped by the lived experiences of African American women; yet their stories are often told by other people; (2) African American women share similar experiences, however their individual experiences are unique and based on their situated contexts; and (3) the diversity in class, gender, religion, age and sexual orientation of African American women encourage different perspectives from which their experiences can be shared and appreciated (p.469).
Collins (2002) suggested that individuals other than African American women have tried to shape their identity, however the ways in which others have shaped African American women’s character have been superficial. Race, gender and class are interlocking pieces for most African American women and these identities are immersed in oppression. The premise of BFT is social justice and empowerment. Black feminist thought encourages African American women to share their stories based on the significance of African American culture (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Applied to higher education, BFT is important in helping African American females deal with the inequalities and racism they may encounter in organizations (Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

The demographics of the United States are changing rapidly and institutional leaders must be prepared to serve a more diverse population (Chun & Evans, 2016; Colby & Ortman, 2015). According to Benjamin (1997), higher education institutions will be impacted by this evolving demographic shift. Academic leaders at every level in the institution must be culturally competent to effectively promote, enhance and demonstrate practices that encourage cultural diversity among the campus community (Chun Evans, 2016; Hansuvadha, 2012). According to Bierema and Cseh (2003) the theoretical constructs that define the field must be confronted, otherwise they become foundations that support the status quo. Hunkins (1999) suggested that the demographic shift in society call for institutions of higher education to acquire different lenses in order to effectively interpret and analyze the world. Campus administrators will need to utilize an analytical approach to examine traditional practices and then be willing to transform institutional infrastructures in order to create a more inclusive campus environment (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). The previous two sections identified existing theoretical
frameworks used to examine the experiences of African American women in higher education. The next section will discuss phenomenology as a philosophical inquiry.

**Philosophical Inquiry**

For this research study, I utilized a phenomenological approach to document the personal and professional experiences of African American women during their ascension to senior academic leadership positions. According to Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano and Morales (2007), this approach is best suited when the researcher seeks to understand the essence that participants experience about a phenomenon (p.239). In addition, Finlay (2009) pointed out that the tenet of phenomenology is the rich description of events as experienced by the person who encountered such events.

Phenomenology has been defined as a “method/practice of observing, recording and interpreting lived experience through vivid and detailed descriptions. The practice of phenomenology seeks to expose, uncover, or reveal universal (transcendental) elements of human existence that are instantiated within practical “particular” empirical situations.” (Magrini, 2012, para.2)

Phenomenology seeks to discover how things are interpreted or experienced from a first-person point of view. The premise surrounding an experience is its intentionality; that of which is being directed towards something; that something is the experience of or about an object, occurrence or event (Margrini, 2012). Husserl (1970), one of the early pioneers of phenomenology research, suggested that phenomenology includes a search critique of natural and prevalent meanings of phenomena. He further contended that “there are attempts at genuinely executed fundamental work on the immediately envisaged and seized things themselves. Even when they proceed critically, they do not
lose themselves in discussions of standpoint, but rather have the last word to the things themselves” (Husserl, 1970, pp. 44-45). Spiegelberg (1986) pointed out that the focus of phenomenology is to reach deep into the human mind in order to capture the essence of the lived experience.

Phenomenology research incorporates three fundamental principles which include the following: (1) step of collecting life experience material; (2) step of analysis, focusing on recognizing and interpreting main themes with the descriptions collected in step one; and (3) step of application; phenomenology research recommends ways for encouraging enhanced practice (Margrini, 2012, para. 6). The goal of phenomenology is not to problem solve but to remain open. Researchers should pose meaningful questions that lead down a path towards inquiry of more information (Magrini, 2012). The previous section discussed phenomenology as a method of philosophical inquiry. The next section will review the theoretical framework used in this study.

**Theoretical Framework**

Culture competence framework will be explored in this section. In addition, several cultural competence models will be reviewed; these models can be adapted by campus leaders to aid in the transformation of institutional infrastructures and establish measurable benchmarks and timelines for improving the representation of African American women in senior academic leadership roles (Chun & Evans, 2016). Furthermore, cultural competence models can be used to foster awareness of and respect for other culturally diverse groups and help to build a more inclusive campus environment (Chun & Evans, 2016; Shorter-Goeden, 2013).
Cultural Competence

Culture is defined as “the learned beliefs, values, rules, norms, symbols and traditions that are common to a group of people” (Northouse, 2013, p.384). Culture competence was defined earlier as “a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, policies, and structures that come together in a system or agency or among professionals and enables the system, agency, or professional group to work effectively in cross cultural situations” (Cross et al., p.13). During the 1970’s, psychologists were among the first professionals to find relevance in the use of cultural competence standards in their work (American Psychological Association, 1993; Arredondo, Toporek, Brown, & Jones, 1996; Sue, 2001). Adopting cultural competence as a framework, they established models and procedures that would eliminate the risk of prejudices in their studies (Frohm & Beehler, 2010; Imel, et al., 2011; Marsella, Dubanoski, Hamada, & Morse, 2000). The essential element in cultural competence is the ability to interact effectively with a diverse group of individuals (Shorter-Gooden, 2013; Sperry, 2012). Professionals in the fields of nursing, education, social services, libraries and counseling have integrated cultural competence in their practices in order to reduce disparities and promote diversity (Marzilli & Assistant Professor, 2016; Nelson, Bustamante, Sawyer, & Sloan, 2015; Overall, 2009; Saunders, Haskins, & Vasquez, 2015; Zander, 2007).

Culturally competent individuals are able to work effectively with other diverse individuals or groups (Flaskerud, 2007; Shorter-Gooden, 2013). According to Flaskerud (2007), culturally competent organizations embrace diversity, utilize self-assessments in order to evaluate competency levels and are cognizant of cultural differences, institutionalize cultural awareness and adjust their services to promote cultural diversity
in the community (p.121). Sperry (2012) suggested that individuals with diverse backgrounds comprise an organization’s culture and as a result, institutions must develop culturally sound guidelines and practices. Consequently, cultural competence is defined in terms of collective values and beliefs and accepted behaviors, attitudes, practices, and constructs that facilitate effective working relationships among individuals in an organization (Sperry, 2012).

According to Shorter-Gooden (2013), institutions of higher education must be committed to ensuring that diversity is visible throughout the entire campus. In addition, Shorter-Gooden (2013) asserted that culturally competent organizations: (1) ensure that everyone has equal access to opportunities; (2) establish and promote a positive climate; and (3) encourage diversity of ideas throughout the organization (pp. 208-209). She acknowledged that “Access is important, but so is success” (Shorter-Gooden, 2013, p.209). Admitting minority students is part of the answer. In addition, colleges and universities must ensure that students have the resources and support systems in place to help them succeed throughout their academic journeys (Shorter-Gooden, 2013). Institutional leaders must be committed to enhancing diversity by recruiting and retaining faculty, staff and senior-level leadership that is reflective of the student body it serves (Chun & Evans, 2016; Shorter-Gooden, 2013). The next section will highlight several cultural competence models.

Cultural Competence Models

Sue et al. (1982) introduced cultural competence framework to the field of counseling in an effort to ensure that counseling professionals were prepared to work effectively with culturally diverse patients. According to Sue and Sue (1990, 2013),
culturally competent counselors demonstrate three skills when working with clients, they include the following: (1) awareness of one’s own biases, perceptions and views; (2) awareness and knowledge of other individuals, including their cultures; and (3) effective use of intervention strategies in order to meet the needs of culturally diverse clients (Sue & Sue, 1990, pp. 166-170; Sue & Sue, 2013, pp.48-51). According to Arredondo et al. (1996), culturally competent counselors do not make inferences about a client’s problems based on their culture nor do they presuppose that a problem identified by a person from a minority group is a direct result of their race or culture (p.49). In addition, culturally competent counselors take responsibility for learning about different groups without holding preconceived notions about their race or culture (Fawcett & Evans, 2012).

Similarly, to Sue and Sue (1990), Sperry (2012) acknowledged that cultural knowledge and cultural awareness are two dimensions of cultural competence. However, Sperry’s (2012) model adds two additional elements, which include cultural sensitivity, the ability to foresee the outcome of a cultural problem and to respond with compassion and cultural action, involves demonstrating cultural sensitivity through an action that will produce a desired outcome (p.314). Moreover, Sperry (2012) stated that there are five principles of cultural competence: (1) cultural competence promotes collaboration, cooperation and embraces differences; (2) four dimensions of cultural competence include cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity and cultural action; (3) one can exhibit high or low levels of cultural competence; (4) the level of cultural competence is determined by the degree to which each of the four elements are functioning; and (5) to be effective in a professional environment, organizations are
required to display a “moderate” level of cultural competence and the ability to exhibit all four elements (Sperry, 2012, pp.312-313).

Banks (2004) research focused on cultural identity. He stated that it is important to understand how people view themselves in society. Banks (2004) model focused on school age students and he asserted that teachers should have a working knowledge of these stages in order to help promote student identity development. There are six stages, which include the following: (1) cultural psychology captivity: individuals start to incorporate the prejudices and stereotypes about their cultural groups which may result in low self-esteem; (2) cultural encapsulation: during this stage individuals attempt to rediscover their cultural consciousness and try to limit participation with their cultural group; (3) cultural identity clarification: individuals are able to reconcile their personal feelings and cultural identity in order to establish positive attitudes towards their own cultural group; (4) biculturalism: gaining a positive sense of cultural identity and associated psychological characteristics in order to actively participate in their own cultural environment and other cultural communities; (5) multiculturalism and reflective nationalism: individuals have clarified, reflective and positive personal, cultural and national identifications; in addition they have an appreciation for their culture and other diverse groups; and (6) globalism and global competency: individuals have acquired the appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes to function effectively within their own culture and diverse groups in society (pp.302-304).

Similar to Banks (2004), Bennett (2016) asserted that there are six stages of development. His model of intercultural sensitivity suggested that as individuals develop psychologically they become more appreciative of cultural differences. Furthermore,
once individuals start to navigate through the stages, they begin to experience their culture through the perspective of different cultures, and adapt their views to take into account the diverse ideas and viewpoints of others. Bennett’s six stages include the following: (1) denial: reality of other cultures not recognized; (2) defense: other cultures put down and degraded; (3) minimization: starting to acknowledge other cultural groups, while attempting to gain knowledge about groups different from your own; (4) acceptance: starting to accept and respect other cultural groups, realizing that other groups add value to the world as a result of their beliefs, values and ideas; (5) adaptation: able to recognize the importance of other cultural groups and their views; and (6) integration: experience of self develops to include the perspectives of different cultures (p.11).

Slater et al. (2005) explored cross-cultural leadership in an educational administration program in Mexico. The study participants were school directors and higher education leaders. The researchers were primarily interested in the preparation these Mexican leaders received, the barriers to leadership, and the implications for preparation programs (p.196). According to Slater et al. (2005), there are four stages of cross-cultural leadership. The scholars suggested that interaction with diverse cultures, along with multicultural training for administrators could enhance and promote stage progression (Hansuvadha & Slater, 2012, p. 177). The four stages include the following: (1) intra-cultural: limited knowledge regarding other cultures; (2) one-way cross-cultural: lack of respect for different cultures; one’s own culture seen as dominant; (3) two-way cross-cultural: aware of other cultures; and (4) meta-cultural: enhance knowledge;
researchers apply a more holistic perspective on how they do work (Hansuvadha & Slater, 2012, pp.176-177).

Hansuvadha and Slater (2012) suggested that additional studies should focus on creating standardized practices to help leaders enhance their cultural competence at various levels within the organization. Additionally, scholars should investigate other resources that will aid in improving administrators’ cultural competence. (Hansuvadha & Slater, 2012).

Balcazar et al. (2009) conducted extensive research in order to locate literature related to cultural competence. The scholars identified 259 peer-reviewed articles pertaining to cultural competence (Balcazar et al., 2009, p.1154). Further examination was conducted by two independent reviewers and 32 articles relevant to cultural competence models were identified (Balcazar et al., 2009, p. 1154). From the 32 articles, Balcazar et al. (2009) selected 18 cultural competence models; those models contained unique components that could be used to provide a conceptual framework for cultural competence (pp.1154). After review of the 18 models, the researchers ascertained that critical awareness, cultural knowledge, skills development and practice and application were significant components needed to demonstrate ongoing cultural competence (Balcazar et al., 2009, p.1155). Critical awareness reflects an individual’s understanding of their own prejudices and encourages self-evaluation of one’s biases; cultural knowledge is when individuals begin to familiarize themselves with groups different from their own; skills development reflects a professional’s ability to work and communicate effectively with different individuals and practice and application is demonstrating the effective application of the three components in a particular context.
According to Balcazar et al. (2009), the model can be used to enhance the cultural competence of professionals who work with rehabilitation patients.

According to Deardorff (2004) intercultural competence, “refers to behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately in cross cultural situations to achieve one’s goals to some degree” (p.196). Berardo and Deardorff (2012) suggested that there are five essential components for interacting successfully with culturally diverse groups, which include the following: (1) attitudes: behavior is welcoming and accepting of people from different cultures; (2) knowledge: entails cultural self-awareness and the importance of understanding different cultures and their perspectives; (3) skills: consists of observation, listening, evaluating, analyzing, interpreting and relating; (4) internal outcomes: based on successfully acquiring the previous three components, an individual demonstrates an internal outcome that consists of flexibility, adaptability and empathy; and (5) external outcomes: based on successfully acquiring the previous four components, the individual is able to exhibit through their actions and communication effective intercultural competence (pp. 45-46). Berardo and Deardorff (2012) emphasized that sustaining intercultural competence is an ongoing, iterative process (p.49).

**Summary**

African American women have made modest gains in obtaining senior-level leadership roles in the academy; in addition, their progress has been slow (Benjamin, 1997; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Jones et al., 2012; Smith, 2015). This chapter offered a context for understanding African American women’s representation in senior-level administrative positions. Existing studies regarding African American women in leadership positions were examined.
This study is framed by cultural competence, which is relevant in understanding the experiences of African American women during their ascension to senior academic leadership roles because it provides a holistic lens to aid campus leaders in examining institutional structures, policies, and practices in order to ensure that:

Historically underrepresented groups have structures and support systems in place for their success…It is not enough for employees from underrepresented groups to be brought in and to languish at the bottom of the organization hierarchy. They need to be provided opportunities for supervisory, managerial and leadership positions. Access and success must go hand-in-hand. That is the first key element of the culturally competent organization.

(Shorter-Gooden, 2013, p. 209)

Individuals and organizations must be culturally competent in order to respond effectively to the needs of the rapidly changing populations served (Dreachslin, Gilbert, & Malone, 2013; Shorter-Gooden, 2013; Smith, 2015). If colleges and universities are to serve culturally diverse students in a competent manner, institutional leaders must establish an infrastructure that encourages and promotes an ongoing process of cultural competence (Chun & Evans, 2016; Shorter-Gooden, 2013). Institutions of higher education can integrate a cultural competence model to build, engage, promote and foster an inclusive climate that embraces diversity throughout the campus environment (Chun & Evans, 2016; Shorter-Gooden, 2013).
Chapter III: Methodology

“The human world comprises various provinces of meaning.”

(Vandenberg, 1997, p. 7)

The purpose of this research was to document the experiences of African American women who successfully obtained a senior academic leadership position in higher education. The following central research question guided this study: What are the personal and professional experiences of African American women during their ascension to senior academic leadership positions in higher education institutions? There were also three sub-questions: In what ways did the personal and professional experiences of African American women during their transition to senior academic leadership roles contribute to their success as a leader? What strategies do African American women employ in order to be successful during their ascension to senior academic leadership positions? What does the role of senior academic leader mean to African American women, and to the academy, as we know it? Chapter three will present the methodology of this study, including research design, participants, data collection and instrumentation, data analysis and the process used to ensure the trustworthiness of this study.

Research Design

The intent of this research was to elicit rich, detailed information regarding the personal and professional experiences of African American women during their ascension to senior academic leadership roles; therefore, phenomenology was an appropriate methodology to utilize in this study. According to Wiersma and Jurs (2003), using this approach allows the participants who are being studied to construct and
provide meaning to their life experiences based on how they perceive the events, which have taken place. Phenomenology research draws from an individual’s experience and reflections to gain an in-depth understanding of the whole human experience (van Manen, 1990). The goal of this research was to allow African American women to expound upon their personal and professional experiences, challenges and significant events and to describe how these encounters affected them during their ascension to senior-level administrative roles in postsecondary institutions. Merriam (2009) stated, “Phenomenological research is well suited for studying affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences” (p.26). Yin (2010), further contended that researchers can utilize an “emic perspective in order to capture participants’ indigenous meanings of real-world events” (p.11). The researcher also employed emic data collection and analysis.

As previously stated in Chapter one, there are a limited number of studies focused on the experiences of African American women in higher education; specifically, their personal and professional encounters in the academy during their transition to senior administrative roles (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Gamble & Turner, 2015; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; West, 2015). In order for the researcher to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of African American women during their ascension to such roles, a phenomenological approach is best suited to obtaining the desired results. Kvale (1996) stated:

Phenomenology is interested in elucidating both that which appears and the manner in which it appears. It studies the subjects’ perspectives of their world; attempts to describe in detail the content and structure of the subjects’
consciousness, to grasp the qualitative diversity of their experiences and to explicate their essential meanings. (p. 53)

**Participants**

Participants included five African American women who are currently serving in a senior-level administrative role at a four-year public or private higher education institution in the Midwestern U.S. In addition, their senior-level leadership role has a reporting structure within the Office of Academic Affairs. Because the phenomenon being studied is how African American women describe and reflect on their personal and professional experiences while pursuing senior academic leadership roles, purposeful sampling was utilized. Patton (2002) stated, “The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth” (p. 230). Wiersma (2000) suggested that most researchers conducting qualitative studies engage in purposeful sampling and the goal of these studies is not to estimate quantities in the population. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), the participants in purposeful sampling are selected because of their knowledge about the phenomenon being studied. By incorporating this sampling technique, the researcher can gain a better understanding of the phenomenon being studied and obtain a more rich description of experiences from a smaller group of participants. Snowball sampling was also utilized in order to identify additional participants for this study. Cohen and Arieli (2011) pointed out that snowball sampling is often used to “locate, access and involve people from specific populations in cases where the researcher anticipates difficulties in creating a representative sample of the research population” (pp.426-427).
To select participants for this study, I employed purposeful sampling and snowball sampling, along with the help of professional higher education associations, college and university websites, (including list serves). In addition, participants of this study met the following criteria:

1. African American women.
2. Current senior administrators (titles may vary depending on the institution) whose positions report to the office of academic affairs at a two-year or four-year public or private higher education institution in the Midwestern U.S.
3. Available to participate in the study.

**Rationale for selecting criteria**

Researchers have discussed the importance of proper sampling in a study. Patton (1990) contended that researchers should select rich-information cases that support the issues, which are paramount to the purpose of the research. Merriam (2002) stated that qualitative research attempts to uncover the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants and therefore it is important to select a sample that you can learn the most from. Hycner (1999) suggested, “the phenomenon dictates the method (not vice-versa) including even the type of participants” (p.156).

The participants were limited to African American women in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the personal and professional experiences of this group, in hopes of enhancing their representation in senior academic leadership roles in higher education. By selecting African American women who currently hold senior administrative positions, institutional leaders can better understand the dynamics involved for these women in attaining such roles. Additionally, the participants were limited to the Midwest
region of the U.S. because the researcher believed that there were potential candidates from this area who could contribute rich information for this study.

**Data Collection and Instrumentation**

According to Bentz and Shapiro (1998) “Doing phenomenology,” means capturing “rich descriptions of phenomenon and their settings” (p.104). The researcher was primarily interested in how the participants described and reflected upon their lived personal and professional experiences during their ascension to senior academic leadership roles in the academy. Triangulation of data was achieved through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and member checking. According to Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, and Neville (2014) triangulation of data enables the researcher “to test validity through the convergence of information from different sources” (p.545). Bogdan and Biklen (1982) suggested that qualitative interviews can be used as the primary source of data collection or in combination with other methods such as document analysis.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Before recruiting potential study participants, I submitted my research proposal to the Institutional Research Board (IRB) for their review. I received approval on August 31, 2017 to proceed with collecting data for this study (See Appendix A). I used purposeful sampling and snowball sampling to locate participants (Cohen & Arieli, 2011; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). I researched higher education institutional websites in the Midwestern U.S. for two weeks prior to sending invitations to potential study participants. I also reached out to potential study participants through LinkedIn, a professional networking website, and Facebook’s online messaging application.
I identified 12 African American women who held senior-level leadership roles at postsecondary institutions in Midwestern U.S. and sent invitations to nine of those potential study participants through email (See Appendix B) along with the Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities document (See Appendix C). I contacted two of the potential study participants through LinkedIn, and one through Facebook messenger. Five of them agreed to participate, and each signed the consent form. Polkinghorne (1998) suggested that five to 25 participants is appropriate when utilizing a phenomenological approach. Creswell (2013) stated that a central tenet of phenomenology research is to understand the shared experiences of individuals, “in order to develop practices or policies, or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon” (p.81).

I sent a second request to the other seven potential study participants; four never responded, two of them replied and stated that they were student affairs administrators, and one stated that she would not be able to participate in the study due to the nature of the topic and her concerns about anonymity since there are not many African American women in senior administration. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, each participant was provided a pseudonym for all documentation collected. Data collection began October 23, 2017.

**Interviews, Document Analysis and Member Checking**

According to Patton (2002), conducting in-depth interviews enables the researcher to acquire rich variation of the human experience. Five semi-structured interviews were conducted for this study. Prior to interviewing the study participants, I contacted a senior-level administrator and requested her participation to conduct a pilot interview to ensure
that the interview questions accurately aligned with the research questions, and captured the richness of data to support my study. In addition, the pilot interview helped to determine whether questions needed to be modified and if additional questions should be developed. The data collected from the pilot interview will remain confidential, in the same way as the data collected from study participants. Interview questions included the following:

1. Tell me about your background, including your education and professional career.
2. What is your current position in Academic Affairs? In addition, what are your roles and responsibilities?
3. How long have you been in your current position?
4. Can you describe the day-to-day activities of your current position?
5. What are some of the obstacles you experienced during your transition to secure a senior academic leadership role?
6. How did you deal with these obstacles?
7. What are some of the advantages you experienced during your transition to secure a senior academic leadership role?
8. What do you like most about your current position?
9. What were some of your roles, responsibilities and challenges en route to your position in Academic Affairs?
10. What are some of the circumstances that encouraged you to apply for a senior academic leadership position?
11. Please describe the person (s) who encouraged you the most during your career? How were they instrumental?
12. At what point in your professional career, did you decide to become an administrator? And can you describe that decision-making process?

13. What advice, could you offer future African American female senior administrators?

14. From your perspective, do you think African American women are underrepresented in senior administrative roles in higher education institutions?

15. If so, what are some of the reasons you think they are underrepresented?

16. From your personal and professional experiences during your ascension to senior administration, what advice could you offer to institutional leaders?

17. What can institutional leaders do to better prepare African American women for senior academic leadership roles?

18. From your perspective, how does an African American female administrator add value to the academy?

Prior to scheduling the interviews, participants returned the *Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities* document to me through email. Three of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, and two of the interviews took place through Zoom, a video and audio web conferencing tool. I made several attempts to arrange a visit with one of the participants, but scheduling conflicts would not permit a face-to-face interview. The face-to-face interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder, and permission to be recorded was outlined in the consent formed signed by the participants. I was also given prior consent to record the interviews conducted through Zoom. After each interview was concluded, recordings were transcribed in Microsoft Word, and the interview data was also analyzed in Microsoft Word. All
participants were provided with a copy of their transcripts to review, revise, if necessary and offer feedback.

According to Denzin (1970) document analysis can be used in conjunction with other sources of data to validate the findings of a study. Prior to the interviews, I went back to each of the participant’s institutional websites, and conducted Internet and YouTube searches in order to capture relevant information about the participants, which may not have been revealed in the interviews. Several of the participants also shared article publications during the interviews.

Member checking was also used to corroborate the data obtained from the interviews. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasized that member checking is essential in the data analysis process in order to confirm the validity of the findings. All participants were sent a copy of their transcripts through email to review, and verify the statements for accuracy. Participants were asked to review the data, and submit any changes, concerns or feedback to me through email. I also thanked each of the participants for their willingness to participate in this study. Four of the participants did not have any concerns; none suggested edits that needed to be made. A couple of the participant’s wished me continued success in pursuit of my degree. One of the participant’s requested three changes to her transcript data to ensure that her anonymity would not be violated. Since there are very few African American women in senior leadership positions, she was concerned that she could easily be identified based on some of the information in the transcript. I replied to the participant and informed her that I would make certain that no identifiable information, including her identity, the identity of her institution, any institutions that she has been affiliated
with, academically or professionally or any other information that would violate anonymity, as pursuant to the Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities document. She thanked me, and wished me luck.

Data Analysis

Keen (1975) stated, “Unlike other methodologies, phenomenology cannot be reduced to a ‘cookbook’ set of instructions. It is more an approach, an attitude, an investigative posture with a certain set of goals” (p.41).

The data was analyzed as it was collected. Merriam (2009) confirmed that data analysis should be performed in conjunction with data collection. I utilized Hycner’s (1985) guidelines to analyze the interview data, which includes the following:

1. Bracketing and phenomenological reduction. During this phase, I listened to the recordings and read the transcripts several times to acquire a more holistic understanding of the data. I suspended any thoughts or judgments in order to understand the perspectives of participants regarding their experiences.

2. Listening to the interview for a sense of the whole. As I listened to the recordings and read the transcripts, I paid close attention to the non-verbal cues such as pauses, silence and emphasis in order to establish a context for specific units of meaning and themes.

3. Delineating units of general meaning. I began to isolate words and phrases, reading the transcript line by line in an attempt to establish the core meaning or essence of the participants’ experiences, still at this point the research questions had not been addressed in the data.
4. Clustering units of meaning to develop themes. At this point, bracketing any assumptions, I determined which units of relevant meaning fit together; specifically, I began to identify commonality among themes that connect several distinct units of relevant meaning.

5. Prepare a summary for each individual interview, validation checking and making changes. I prepared a written summary of the interviews and incorporated the themes that were extracted from the data. In addition, I provided each participant with a written summary of their transcripts and elicited their feedback regarding the findings, and asked them to make the necessary changes.

6. Developing a composite summary of the interviews. A composite summary of the interview data was prepared. This helped to capture the essence of the phenomenon being studied and provided a more holistic understanding of the world, in general as experienced by participants. (pp.280-294)

**Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted the importance of trustworthiness in assessing the value of a research study, and further suggested that credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are the central components in establishing the validity of a study. In order to ensure that all participants genuinely wanted to participate in this research study, each was provided with the opportunity to review the consent form, and to ask questions prior to signing it. In addition, participants were informed on the day of the interviews that they could withdraw their participation at any time. Also, member checking allowed participants to make certain that the data accurately characterized the phenomenon being studied; all participants received a copy of their interview in order to
review the validity of any phrases, quotes and statements. In addition, Hycner (1985) recommended that the findings be examined by the research committee; this study will be reviewed by my dissertation committee prior to its publication.

Summary

Chapter three explained the methodology used to document the experiences of five African American women during their ascension to senior academic leadership roles in higher education. Participants in this study were recruited from the Midwestern U.S. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Incorporating Hycner’s (1985) guidelines for the phenomenological analysis of interview data allowed me to be more cognizant of the number of things to consider in analyzing the interviews. Finally, to ensure reliability and validity, participants of the study were provided with electronic copies of their interviews, and they were invited to verify and edit their transcripts, if needed. In addition, the dissertation committee reviewed the information in the study, to ensure that the data analysis and discussion were appropriate, and supported the purpose of the study. Chapter four will present the findings of this study.
Chapter IV: Findings

The purpose of this research study was to document the personal and professional experiences of five African American women during their ascension to senior academic leadership roles in higher education institutions. Exploring African American women who have successfully achieved pinnacle leadership can help contribute to the limited body of scholarship regarding the experiences of African American women and their ascension to leadership roles in the academy. In addition, this research can help to inform, motivate and cultivate the career progression of African American women who aspire to become senior-level administrators and encourage institutional leaders to focus on intentional strategies to enhance African American women’s representation in senior academic leadership positions at colleges and universities.

Merriam (2009) stated that researchers who employ a qualitative study are interested in understanding how people interpret their feelings, make sense of their worlds, and perceive the experiences which have occurred in their lives (p.23). Bevan (2014) further asserted that phenomenology is undertaken when a researcher “is interested in describing a person’s experience in the way he or she experiences it, and not from some theoretical standpoint” (p.136). Utilizing a phenomenological approach, the researcher documented the personal and professional experiences of five African American females who currently serve as senior academic administrators at four-year institutions in the Midwestern U.S.

Participants

According to Bevan (2014), the goal of a phenomenological researcher is to uncover the essence of the lived experiences of participants, and this is achieved by
structuring the interview in a way that facilitates a holistic investigation of the phenomena. Seidman (2006) pointed out the importance of the researcher allowing participants time to reflect on personal accounts of their life history as they experienced the events, in their own words, and based on a timeline regarded as being significant to them. According to Seidman (2006), this establishes a context for the interview questions that follow. The next section provides a description of the participants in this study.

**Description of Participants**

The five African American women who participated in this research study are senior-level administrators at postsecondary institutions in the Midwestern U.S. For purposes of this study, the following pseudonyms were assigned: Dr. Linda, Mrs. Tracey, Dr. Christina, Dr. Cheryl, and Mrs. Lisa. Three of the five participants have doctoral degrees, and two have master's degrees. One of the participants is currently pursuing her doctoral degree. The age ranges of participants were between 44-55 years of age with an average age of 47. All participants have been in senior-level administrative roles for less than five years. Three of the participants have been in their leadership roles for one year. One participant has been in her role for two years, and one participant has been in her position for three years.

In addition, four of the participants have spent most of their careers in various roles in higher education. One of the four participants has also had experience working in a corporate environment. One participant’s career path includes K-12, corporate, and higher education. With regard to ascending to senior-level leadership roles in higher education, three of the participants shared that they were not seeking
senior administrative positions. The opportunities were presented to them because of
the work they were doing and the previous work they had done in their institutions, or
they were encouraged to apply for senior-level leadership once the position became
available. Two of the participants felt they had achieved a level of success in their
professional careers, and senior academic administration was the logical next step in
pursuit of advancement in the academy. Three of the participants achieved senior-
level leadership roles within their current institutions, and two of the participants left
their former institutions and obtained senior-level leadership positions elsewhere.

Table 1 presents a description of participants. Pseudonyms were used to protect
their identities. In addition, since there are a limited number of African American
female senior academic administrators in the Midwestern U.S. and two of the
participants helped to create their current titles, only academic administrative titles
were provided in the table below.

Table 1. Description of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Current Position</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th># of years in higher education</th>
<th># of years in current senior administrative role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Linda</td>
<td>Dean of a large private institution</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Tracey</td>
<td>Associate Vice President/Senior Director of a large private institution</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Christina</td>
<td>Associate Provost/Executive Director of a public institution</td>
<td>EdD</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Cheryl</td>
<td>Dean of a large public institution</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Lisa</td>
<td>Dean of a large public institution</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Questions

Because the intent of this study was to document rich, detailed accounts of the experiences of five African American women and their ascension to senior academic leadership positions in higher education institutions, the following research question guided this study: What are the personal and professional experiences of African American women during their ascension to senior academic leadership positions in higher education institutions? Three related questions included:

1. In what ways did the personal and professional experiences of African American women during their transition to senior academic administration contribute to their success as a leader?

2. What strategies do African American women employ in order to be successful during their ascension to senior academic leadership positions?

3. What does the role of senior academic leader mean to African American women, and to the academy, as we know it?

The interview questions in this study were narrow in focus and designed to elicit descriptive responses regarding the experiences of five African American female senior-level administrators and their ascension to leadership roles in higher education institutions. In addition, the interview questions aligned with the research questions, and, although there were some differences in regards to participants’ experiences during their ascension, nine common themes among the participants were revealed. It is important to note that the themes, which emerged from the data, represent the unique experiences of the five African American women who participated in this study. As mentioned earlier, previous research studies tend to group African American women and Caucasian women
together, making it difficult to understand the distinct encounters of African American women (Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015; Stefanco, 2014; Taylor & Stein, 2014). African American women hold unique perspectives of their own experiences (Collins, 2000) as presented in the narratives shared by participants in this study. The next section will present the findings of the study.

**Findings of the Study**

**Research Question 1: Themes**

The first research question was, “In what ways did the personal and professional experiences of African American women during their transition to senior academic administration contribute to their success as a leader?” Research question one sought to identify the personal and professional experiences as described by the five African American women in this study, which helped to shape their lives early on, and along their trajectory to senior-level leadership roles in higher education institutions. Participants in this study attributed self-confidence, a support network, and risk taking as three factors contributing to their success during their transition to senior-level leadership roles in the academy.

**Theme 1: Self-confidence.** One predominant theme that emerged from the interview data was self-confidence. Self-confidence refers to the way in which the participants in this study perceived themselves as individuals based on situations and life experiences that have helped to frame their self-perception. The participants in this study had already well-established self-confidence, and the belief in their abilities to obtain a senior-level leadership position and to be a successful leader. Throughout the interviews, participants displayed positive self-authorship and authenticity. Analysis of the data also
revealed that these women were cognizant of the benefits of building their self-confidence early on, investing in themselves and finding their voices in order to achieve success as a leader. One of the participants expressed the importance of being confident about who you are as an individual. She noted:

I am who I am. I am unapologetic about who I am and where I came from. I think outside the box, and if I want to do something, I see myself in it, and I believe I can do it. (Dr. Christina, personal communication, November 16, 2017)

Another participant stated:

I am a transparent person and I speak my mind. I say what I mean, and I say what I think, sometimes to a fault. But I am open and I tell people what I believe. And so you will always know what I am thinking, in fact, even if I do not want you to know what I am thinking. Most of our faculty say they can read my face, and so you know it is pretty clear what I am thinking. (Dr. Linda, personal communication, October 23, 2017)

Mrs. Tracey, who has spent much of her career in higher education, discussed the importance of realizing what her superpowers were. She explained that once she embraced her superpowers, she began to work from that space. Mrs. Tracey emphasized that you must have confidence when you are working amongst the elitist. She stated:

Higher education is very elitist and being the only person of color, the only person who is as young as you are, and the only person who really did not have the journey through higher education that many others had; I was on the fast track going through the whole ascension process within higher education. Sometimes that can hold you back, but you have to be confident enough to realize that is your
superpower. I do not let what others think or say distract me from showing up 100%. I am a believer, so I know that God has placed me in this space, to work from this space, and it is okay to be in this space. Sometimes as women of color, we are afraid to go to the table because of some of the things we think people might think. I do not care what you think, because I am here to get a job done. You get the best hours of my day; I am awake, I am functioning and I am here more than I am at home, so we have to figure out a culture that we can all show up in. (personal communication, October 24, 2017)

Dr. Cheryl recalled from her adolescence into her teenage years and even early 20s, planting seeds of confidence about one day becoming a senior administrator. She said:

I can remember writing my goals and dreams down, and then I would post them periodically. They included university president, travel, etc. Planting those seeds of what was to become, and I am now on that trajectory. I can even remember very early on when I use to play principal during the summer. I must have been nine and my siblings who were much younger than I was, we would play principal during the summer and mimic my former principal. I had positive images of her. So there are moments from early on in my life that I think about, and reflect upon, when I started to plant seeds about going into administration. (personal communication, December 22, 2017)

Mrs. Lisa discussed being able to project your ideas and perspectives with confidence and understanding the opportunities that you have to impact change. She shared, “I pursue positions where I do have authority and decision making authority and then I use that to
try and do the best job I can on behalf of my department, my students, my faculty, and staff” (personal communication, January 4, 2018).

All participants emphasized the importance of being comfortable with who you are as an individual. The data also revealed that having a strong support network was a contributing factor to the success of these women during their ascension to senior administration.

**Theme 2: Support network.** Support network refers to those individuals who these five African American females have identified as being instrumental influences in their lives. They include family, mentors, colleagues, and friends who have helped these women to navigate through obstacles, shared their life experiences and knowledge, kept them accountable, and provided emotional support and encouragement, contributing to their aspirations, preparation and success during their ascension to senior administration. Two of the participants credited their dads as being instrumental influences in their lives. One participant reminisced about being a kid, and going to work with her dad. She recalled:

> My dad was in marketing and we used to do fun things like go to focus groups and sit behind the glass and listen to the moderator talk to the focus group members. We would sit and eat chips, and it was always fun…I always enjoyed that. And my dad took a lot of trips; he would travel and I thought this is a nice life and I want this life. You make good money, you enjoy your job, and you get to have fun. My dad has always been influential. (Dr. Linda, personal communication, October 23, 2017)

Mrs. Tracey offered:
My father has always been such an inspiration because he had physical disabilities and being his daughter, seeing the challenges, and watching him overcome those challenges… Had it not been for the transparency and the conversations, and watching him push some of his assignments away because he could not physically do all that. I learned so much through him just showing up, because even as a little kid in K through 12th grade, witnessing his journey, and then putting the pieces together as I got older and realizing I’m on the same journey. He was president of a teacher’s union, had his own business while he was teaching, toured and traveled all over the world, and literally, my life mirrors his in so many ways. As a little kid, he would pull me along and take me on these meetings with him and he would have me sit at the table and do my homework, but I had to also help pass out papers, and the agenda to those who were in attendance. Today, I sit back and I am like, here I am at a similar table. And I talked about his physical disability, how it started off as a mild limp and everybody thought it was cool…but all the way to the point of his transition, his mind was so sharp. So it has always empowered me to know that as long as my mind is being fed, it does not matter what is going on, what is not in place, or who is not on board…I am powerful. (personal communication, October 24, 2017)

One of the participants discussed the admiration she had for her grandmother. Her mother passed when she was seven, so her grandmother has been her backbone, instilling in her the importance of education, not only through words, but also by being an example. Without hesitation, she stated:
Number one, my grandmother. My grandmother who had a high school diploma, and worked as a CNA for a while. She later went back to school when I was in the seventh grade because she desired to become an RN. I remember helping her with some different things while she was in school. She eventually became an RN and DON of a nursing home. I would definitely say, my grandmother, because she was that person who really instilled in me that education was a way to move forward and change the trajectory, and if you stay in school; she never allowed us to miss a day…but if you stay in school, there are benefits to being educated. My grandmother endured the Civil Rights Movement, and she shared many stories with us about that era, and how you can rise to the top despite the obstacles. She taught us how to be an advocate for the things we want, how to be fearless, seek guidance, and above all else, she taught us how to pray for all things. (Dr. Christina, personal communication, November 16, 2017)

Several of the participants mentioned mentors who served as a great source of encouragement, provided guidance along their journeys and kept them accountable. Dr. Cheryl explained:

I’ve always been blessed to have people come into my life for particular reasons and they come in all shades, in all contexts. When least expected, or did not expect that this person could serve as a mentor to me. And people recognize, and it is reciprocal because I believe in being of goodwill and service to others. I am blessed that it is reciprocated to me. I operate from the mindset there is more than enough to go around, and because of that, I extend myself to being a mentor to others, creating opportunities for others, and that has been extended to me. Some
people, less expected had faith in me, early on including one of my former colleagues at another institution where I was assistant professor, and she was a faculty member. She is now a dean at a different institution, and continues to be very instrumental, serves as a mentor to me. My former dean who hired me at another institution, a white male, age 65, I’ve learned so much from him, and he has turned out to be a mentor. My colleagues of same race, same gender, and have diverse backgrounds, that’s also a group of network. Another former dean, who served as a reference for me when I applied here, he has been a mentor as well, in fact, we still keep in contact. (personal communication, December 22, 2017)

One participant pointed out:

Over the years, there have been a lot of people who have influenced me. I cannot point to any one particular person that has been more influential than others. I have had a huge network of people that have supported me along the way. There is one person I used to work for when I was in grad school, he was the COO, and a really good mentor to me. He was really instrumental in helping me move forward, and giving me advice about which direction I should or should not go, as far as my career. Even now, a former dean of another institution, he continues to serve as a mentor. In fact, we are having lunch in a couple of weeks; we periodically have lunch, and he’s a great person to brainstorm ideas with. You know, what do you think about this? I have so many people that I call upon. (Dr. Linda, personal communication, October 23, 2017)

When discussing the importance of mentors during her trajectory to senior-level leadership, Mrs. Tracey expressed herself in the following manner:
Over the years, as I have evolved in my career, I understood the importance of mentorship, and that is what I am focusing on in my dissertation and how it really does have impact on your development and your ascension. For me, when I communicate the importance of mentorship, my formula is always, at all times have three; one, same gender, one from a different culture, nationality, and one from the opposite sex. What they pour into you…each of them is so critical, and it is so different. My father is still mentoring me, even in his physical absence. My male mentor who used to work at this institution, and who has been around since my dad ascended, I did not reach out to him, he reached out to me. He reached out to me because he saw my fast movement within the institution, so he was curious. And when I asked people about him, they were like, “You don’t know who he is?” No, I don’t. And I didn’t at the time. But he was amazed at my wisdom, and my level of esteem. He even said to me, “You know I watched you before I reached out to see some of the things that you were involved in.” So this male, who would become my mentor we started meeting literally five months after I started here, and he has gone on to do some amazing things, but we are still in contact. But this man, just like my father pushed me so much, that at one point I had to push back because I was not mentally ready. Looking back, I was skill set ready, but my mind wasn’t ready yet. But having both push me; my father, and male mentor because that was the level of confidence they had in me... I remember one week after I started in this current role, my male mentor called me and said, “Congratulations, you’re ready. Now here’s what I need you to do. Go in. Find the low hanging fruit, grab it and make it magnificent. And I need you to
start right now positioning yourself to be in the company of those where you see yourself going next.” He also said, “Work your role, cap it at three, and then find your next.” So my male mentor gave me a plan. The female mentors in my circle did not give me a plan. They talked to me about how to show up, and make sure I’m presenting my best self. But my male mentor gave me a strategy. That allowed me to understand, wow, look at this gender difference of mindset. (personal communication, October 24, 2017)

Another participant indicated:

My godmother who is also my mentor has really been encouraging to me. She is my gift from high school. I never had her for a class, but I met her in the hallway, and she has been with me now for 30 years. She became an extended member of our family, and she stepped in and kind of took the place of where my mother would have been if she were here. She reinforced the importance of education, and demonstrated in her role as a high school administration, now retired. She supported me throughout my journey. (Dr. Christina, personal communication, November 16, 2017)

As one participant reviewed those who were supportive to her during her transition to senior administration, she stated:

I had a few people that have been really supportive and encouraging. Suggesting leadership training programs that provide good foundation and preparation, and sending me jobs, saying, “Hey, you should really apply for this.” Keeping me in mind, and then serving as a reference when I did pursue positions. (Mrs. Lisa, personal communication, January 4, 2018)
Participants described others who played a significant role in their success, such as other family members, and friends. Dr. Christina volunteered:

My three younger cousins that I raised who were my kids. They were supportive of my journey but they were also my motivation because I felt as though I had to live a life that would show them that they could play the cards that they were dealt, and then they could also live and beat the odds. (personal communication, November 16, 2017)

Dr. Linda added:

I have a network of friends and we don’t talk about work. They are very supportive, we hang out, relax and unwind. I love to play tennis, and I have a group of core friends that I play tennis with. And I have some girlfriends, one of my close friends just finished her radiation therapy for cancer, so she’s celebrating that, and we’re doing a girls’ trip. So, fun stuff, things that keep you grounded and keep you safe. (personal communication, October 23, 2017)

The participants in this study demonstrated unwavering self-confidence and determination. The data revealed that these women understood the value of a strong support network and how tapping into their network of family, friends, mentors, and colleagues contributed to their success before and during their trajectory to senior administrative roles. The data also revealed that these African American female senior-level administrators were intrinsically motivated to succeed and inspired by their intellectual curiosity to take risks.

**Theme 3: Risk taking.** Risk taking refers to the actions that these women engaged in during their transition to senior administration, which could have yielded
negative consequences, but ultimately contributed to their success. All the participants were adamant about the importance of taking risks and pursuing opportunities that otherwise might not have occurred if they had not taken a chance. Mrs. Lisa discussed the unique challenges of being a woman and the primary caretaker of children while having a career. She noted how she took risks in order to achieve work-life balance:

I was a department chair for three years, and the people at the next level of dean were all planning to stay for a long time, and it didn’t seem like anything was going to change. But I also had kids and I didn’t want to take them out of school, so I set a 90-mile radius around my home and applied for positions within that range. So I left my institution, went to another institution, and stayed there for three years, and that was really starting to take a toll on my family because I was doing a lot of commuting. So, I’m here now as dean, and it’s a good foundation, and a good place to be in my career, but it also meets the needs of my family.

(personal communication, January 4, 2018)

Similarly, Dr. Cheryl progressed to her current role of dean by moving to a different institution. She has lived in several states in the U.S. and is not intimidated by new challenges; in fact, she sees the opportunities in them. She stated, “Be comfortable in your knowledge, be comfortable in who you are and be willing to step outside of the box and take risks” (personal communication, December 22, 2017).

Mrs. Tracey recalled joining her institution 15 years ago as an entry-level clerk with no degree. She explained how she risked leaving a well-paying job in pursuit of her goals:

I moved here from a different state because I knew I needed to go back to school. I was in the communications field prior to coming here, so I took a drastic pay
cut, but I knew I was focused on getting my degree. I came here, started working, and applied for school right after my first couple of months of working in this entry level role. What was interesting is that I had started school straight out of high school in the early 90s and went to school for one semester; registered for that spring semester but never attended classes. Back then, not being aware that you needed to drop or withdraw from classes. So what happened is I get F’s in all those courses and it didn’t register with me until I attempted to register as a student or go through the admission process here and I had to request my transcript from my first university. They denied me admission here. I said, okay, what can I do to be considered because that was really the reason for me saying yes to the job offer. At that time, I went from $40,000, and again we’re talking 2001, 2002. So I went from $40,000 to like $18,500, but I learned so much and I became so disciplined, because I took that risk…the gamble. So I end up being advised by the admissions director on what I needed to do in order to be re-evaluated for admission. I did what I needed to do, and eventually I was admitted on probationary status, and able to take one class. So I really started from scratch. But I said, okay, I have to go with this opportunity; took a class at a time for about a year while working my entry-level job here. At the time, I was also working on a radio show, part time as well as a producer and on air talent at the same time. So part of my, I would say success in ascension throughout my career has not been solely because of the great things I've done within this institution that I’m currently employed in now as a senior-level administrator. I know for a fact it’s because I've always fed two baskets. (personal communication, October 24, 2017)
Another participant discussed the risks she took when she entered into higher education with a social work background. She remembered having to prove herself when she first arrived in the academy:

I’m truly a person who started from the bottom, and worked my way up, and I had to prove myself, which really wasn’t a hard task, when you have a passion for what you do. So I wasn’t afraid of moving up, and taking risks, because I really let my passion for students and being fearless at the table about advocating for what students needed and what changes needed to happen. Some people are resistant to change because they are accustomed to doing things the same way, and they feel like, who are you to come in here and change it. But you have to let your intuition and your personal mission drive your decisions. (Dr. Christina, personal communication, November 16, 2017)

Dr. Linda (personal communication, October 23, 2017) remembered working long hours early on in her career, and having to take risks and change jobs in order to pursue a career path that was suitable for her. Along her journey, she had to relocate several times, transition into new positions, and endure the loss of employment due to job closure, but her drive to succeed fueled her to push past moments of uncertainty, and because of her resilience, she was able to obtain a senior academic leadership position in academe.

The data collected in this study provided evidence that these women were naturally ambitious and grounded in their beliefs to succeed. The data also revealed that self-confidence, a support network, and risk taking were the three primary themes that addressed the first research question.
Research Question 2: Themes

The second research question was, “What strategies do African American women employ in order to be successful during their ascension to senior academic leadership positions?” Research question two sought to explore the strategies and tactics that the five African American women in this study utilized in order to be successful during their ascension to senior academic leadership positions. The three themes that emerged from the interview data to address this research question included building relationships, raising your hand for stretch assignments, and advice for aspiring African American female senior-level leaders.

Theme 4: Building relationships. All of the participants stressed the importance of cultivating and maintaining professional relationships. The data revealed that finding allies and building alliances was a contributing factor to the success of these women during their ascension to senior administration. Dr. Linda thoughtfully explained:

One of the main advantages during my ascension to senior academic leadership was that people knew me, and people supported me because I built those relationships. I am a known quantity. So when the provost talked to faculty about the faculty candidates, you know, overwhelmingly our faculty wanted and supported me as being the dean, so that was a good feeling knowing that I had the support of faculty, I had the support of staff, and ultimately the support of our administration. Even in my current role as dean, for example, there are a lot of deans who don't have a lot of direct connection with the faculty. I am probably different in the sense that I do. I like walking around the halls, I stop in people's offices and I say hello, and good morning, how are you? I just saw someone, I
told you I went out to my car and one of our faculty members was out there sitting outside and you know I was like, hello, how are you? Do you still have that cold? Are you feeling better? Because last week he was sick. I try to know about all of the faculty, what's going on with their lives and I know their family members. Those things are important, when I need to get things done and I need their support, they need to know that I care about them as people that it's not just about you know, getting something done. (personal communication, October 23, 2017)

Dr. Christina expressed:

What I did is to build my own personal board of directors and it became very important to me to figure out who I could use that could advocate for me when I was not in the room. I had developed a relationship with my alma mater, which I contribute a lot of foundation of creating who I am foundationally, to my experiences that I have on that campus, etc. But I created a relationship with the president of the institution and unbeknownst to me, he was an advocate for me when I wasn't in the room. When he would see my president at meetings, he was advocating for me when I wasn't in the room to the point where my president was like, “Are you paying these people for endorsements they're always asking me about you?” That's the type of relationship you want to develop, when people can speak about you and you didn't even ask them to or when you're not even in the room. (personal communication, November 16, 2017)

Another participant affirmed the importance of relationships, and stated, “So for me it's been about relationship authenticity that created opportunities for folks to be a blessing in
my life, and for me to learn and also extend that to others” (Dr. Cheryl, personal communication, December 22, 2017).

Still another participant discussed the love that she has always had for her work in the academy, building relationships with students, and helping them to succeed. She said, “I love the work that I do. I love creating opportunities for young people, I love figuring out how to lift our vision and aspirations for the educational enterprise to the higher level” (Mrs. Lisa, personal communication, January 4, 2018).

Mrs. Tracey discussed how developing key relationships has been instrumental to her success before and during her ascension to senior administration. She acknowledged that she did not seek out her current position, but because of the relationships that she has nurtured, and sustained, the position found her. When it comes to working in higher education, she added:

So I tell everybody, yes, it is work, it takes grit. So it's not for everybody, it's not and that's okay. But there are many people who want it and want a shot, but part of that is, what I have found is that you have to build a brand for yourself, where people feel trusted. I think sometimes those who are not of color who are in these decision making spaces, they don't have opportunities to even build relationships with us. So if you don't have those relationships then they're never on your radar. So you have to find ways of building relationships. (personal communication, October 24, 2017)

The data revealed that these women were cognizant of the power of relationships early on, and were able to cultivate and leverage a network of relationships during their ascension process. Data further revealed that a strategy employed by two of the
participants during their ascension to senior administration was to accept stretch assignments.

**Theme 5: Raising your hand for stretch assignments.** Stretch assignments refers to the additional tasks or projects that these African American women accepted in order to enhance their knowledge, skills, and develop their professional comfort zone. Two of the five participants noted the importance of raising your hand for stretch assignments. These two participants were not pursuing senior-level leadership roles but based on their increased visibility and high-level work performance, they were recognized by their institutional leaders, which increased their advancement potential. Dr. Christina enthusiastically explained how an initial nine-month assignment was the beginning of her unexpected ascension journey in higher education. She shared:

I stumbled into higher education as part of a grant funded program, and I was only supposed to be here nine months, and it’s been seven years, going on eight. I started in higher education as a part time project coordinator and that was in 2010. So I worked on a grant funded program, but then I started doing some other things. I started teaching first year students, and then I took an interest in sitting on the disciplinary review committee, scholarships community and just different things that were happening in the institution that were of a personal interest to me, as well as in alignment with my personal mission and what I wanted to do for young people. Shortly after, our grant funding ended after several cycles of being renewed and I went home for one week but I was called back to come and help with our STEM students and so I worked as a retention coordinator for our STEM students in our STEM programming, which was a grant funded program that we
I did that for about a year. But thinking back, even working part-time, I was full-time because of my therapy background, and I was often times here in the evenings doing more than what was in my job description. I started providing counseling and therapy to students, and helping to resolve issues like roommate spats, friend spats or relationship issues and those type of things. And so after that, that's what kind of prompted me to say, hey, I can do this for the next 20 years. I really wanted to get to the table to be able to implement changes that I saw that really needed to happen. I often joke that in higher education if you don't have alphabet soup behind your name, no one really listens to you. And so I made a commitment to go back to school and get my doctorate. At the time, I had five students that I worked with as a group of peer educators, and I contribute me going back to school to them. So I told them, I'm going back to school, and getting this doctorate because of you. If I can do it, you can too. So right as I was completing my degree, we received a new president and I started to pitch a proposal to him about the things that I saw from a three dimensional perspective. One was having worked on the student affairs side, the other one was having worked on the academic affairs side, but more importantly I raised my two nieces and my nephew, who all three now are college graduates. But at the time they were students, and two of them have matriculated through this institution, and so I had a programming perspective, too. So I pitched a proposal to him about some things that needed to be changed and I was fortunate and blessed enough for him to say, “Hey, I reviewed your proposal and would like to bring you on so that you
can implement it.” So that's my story of stumbling into higher education.

(personal communication, November 16, 2017)

Mrs. Tracey reflected on her 15-year career at her current institution. She recalled how it all began:

So I'm now working full-time during the day, doing school full-time between evenings and weekends. And with that I begin to volunteer for a couple things outside of the university and within the university because if you don't raise your hand for stretch assignments, meaning stuff you didn't get hired for, individuals don't know who you are and your personal brand is not known to individuals who can help you advance within your institution or even outside of it. It’s always this dual role that we're playing and I believe you have to not play the game, but you have to learn to leverage the game on both sides internally and externally. So I raised my hand for a stretch assignment and volunteered for things within my institution. I recall my first time going to a meeting for one of the leaders in the institution, and I heard her having a conversation with a group, and I just happened to be in the space and I said let me know how I can help. And she said, “I'm going to take you up on it.” So she asked me to attend a meeting, told me what my role would be and how I needed to contribute in her stead. Around the same time, I had also applied for a couple of jobs internally. Well one of the individuals who would be hiring was in that meeting. Because I spoke up and contributed based off my knowledge that I had from my current position and how it impacted some of the enrollment at that time and the barriers some of the students were facing to get enrolled because of what was happening in the office,
it peeked their interest. I guess in their minds, I was going to bring something that they didn't know that could help within the Office of Academic Affairs, so I get an interview because I volunteered for something not knowing this was going to happen. I get the job as a coordinator within the Office of Academic Affairs, but because of the experience I was bringing, the role got shifted and I became the liaison for all the directors; helping to support them with processes, procedures and daily operations. Which some things, I didn't even know. But what did I do, I went and said okay, who were key people, and I went and set up time for me to learn these different parts of the system that we were using, different parts of the process when it comes to registration, and dropping classes. So I end up learning all of that, bringing it back to this role and helping our directors, even as they're getting hired. So throughout our whole footprint, then began to offer trainings to different departments even virtually, not knowing I was really not grasping and wrapping my mind around what was going on. I only served in that position for eight months because our vice president of Academic Affairs came and offered me a role to be an academic advisor and assistant director. I was offered this position because of the work that I had already demonstrated. So I accept the role and on my first day, the director leaves due to personal issues and personal matters he needed to take care of. So I learned that not only does this institution have its own undergrad and graduate students, faculty and staff that have to be managed, but it has additional facilities. I had to learn all of that and even hiring to feel some vacancies. I do that for a year as interim and the next year, I’m made permanent director, so doing a little more hiring. I end up having to learn all these
different things, while I'm doing them some simultaneously and again no training, but because of all that past experience, I knew the system. I knew I had a network because I had already built that network throughout the institution in the past two roles. Then I end up doing that and I’m done. I serve as director and the lead for our corporate cohort partnerships. We get new administration here at the institution, a new president, new provost and some other new leadership and they catch wind of all that I'm doing in the community. I get pulled into a meeting and I'm thinking, like, oh my God, what is happening because that year, everything that could go wrong, was going wrong and I'm just a true believer that when there's some turbulence, there's some flight that’s coming behind it, meaning some ascension. So there was so much going on between faculty members, faculty and students, I mean it was just falling apart. So, I'm thinking I'm getting called into a meeting because of these issues. But no, they asked me, “What do you really want to do?” But I had an answer. I know with all my heart, I could have ruined that moment, had I not been prepared nor had receipts to support not only am I ready to do this, but I can do this. So I said, we have some gaps in this institution, when it comes to people of color and underrepresented populations, but also engaging our community. Some of the work that we are doing wouldn't be so difficult if we had some more structure in these places. The meeting lasted like maybe two minutes. From there, I get a call later that week it was just with the president and without going through everything she said, “I have an opportunity that I think you'll like. No, I know you will like.” I end up saying yes to a newly created position, which is my current role. So I helped develop the
position, I helped craft the position. I even sat with our current president to get her to understand how we could not just check a box but we have to be very intentional and that meant that some things would have to be unconventional and uncomfortable. (personal communication, October 24, 2017)

Building relationships and raising your hand for stretch assignments are strategies utilized by the women in this study during their ascension to senior administration.

Another theme that emerged from the interviews in support of research question two was advice for aspiring African American female senior-level leaders.

**Theme 6: Advice for aspiring African American female senior-level leaders.**

Each of the five participants in this study offered candid advice to African American females who aspire to pursue senior academic administrative roles in higher education institutions.

Dr. Linda offered:

Here is what I would say. I think one of the most important things to do is to really know the organization and make sure the organization knows you. For example, when I first started working at this institution in my previous role, I made it my mission to go meet all of the people who would have some type of contact with my students, from admissions, to recruitment, and so forth. It is important for me; I always want to know about organizations. Most of the time, faculty do not go and interact with the recruitment team, they do not go over and meet all of the admissions people. I made sure to find out where they were, and then I would decide, okay, today I’m going to visit this functional area, and introduce myself, and talk to the people who directly interface with my students.
It was a nice thing because, in part, faculty and administrators in general, do not go over and talk to people who are at the front lines, and so the fact that I did that meant something to those people. It is not that I knew all of these people well, but by going over and introducing myself, they knew that I cared about my students. I wanted my students to be successful, and to get through whatever process they have to go through here, in an efficient manner, and certainly, if there is an issue I need to know who to call and I want that person when they pick up the phone to know who I am. I would definitely say that getting to know people is very important because in academia, that is everything. Your faculty who are teaching, your staff supporting that teaching, everything is about people. People run the systems here, so when you want things changed, you cannot change it by yourself, you have to change it through people. (personal communication, October 23, 2017)

Another participant discussed the importance of African American women building their own brand, and finding ways to position themselves in the company of those who are making decisions. She elaborated by recommending that African American women who aspire to become senior-level leaders begin to branch out and get uncomfortable, and not be in those same circles with your sisterhood. She said:

I am not saying forget about them because for us women of color we find that is strength for us and not everybody understands that. But you have to come out of that, and then I have heard that many people will say, but that is playing the game. You have to learn to play the game, no matter where you land. The thing is do you stay playing or do you learn to leverage the game. And back to that mind,
feed that mind. Sign up for those committees, sign up for working groups, figure out what some of those gaps are because remember what I said earlier, we all have a superpower. It is the fact that you are the very voice of those who are not represented, and why are you so passionate about it? Tap into that, because that is where it comes in and then you present to these groups, and sit at these tables I’m sitting at, and don’t be afraid to share your ideas, and thoughts, and you begin to develop relationships. (Mrs. Tracey, personal communication, October 24, 2017)

Dr. Christina added:

Advocate for what you want, and be a solution and not a problem. Think outside the box, and see yourself in it, if that is what you want. I would also say lean into the table, because you have a right to be at the table just like everybody else. I like to consider myself a chameleon, be a chameleon, and what that means is a chameleon is able to adapt to the environment in which they are in, and I’m not saying adapt, but be adaptable. Also, claim your space, and do what you need to do to be your true authentic self, because when you’re authentic, it encourages other people to be authentic. I share with our students here in this space that a lot of times when we’re at different tables we feel like we have to wear a mask or we have to be apologetic about who we are and what that looks like and what our personal mission is. I am very confident in what my mission is. My personal mission is to help young people gain access to education and other opportunities. So it’s important to make sure that you are well aware of what your personal mission is. Once you understand what your personal mission is, regardless of what goes on, what personal attacks come against you, if you had to make that
decision again, you would because that’s what you were supposed to do. (personal communication, November 16, 2017)

Dr. Cheryl’s advice echoed several of the other participants in this study. She shared:

One of the things I would say to aspiring African American female senior administrators is be willing to step out of your comfort zone and be cognizant of who you are. One of the things I said when I was contacted for this position to apply is that I don’t want to move there, I don’t like the cold, although I tend to live in the cold. But I said to the headhunter at the time, you’ve contacted me, I have not responded but I don’t know what God is telling me. I said, God okay, if you want me to be on this journey, fine. I also said to the headhunter, I want you to know the person on the other end of this phone call is a person of color. Is that institution ready for a person of color? I’m comfortable in my skin, but I wanted to know if they were ready for a person of color. She said, “Well the previous dean was a person of color.” I share that with you to say, know who you are because you will be tested in your different roles, and build your faith. My faith is critical to the work that I do. I say to myself lead in love, walk in love, and be in love, because you are dealing with people. When you’re interacting with people, it’s an opportunity to do this work and in part learn from others. So the advice that I would give to others on this journey, be confident in who you are, know your craft, study your craft, and have a strong spiritual foundation. There’s not a position that I’ve gone into, that I have not studied; find a book, mentor, or professional development. (personal communication, December 22, 2017)

A fifth participant concluded:
If your track is academic affairs, I highly recommend that you get to full professor before you begin that pursuit, because it’s really hard to maintain your research agenda as an administrator because it’s just overwhelming. It really helps to get that tenure-track faculty rank before you begin the journey to senior administration. So my advice is try to look at the person who is on a similar path or has a similar position, or background based on where you’re trying to get to, because there’s so many different paths in the academy. But the best way to figure out how to map out your career is to look at what a person on the same path did, look at their career, and credentials. It’s really important to be specific because if you try to map yourself against someone in a whole different area, you could really make a mistake, and waste time and money, because you’re mapping your career against a career path that wasn’t the same as the one you’re trying to stay on. (Mrs. Lisa, personal communication, January 4, 2018)

Data from the interviews provided evidence that these five African American women understood the importance of relationship building and raising their hands for stretch assignments and utilized these strategies in order to cultivate their opportunities during their ascension to senior administration. Data further revealed that building relationships, raising your hand for stretch assignments and advice for aspiring African American female senior-level leaders were the three emergent themes that supported the analysis of research question two.

**Research Question 3: Themes**

The third research question was, “What does the role of senior academic leader mean to African American women, and to the academy, as we know it?” Research
question three sought to understand how these five African American female leaders make meaning of their role and what it means to the academy. A thematic analysis revealed three themes: a push for transformation versus a pull of traditional leadership, our success inspires students to aim higher, and advice for institutional leaders.

**Theme 7: A push for transformation versus a pull of traditional leadership.**

Participants in this study noted the changing landscape of higher education institutions with regard to the shift in student demographics. Several of the participants noted that in order for institutions to align with the change in student demographics and fulfill the promise of educating the “whole student,” a prerequisite must include the presence of African American women in leadership roles in the academy. Dr. Cheryl made the following observations:

> The U.S. is changing, the shift in demographics is here and we have to be responsive to that. We’re still playing catch up with diversifying academe; the diversification is not at the faculty level, so it’s challenging to see at the administrative level. Universities have to be intentional about recruiting diverse faculty, staff, and students, so that there are opportunities for someone to be groomed, to have the experience to matriculate into these leadership roles. So we need our traditional leaders to understand, and to broaden their landscape of being inclusive of diverse populations. (personal communication, December 22, 2017)

Another participant shared:

> If you think about how deans are selected, they are generally going to report to a provost.
Many of your provosts are men and they’re white men. So when they’re selecting individuals, they’re probably more prone to select the individuals who are like them, not because it’s any overt racism or overt discrimination, but it’s just people tend to feel more comfortable with people who look like them. To have an administrative team with no diversity is really not what organizations want to do today. I think when you have situations like that it tends to lead to making decisions that are not always the best decisions. Just look at some of the things that have happened to companies in the corporate world. When you don’t involve diverse populations, you can end up making some crazy decisions. (Dr. Linda, personal communication, October 23, 2017)

A third participant contributed:

I think it starts with the pipeline of African American women getting their terminal degrees, African American women being hired as assistant professors and getting into tenure-track positions. All of that creates the pipeline into senior administration. If we’re not hiring African American women in our faculty positions, then that decreases the pool of applicants who could become tenured professors, and that’s the pool from which we often draw the department chairs, and that’s the pool that we draw the deans, and so forth. I think one of the challenges is that we have low numbers of African American women coming into the academy as academics and faculty members. (Mrs. Lisa, personal communication, January 4, 2018)

Still another participant offered reasons to push for transformation versus a pull of traditional leadership:
In 2050, women of color will be the majority, and by that time, the underrepresented will also be the majority, so data proves that one. If you’re recruiting as a higher education institution, who are you going to have to fill your seats? Not only that, as you have these individuals fill your seats, who’s going to be teaching them? Not to say that it has to be a person of color, but those who are not of color need to understand how to teach the whole classroom and the whole person. Then you have those who are leading who cannot identify with the barriers, concerns, fears and the trauma that individuals who are of color are experiencing sitting in their classroom. Then also the additional barriers and the additional discrimination that they face when they walk across the stage, and graduate from your institution. That gap, we’ve not even tapped into and it’s one that I think is going to spiral if we don’t grab hold of that group that we’re releasing into the world. (Mrs. Tracey, personal communication, October 24, 2017)

Data in the study revealed that these women were encouraged to push for transformation, because their presence in senior administration inspired students to aim high.

**Theme 8: Our success inspires students to aim high.** Three of the African American female leaders in this study explained how their role in the academy encourages students, gives them hope, and teaches them perseverance. Dr. Linda pointed out:

I look at me in this role and being an African American female in particular, and I don’t want to sound full of myself, but it’s inspiring for other students, for
students here. So I’ll go down and talk to our students and our female students will look up, and they say, “Hi.” They want to meet me and talk with me and it’s a nice thing, because they’re like, “Oh my gosh she’s like me,” which I am. I’m like them and they’re like me. If I can do something like this, then whatever their goals are, whatever they’re trying to achieve, they can meet those goals.

Sometimes, I’ll do this talk about choices and the choices that I’ve had to make in my life and how at each path, I could have gone this way and I chose to go this way. I think it’s inspiring and it helps other black women see that there are choices and there are options. I can make these decisions and I can move up. I can do the things I need to do to get it done. (personal communication, October 23, 2017)

As one participant described:

Number one, we’re a reflection of who you are recruiting, whether it’s a PWI, HBCU, MSI, or HIS, it doesn’t matter the type of institution. We bring a lot to the academy. We bring real world practice and real experience. We’ve lived it, and we’ve done it. We bring a different perspective in order to be able to help institutions create new initiatives for those students that they’re attracting and it also provides a sense of commitment from an institutional standpoint. It shows students that we’re committed to them holistically, and we want them to feel comfortable, valued, and safe in the institution. It instills hope in them, that wow there’s someone who looks like me that I can aspire to be. (Dr. Christina, personal communication, November 16, 2017)

Another participant contributed:
African American female senior administrators add value because you get different perspectives, whether it’s African American, Hispanic or other groups of diverse background. It’s more inclusive, it creates an opportunity to strengthen the organization, it’s value added to the organization of having a heterogeneous diverse organization. It makes for a healthy organization, and you benefit, the organization benefits, individuals benefit and it helps us to be able to navigate our interaction in the world. You probably heard this, that at 11 a.m. on Sundays is the most isolated homogenous we are because we all go to our respective churches. That’s not the society…we are increasingly becoming more diverse, how do our organizations reflect that? There’s value added from the talent, the intelligence, the skill sets of individuals, and that’s also the cultural competence. I can’t tell you over the years how many students have said to me, “Oh, you’re the first black female that I’ve had as a professor.” That should not be. I don’t want to be an anomaly. We have to break that tie. I want our young people to see image of success, image of what they can be. It speaks volume when that image exists. They don’t have to imagine it, they can see it. It plants a seed for them of what they can become. I’m certainly standing on the heels of others who have paved the way for me. How do we continue to do that? Pace setters, and be persistent to diversify our institutions. (Dr. Cheryl, personal communication, December 22, 2017)

Data in this study provided evidence that these women pushed for transformation because they understood the significance of their role in shaping students, and inspiring them to be successful.
The final theme that emerged in support of research question three is advice for institutional leaders.

**Theme 9: Advice for institutional leaders.** The five African American female senior administrators in this study offered advice to institutional leaders based on their personal and professional experiences during their ascension to senior administrative roles in higher education institutions. The women in this study also provided recommendations on how to better prepare African American women who aspire to ascend to leadership roles in the academy and explained the importance of doing so. Dr. Linda stated:

I’m the first one here at this institution. The one thing that I would say is make sure that you don’t discount internal candidates, and I think this happens a lot, but you never know what you have in your own neighborhood. Another thing I would say is to support African American women when they go through certain programs, and that does require financial support. (personal communication, October 23, 2017)

A second participant in this study who is also the first and only African American female in her current role shared:

There are all these different spaces in the academy that women of color need to be in, and not only to have an individual that those who are in the classroom can go to, but also who can help people who are at the table making those decisions to better understand the concerns and the issues. I’m a true believer, if it’s not something you have to deal with then it’s not of concern to you because you don’t even realize it’s an issue. That’s been why my role is so important to this
institution. It has allowed me to be a voice to make sure the voice is not muted, to ensure that the needs are not ignored, and to make sure that the wants and desires of those who are of color are included in these discussions. I’m able to make sure that we don’t lose sight and we don’t water down those things because sometimes it happens. I learned my voice has to be in the conversation because if it’s not, we’ll gloss over it or we’ll check the box. Okay, they wanted a program, so here’s the program. It’s bigger than just establishing a program. Everybody needs to come and learn about the program, and not just learn about it, but also be equipped, because you can’t teach what you don’t know, and you can’t lead where you have not been. There’s no way we cannot have women of color in these roles, you do yourself a disservice, and to have only one…we won’t go into that, still yet a disadvantage. We’re a higher education institution, producing leaders. Institutional leaders can also provide opportunities for those who are not just in senior leadership, but all leadership, creating a culture where everyone has access to development, and then that development looks so amazing. There are some who want to progress but there are no opportunities at that level. Here we have a leadership program, and what’s interesting is 16 people from the institution got accepted, and from what I’ve heard only those who are in leadership can participate. So now the conversation is, do we create something different for those who are at a lower level? I don’t think so, because I think we should all be in there together. There should be slots for those in leadership roles, all the way down to entry level, because to me that’s also practicing inclusion, and giving way to diversity, putting all that into action. This would also help with the
ascension process of those who are of color, because if you have an inclusive environment, outcomes would be different. (Mrs. Tracey, personal communication, October 24, 2017)

Similar to Dr. Linda, Dr. Christina discussed the importance of institutions developing their own leaders. She explained that at her institution they have a model where they grow their own:

We are committed to developing leaders, if you are excelling. I’m a prime example of that, going from a part-time person to coming on as an interim person, and as a person who excelled when I was offered additional responsibilities. I definitely believe in providing opportunities for your up and coming leaders, giving them access to leadership programs. It benefits the organization because you already have someone who is familiar with your culture and climate and you don’t have to teach them all the fundamentals because they get it. You’re simply investing in them, grooming them so they can go to the next level. (personal communication, November 16, 2017)

Still another participant emphasized:

I would say one of the things that can be done is institutions develop their pipeline of leaders within where they are. This won’t happen if it’s not intentionally made up of opportunities, whether it’s leadership fellows, whether it’s at the provost, or at the dean levels, creating those opportunities for exposure. Why some people don’t go into it, because they don’t have the opportunities…the opportunity to explore, consequently, it’s difficult to know that these opportunities are available. Institutions also have to be willing in their recruitment efforts to reach out to
broader groups, whether advertising in associations, organizations; talent recruitment and being intentional about that. Also extending the invitation for people to apply, because people will not apply, if we don’t extend the opportunity. (Dr. Cheryl, personal communication, December 22, 2017)

A fifth participant concluded:

My advice would be for senior leaders to pay close attention to hiring practices, make sure that the hiring processes are fair and open so that talented African American women can apply for tenure-track jobs, and not just adjunct positions. Make sure that people are being held accountable for the hiring practices to ensure that the historical traps of nepotism and hiring your friends are not allowed. Also, make sure that in your core values and institutional values that it’s clear that having a diverse workforce is a priority and then making sure that every piece of the hiring process reflects that priority. If you don’t have a diverse pool you’re not going to hire anyone, so someone has to be looking at the pool to say, “You know why is this pool not diverse?” I think leaders have to be engaged in the process, looking at the data and then holding their leaders accountable to reach those goals. (Mrs. Lisa, personal communication, January 4, 2018)

Data analysis in this study revealed that these African American female leaders instilled the courage to push for transformation because their success inspired students to aim higher. Analysis of interview data also revealed that these women are hopeful that their advice to institutional leaders will provide insights on ways to enhance the leadership pipeline for African American women in the academy.
Summary

The narratives shared by the women in this study allowed the researcher to collect rich data that helped to shed light on the experiences of five African American women during their ascension to senior administration. The following research question guided this study: What are the personal and professional experiences of African American women during their ascension to senior academic leadership positions in higher education institutions? Data collection and analysis of data revealed nine themes that aligned with the research questions for this study (See Figure 1). The nine overarching themes were exposed as common phrases, statements, and patterns revealed across the interview data. All five participants noted the importance of having self-confidence, a strong support network and the courage to take risks. In addition, the five participants in this study discussed the value of building positive relationships in the academy. Two participants explained how raising their hands for stretch assignments helped them to gain more visibility and ultimately contributed to their career progression within their institutions. Each participant offered advice to African American women who aspire to pursue senior academic administration. All participants noted the importance of pushing for transformation in the academy versus a pull of traditional leadership. Three participants discussed how their role as an African American female senior administrator inspires students to aim higher. All participants offered candid advice to institutional leaders regarding the necessity of African American women in senior academic leadership positions to support the diverse learning experiences of all students.
Chapter five will present a discussion and summary, recommendations, and conclusions.
Chapter V: Discussion and Summary, Recommendations, and Conclusion

The U.S. population is becoming more diverse in terms of racial and ethnic minorities (Chun & Evans, 2016). It is projected that over the next several decades, white children will become the minority (Chun & Evans, 2016; Colby & Orman, 2015; Frey & Ebrary, 2015). The shift in the U.S. population has already started to impact student demographics on college campuses (Betancur & Livingstone, 2018; Flaherty, 2016). As a result, postsecondary institutions have been responsive to diversifying their student body; however, little progress has been made in the alignment of the leadership to reflect the increasing number of diverse students entering into the academy. Consequently, African American women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions in higher education (Betancur & Livingstone, 2018; Chun & Evans, 2016; Flaherty, 2016).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to document the personal and professional experiences of five African American women during their ascension to senior academic leadership positions at four-year postsecondary institutions in the Midwestern U.S. The impetus to pursue this study was to contribute to the scarcity of literature which has primarily focused on the underrepresentation of African American women in leadership roles, African American women in student affairs administration, barriers to leadership, and the leadership and career development of African American women (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Gamble & Turner, 2015). Furthermore, this research might help to prepare African American women who aspire to become senior-level administrators in the academy. Also, this research might encourage institutional leaders to examine and strengthen their policies and practices with regard to enhancing the representation of African American women in senior-level administration.
Merriam (2009) contended that utilizing an emic perspective allows the researcher to understand the phenomenon of interest from the participants’ perspective (p.14). According to Creswell (2013), phenomenology research is a qualitative approach that can be used to understand the experiences within a particular group based on how they perceive the events which have occurred in their lives. Because this study sought to understand the experiences of five African American women during their transition to senior administration, the researcher integrated a phenomenological approach and employed emic data collection and analysis.

Prior to investigating the experiences of the five African American women in this study, a review of the literature was conducted in order to examine the available research related to this topic. The existing literature on African American women and their trajectory to senior-level administration in the academy was limited (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Evans & Chun, 2015; Gamble & Turner, 2015; Taylor & Stein, 2014). Previous studies have acknowledged the low number of African American women in leadership roles, the slow pace in which African American women progress to leadership, and the absence of African American women’s narratives regarding their experiences during their transition to leadership roles in academia (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Taylor & Stein, 2014; Valverde & Castenell, 1998; Wolverton, Bower, & Hyle, 2009). This research adds to the body of scholarship by offering insights on the experiences of five African American women during their ascension to senior administration in higher education institutions. In addition, the narratives of these five African American women advances the extant literature, by providing rich detailed descriptions of their encounters as they ascended to senior-level leadership roles in the academy.
Previous studies have employed Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Black Feminist Thought (BFT) to examine the experiences of African American women (Chambers, Frierson, & Sharpe, 2011; Grant, 2012; Griffin & Bennett, 2013; Howard-Hamilton, 2003). CRT in education has been defined as “a theoretical framework that challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses” (Yosso, 2005, p.74). CRT has been used in higher education to investigate racial disparities and to help promote awareness of the barriers faced by minority groups in academia (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). The BFT framework is situated around the experiences of African American women and was developed in part because of the inequitable treatment of African American female faculty in the academy (Collins, 2000, Howard-Hamilton, 2003). BFT can be used to understand the challenges and biases African American women face with regard to career advancement in higher education (Davis & Brown, 2017). Both theoretical constructs provide a lens that can be used to examine the experiences of African American women (Grant, 2012; Griffin & Bennett, 2013; Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

For purposes of this study, the researcher utilized cultural competence framework in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the experiences of these African American women during their ascension to senior-level leadership positions in higher education (Chun & Evans, 2012; Chun & Evans, 2016; Cook, 2012; Hurtado & Alvarado, 2015). Several models of cultural competence exist, but the premise of cultural competence is to eliminate disparities by building structures and creating policies that will empower organizations to become more culturally competent (Chun & Evans, 2016; Dreachsln, Gilbert, & Malone, 2013; Smith, 2015). Cultural competence is comprised of
four key components, which are interconnected: awareness, attitude, knowledge and skills. (Chun & Evans, 2012; Chun & Evans, 2016; Sue & Sue, 2008). Culturally competent organizations promote fair and equitable treatment of all its employees, encourage participatory engagement and inclusion, facilitate and sustain a welcoming environment conducive to respect and acceptance, and ensures that the fabric of the organization includes the diverse perspectives of all its employees (Shorter-Gooden, 2013). Cultural competence framework enables institutions to examine the linkages between organizational members working together effectively. Enhancing cultural competence is an ongoing, continuous process that requires the intentional commitment of every member in the organization (Chun & Evans, 2012; Dreachslin, Gilbert, & Malone 2013; Shorter-Gooden, 2013).

The researcher relied on purposeful sampling and snowball sampling in order to locate African American females who were senior academic administrators at a two-year or four-year public or private institution in the Midwestern United States. Five African American females were selected to participate in this study. All five participants met the requirements as outlined in this study, and signed the Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities form. Data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews that were individually conducted, three face-to-face and two through a web-conferencing tool. Eighteen interview questions aligned to support the research questions for this study. Each participant was provided with a copy of their interview to make changes, if necessary. Interview data was analyzed using Hycner’s (1985) guidelines outlined earlier in this study. Data analysis revealed nine themes: (1) self-confidence; (2) support network; (3) risk taking; (4) building relationships; (5) raising your hand
for stretch assignments; (6) advice for aspiring African American female senior-level leaders; (7) a push for transformation versus a pull of traditional leadership; (8) our success inspires students to aim higher; and (9) advice for institutional leaders.

The nine themes derived from the data analysis aligned to support the central research question for this study: What are the personal and professional experiences of African American women during their ascension to senior academic leadership positions in higher education institutions. In addition, the nine themes revealed from the data analysis aligned to support the three related research questions for this study: In what ways did the personal and professional experiences of African American women during their transition to senior academic administration contribute to their success as a leader? What strategies do African American women employ in order to be successful during their ascension to senior academic leadership positions? What does the role of senior academic leader mean to African American women, and to the academy, as we know it?

The five African American women that participated in this study provided rich detailed information about their ascension process, which helped contribute to a better understanding of the personal and professional experiences of African American women during their transition to senior academic leadership positions in the academy.

In what ways did the personal and professional experiences of African American women during their transition to senior academic administration contribute to their success as a leader?

Data revealed that the women in this study demonstrated self-confidence, which proved instrumental to their success as they ascended to leadership roles in the academy.
Participants in this study understood the importance of advocating for themselves, and they were comfortable in their own skin, which allowed them to take risks. Data also revealed that these women relied on a support network including family, friends, mentors, and colleagues to help them thrive professionally, navigate through obstacles, and maintain a healthy balance between their personal and professional lives. Hughes (2009) contended that African American female leaders must be confident in their ability to lead and be able to display levels of competence far greater than their white counterparts. McGowan (2007) asserted the importance of risk taking in the role of a leader. She said:

> Leaders must learn by embracing tough challenges and stretching themselves, by taking risks that have potential consequences for their well-being. Instead of being merely change agents, they accept that they must grow…Key to success in any undertaking is understanding that risk taking is an integral part of leadership.

(p.106)

Austin (2009) noted the importance of having a support network. She stated:

> It’s critical to have two or three people with whom you can have frank conversations or sharing of information. My staff doesn’t need to hear me say I don’t know what we’re going to do. It does not engender confidence. With a peer I trust, I can say, ‘I really don’t know how to do this. Can you give me some ideas?’ And there is no judgment, there is no, ‘How incompetent can you be?’ But, rather there is support and a generating of possible solutions to my problems.

(p.9)
What strategies do African American women employ in order to be successful during their ascension to senior academic leadership positions?

Data derived from the interviews revealed that these five African American women were cognizant of the value of building, cultivating and leveraging relationships in order to be successful during their transition to senior-level leadership roles. Furthermore, data provided evidence that these women understood the importance of stepping outside of their comfort zone and raising their hand for stretch assignments. Three of the participants in this study acknowledged that they did not seek a leadership role, but because of their courageous ability to develop and sustain relationships and their willingness to volunteer for stretch assignments, they were able to advance to senior administration. Data also revealed that these women recognized the value of supporting other African American women who aspire to become senior-level leaders in the academy, and they offered advice. Beckwith, Carter, & Peters (2016) acknowledged the value in African American women pursuing stretch assignments in order to advance their careers. Moore (2017) explained how building relationships helped her to be successful in the academy. She shared:

This pathway might have ended negatively for me had there not been other strengths I could draw upon to help advance my success. I used those strengths to seek exposure and recognition for my research. I expanded my professional networks and developed relationships with colleagues in my subfield who were interested in and valued the type of work I was doing. (p. 202)

Carson (2009) urged aspiring African American female leaders to:
Define the next step and know where you are going. Whether you talk about taking steps or going through doors, to be successful you must know where you are going. Always think of the next door that you are going to open or the next step you are taking; name it and frame it so that it becomes real to you. You have to have a vision. (p. 35)

**What does the role of senior academic leader mean to African American women, and to the academy, as we know it?**

Data from the interviews provided evidence that the women in this study recognized how important it was for students to see a representation of an African American female in a position of authority. Their representation in a senior-level leadership position encouraged students to aim higher. Data also revealed that these women garnered space in the academy and were steadfast in their push for transformation versus a pull of traditional leadership. The five African American women in this study also offered advice to campus leaders regarding the importance of being committed to examining institutional policies, practices and structures in order to enhance the representation of African American women in senior administrative positions. Moses (2009) demonstrated the importance of pushing for transformation versus a pull of traditional leadership and practices. She recalled her role as vice president for academic affairs at California State University. She shared:

It was a unique and tough setting. I immediately saw things we could start doing to create a university that valued inclusion, diversity and excellence. For example, we instituted diversity hiring programs to improve the ethnic and gender mix of the faculty, and we talked about the importance of doing searches as well. It
wasn’t until I started shutting down searches that people took me seriously. I told faculty members from the School of Business that they had to do a better job of bringing in a diverse pool of faculty. A couple of senior faculty didn’t agree and responded with, ‘We’re not going to be on the search committee anymore.’ I said, ‘Fine, I’ll constitute another one.’ And when they saw that I was going to move ahead without them, they changed their minds and stayed on the search committee. (pp. 64-65)

Bensimon (2018) concluded that higher education institutions must revise their hiring practices if they are committed to promoting an inclusive environment and fulfilling the promise to educate the whole student. Madyun, Williams, McGee and Milner (2013) argued that the representation of African American faculty aids students in the enhancement of their intercultural competence. Montgomery and Bradford (2010) agreed that African American female leaders motivate students to aim higher and inspire them to reach beyond their comfort zone in order to achieve their educational goals. Leiter (2018) advised institutional leaders to proactively examine their practices and eliminate structures and policies that perpetuate bias in hiring decisions.

The intent of this study was to document the personal and professional experiences of five African American females who obtained senior-level leadership roles in higher education. The rich, detailed insights of their journeys helped to build better narratives concerning the experiences of African American women during their ascension to senior administration. The next section will present recommendations based on the findings of this study.
Recommendations

This study adds to the body of scholarship by documenting the personal and professional experiences of five African American female senior administrators during their ascension to four-year higher education institutions in the Midwestern U.S. As stated in the preceding chapters of this study, prior research is limited in terms of noting the experiences of African American females during their trajectory to senior academic leadership roles in the academy (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Gamble & Turner, 2015). This research can also benefit aspiring African American female leaders as they prepare for career advancement in academe. Furthermore, this study challenges institutional leaders to review policies, practices and academic structures to ensure they are aligned with the mission, vision, and values pertaining to educating and supporting the diverse student populations, which now comprise college campuses across the nation (Bauer-Wolf, 2018; Bensimon, 2018). Based on the findings of this study, the next three sections will present recommendations for future research, aspiring African American female senior administrators, and institutional leaders.

Future Research

More research is required to understand the personal and professional experiences of African American women during their transition to senior-level administrative roles in the academy. This research focused on five African American women in the Midwestern U.S. To further understand this phenomena, it would be beneficial to repeat this study using a larger sample size and include additional geographic locations in the U.S. As mentioned in an earlier section of this study, one of the limitations was focusing exclusively on African American women. Little is known about the experiences of other
minority groups during their ascension to senior academic leadership roles. Therefore, a phenomenological approach should be used to document the experiences of other minority groups who have obtained leadership roles in academe (Chun & Evans, 2012; Chun & Evans, 2016; Flaherty, 2015; Hurtado & Alvarado, 2015). Additionally, research studies should be conducted to compare the experiences of African American women with those of African American men who ascended to senior academic administration in the academy. Studies should also compare the experiences of African American women at four-year public institutions with those of African American women at four-year private institutions. Also, the experiences of African American women in two-year colleges with those of African American women at four-year institutions. Finally, future studies should compare the unique experiences of African American women and Caucasian women during their ascension to leadership roles in higher education. In previous studies, researchers have discussed the experiences of these women as a single group, making it difficult to gain a clear understanding of their distinct encounters during their transition to senior administration (Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Stefanco, 2014; Taylor & Stein, 2014).

Development of research in these areas is vital for advancing the understanding of the experiences of underrepresented groups in senior administration (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Taylor & Stein, 2014).

**Aspiring African American Female Senior Administrators**

Aspiring African American female senior administrators need to understand the type of institution they want to lead. The campus culture of a PWI is different from the campus environment of an HBCU. The requirements for becoming a dean at a two-year
college are different from the requirements of becoming a dean at a four-year university (García, 2009). Furthermore, aspirants should educate themselves on institutional polices, practices, and leadership infrastructure. García (2009) acknowledged that the characteristics of institutions are different and urged new leaders to become acquainted with the campus environment prior to making any changes.

Aspiring African American female senior administrators should develop a plan on how they will advance to senior-level leadership. They can create a vision board that includes short-term and long-term goals, establish frequent checkpoints, and record milestones. This will enable them to keep track of their progress, establish measurable and realistic objectives, timelines, and identify additional skills or knowledge required in order to obtain a senior-level leadership role. Carson (2009) discussed the importance of aspirants knowing where they are going and creating a visible path towards leadership. Mrs. Lisa (personal communication, January 4, 2018) also recommended that aspiring African American women map out their career trajectory to ensure that they travel down the right path.

Aspiring African American female leaders should refine their skill set by volunteering and/or accepting additional work assignments in order to enhance their professional experience, demonstrate interest in pursuing a leadership role and gain visibility among institutional leaders. Three participants in this study did not seek senior-level administration, but because of their willingness to accept stretch assignments, they increased their visibility among institutional leaders and were selected for their current role or were encouraged to apply for senior administration.
Aspirants should speak up and request access to professional development opportunities. They should also develop and sustain relationships in academe and become members of higher education associations, as they can benefit from new perspectives and strategies, find a mentor, and build an external network of allies who can provide support for them as they navigate towards senior-level leadership.

**Institutional Leaders**

As the U.S. population becomes more diverse, higher education institutions across the nation will likely see an increase of students from diverse cultures and backgrounds (Betancur & Livingstone, 2018; Frey, 2012). Institutional leaders should be proactive and intentional in creating, promoting, and sustaining a campus environment supportive of the students’ holistic learning experiences (Chun & Evans, 2012; Chun & Evans, 2016; Shorter-Gooden, 2013). Higher education institutions play a crucial role in preparing students to become culturally competent citizens (Chun & Evans, 2012; Shorter-Gooden, 2013). To ensure that students are well-prepared to navigate in a diverse workforce, institutions should be cognizant of the extent to which their institutional infrastructure yields equitable contributions from all represented groups (Chun & Evans, 2012; Chun & Evans, 2016).

In order to establish a genuinely inclusive campus environment, cultural competence practices should be adopted as an ongoing, iterative process that permeates throughout the entire institution. If implemented appropriately, cultural competence will enable individuals to recognize, accept, and respect how their cultures differ from and are similar to other groups, but it requires that all individuals be committed to becoming
more culturally competent and value diversity (Chun & Evans, 2012; Chun & Evans, 2016; Shorter-Gooden, 2013).

In addition, institutional leaders should be committed to implementing policies and practices that facilitate access to every member in the academy (Chun & Evans, 2016; Shorter-Gooden, 2013). Campus leaders could use the cultural competence framework to examine institutional policies to ensure that they adhere to culturally responsive and inclusive practices. Hiring practices should be consistently examined, and search committee members should be culturally competent and understand the importance of designing a search process that enriches the institution’s mission, values, and capacity for equity.

Professional development opportunities should also be provided for African American women who are in leadership roles and for aspiring African American female leaders. Furthermore, for aspirants who demonstrate their readiness to lead, they should be guided, supported, and encouraged to ascend to the next level in the academy. Aspiring African American female leaders should also be paired with a mentor, and once they ascend to the next level, they should be encouraged to become mentors. In addition, institutional leaders should make concerted efforts to advance individuals from inside the institution.

**Researcher’s Reflection on the Study**

My perception of the experiences of African American women and their ascension to senior academic leadership positions in higher education institutions has somewhat evolved, as a result of this study. Prior to conducting this study, I believed that most African American women who pursued senior academic administrative roles in
academe would have to navigate the intertwined barriers, particularly in relation to race and gender. However, the African American women in this study possessed unwavering self-confidence, resilience, and courage in order to negate the oppressive practices that have historically been part of African American women’s professional experiences.

The women I interviewed discussed some of the challenges they endured, sacrifices they made, and the risks they took to achieve their professional stature in the academy. Because these women believed in themselves early on, they accepted the role of senior administrator with grace, and preparedness to lead. Two of the participants spoke of their willingness to reach outside of their professional comfort zone, and this resulted in the ability of others to recognize, support and develop the talents of these two African American women. Accepting stretch assignments allowed these women to strengthen their relationships and enhance their visibility in their institutions, which ultimately contributed to their career progression.

I also assumed that all of the participants in this study ascended from the ranks of the tenure-track faculty since traditionally senior administrators are selected from this pool. However, the two participants who raised their hands for stretch assignments were not faculty members in their respective institutions: they were staff members. These two African American women have proven that there is not a one size fits all approach to reaching success and achieving your goals. They had their feet firmly planted on the ground and both of these women had already accomplished so much because of their eagerness to expand their knowledge and skills. As a result, they were able to leverage and enhance their leadership potential.
The stories shared by these five African American women helped me to understand that it is the experience of being an African American female that forms character, consistency, and determination. The participants were authentic when discussing their journeys and unapologetic about their role as senior academic administrator. Several of the participants explained how their role has allowed them to be a voice for minority students when making decisions, policies and establishing programs. These women have created a space in their respective institutions to lead the charge of educating all students, and they refuse to be paralyzed or defined by how they are seen.

As an aspiring African American female senior administrator, the stories shared by these five amazing women inspired me. This research study allowed me to understand how the personal and professional experiences of these women have helped to shape them as senior academic leaders. These women have demonstrated agility in transforming barriers into opportunities, and they have been successful. As I think of these women, and their journeys, I am reminded of one of my favorite poems:

*Out of the huts of history’s shame I rise*
*Up from a past that’s rooted in pain I rise*
*I’m a black ocean, leaping and wide,*
*Welling and swelling I bear the tide.*

*Leaving behind nights of terror and fear I rise*
*Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear I rise*
*Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,*
*I am the dream and the hope of the slave.*
*I rise, I rise, I rise.*

~Dr. Maya Angelou, 1978: Still I Rise

The five African American women in this study have demonstrated that they don’t need validation from anyone to use their voices to make a difference in the
academy. They embrace their uniqueness and rise to the occasion as change agents, and in spite of the obstacles…still they rise.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this research study was to document the experiences of five African American women and their ascension to senior academic leadership positions in higher education institutions. This study made it possible to understand the phenomena of African American women’s experiences as they ascended to senior administration. By documenting the experiences of five African American females who obtained a senior-level leadership role, aspirants can better prepare for senior-level leadership in academe. In addition, institutional leaders can ensure that their policies and hierarchical structure are supportive of the growth and contribution of all its members. Furthermore, institutional leaders have the right and the responsibility to ensure that no one is unseen, all voices are heard, and everyone is inspired.
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APPENDIX A

IRB Approval Form

Office of Research Administration

One University Boulevard
St. Louis, Missouri 63121-4409
Telephone: 314-516-6000
Fax: 314-516-6759
E-mail: era@umsl.edu

DATE: August 31, 2017
TO: Jennifer Simms
FROM: University of Missouri-St. Louis IRB
PROJECT TITLE: [1110472-1] Experiences of African American Women and their ascension to Senior Academic Leadership Positions in Higher Education Institutions
REFERENCE #: 
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: August 31, 2017
EXPIRATION DATE: August 31, 2018
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

The chairperson of the University of Missouri-St. Louis IRB has reviewed the above mentioned protocol for research involving human subjects and determined that the project qualifies for expedited review under Title 45 Code of Federal Regulations Part 46.110b. The time period for this approval expires one year from the date listed below. You must notify the University of Missouri-St. Louis IRB in advance of any proposed major changes in your approved protocol, e.g., addition of research sites or research instruments.

You must file an annual report with the committee. This report must indicate the starting date of the project and the number of subjects to date from start of project, or since last annual report, whichever is more recent.

Any consent or assent forms must be signed in duplicate and a copy provided to the subject. The principal investigator must retain the other copy of the signed consent form for at least three years following the completion of the research activity and they must be available for inspection if there is an official review of the UM-St. Louis human subjects research proceedings by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office for Protection from Research Risks.

This action is officially recorded in the minutes of the committee.

If you have any questions, please contact Carl Bassi at 314-516-6029 or basai@umsl.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.
APPENDIX B

EMAIL SENT TO POTENTIAL STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Good morning/afternoon, ___________________________

I hope you’re having a good day. My name is Jennifer Simms, and I’m a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at the University of Missouri – St. Louis. My research focuses on the experiences of African American women in leadership positions in postsecondary institutions. I’m currently seeking African American women who are senior-level academic administrators to participate in my study. You can find more information regarding my research in the attached *Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities* document. Thank you so much for your consideration, __________________________, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Simms
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Division of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
One University Blvd.
St. Louis, Missouri 63121-4489
Telephone: 314-516-5483
Fax: 314-516-5227
E-mail: jsimms@umsl.edu

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities
Experiences of African American Women and their ascension to Senior Academic Leadership Positions in Higher Education Institutions

Participant ____________________________ HSC Approval Number ____________________________

Principal Investigator Jennifer Simms

PI’s Phone Number 314-550-2142

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Jennifer Simms under the guidance of Dr. Shawn Woodhouse, Associate Dean of Student Services and Associate Professor of Higher Education. The purpose of this research is to document the experiences of African American women and their ascension to senior academic leadership positions in higher education.

2. a) Your participation will involve
   ➢ Giving the investigator permission to observe you in your natural work setting. In addition, the investigator would like to conduct an interview using an audio voice recorder. During this interview, you will be asked to answer some questions as to your experiences during your ascension to senior academic leadership in higher education. The interview will be transcribed. During the interview, you will be asked to present a copy of your professional curriculum vitae.

   ➢ Observations will be conducted in your natural work setting, such as a collegial meeting and/or office setting. During the observation, a journal will be used to take notes. Interviews will be conducted in a private setting, such as an office.

Approximately 5 individuals may be involved in this research.

b) The amount of time involved in your participation will be approximately 30 minutes for the observation and approximately one hour in length for the interview.

3. There are no anticipated risks associated with this research.

4. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study. However, your participation will contribute to the knowledge about the experiences of African American women and their ascension to senior academic leadership positions in higher education institutions.

5. Your participation is voluntary and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. If there are any questions you would rather not answer or that you do not feel
comfortable answering, please inform the investigator; the interview will stop or the investigator will move on to the next question, whichever you prefer.

6. By agreeing to participate, you understand and agree that your data may be shared with other researchers and educators in the form of presentations and/or publications. In all cases, your identity will not be revealed. In rare instances, a researcher's study must undergo an audit or program evaluation by an oversight agency (such as the Office for Human Research Protection). That agency would be required to maintain the confidentiality of your data. In addition, all data will be stored on a password-protected computer and/or in a locked office.

7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may call the Investigator, Jennifer Simms at 314-550-2142. You may also ask questions or state concerns regarding your rights as a research participant to the Office of Research Administration, at 516-5897.

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent to my participation in the research described above.

Participant's Signature  Date  Participant's Printed Name

Signature of Investigator or Designee  Date  Investigator/Designee Printed Name