WOMEN MID-LEVEL CAREER PROFESSIONALS: NAVIGATING THEIR CAREER TRAJECTORY TO HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

Women mid-level career professionals continue to face obstacles as they move forward in their careers. Opportunities for advancement and balancing personal and professional commitment remained challenging. Supportive relationships were integral in career guidance, navigating decision-making and office politics, and networking. This qualitative study explored the shared lived experiences of women mid-level career professionals in higher education. The focus was to examine their professional experiences, focusing on the challenges faced, perception of leadership, supportive relationships in the workplace, and institutional support via professional development. In addition, leadership self-efficacy, social capital, and intersectionality between race and gender were highlighted to understand further the experiences of mid-level career professionals in higher education. The research questions were: (1) What are the shared experiences of mid-level women professionals in higher education? And (2) How do work relationships influence the experiences of mid-level women professionals in higher education? There were fifteen participants in this study who were recruited via email and self-identified as mid-level career professionals. They were required to complete an interest form, demographic survey, and two 60- 90-minute interviews. Seven themes emerged and were organized into three categories: (a) perceptions of leadership styles & professional identity, (b) challenges, support, & morale in the workplace, and (c) work relationships influence on career growth.

There were several findings in this study. There was ambiguity around the definition of mid-level career professionals. Perceptions of effective leadership styles were contradictory. Advancement opportunities continued to be challenging, and often, women hit a wall. There was invisibility due to lack of support from supervisors, and title- consciousness played a factor in

seeking guidance and learning opportunities. The balance of personal and professional lives was difficult and influenced decision-making in terms of career trajectory. An increase in women supporting women was imperative to creating connections between mid-level and senior-level. Lastly, the experiences of Black women mid-level professionals did not differ much from the experiences of participants who identified as white. However, all the women of color in this study spoke to sponsorship for validation. Overall, this research contributed to a deeper understanding of women mid-level career professionals' experiences in higher education.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Higher education endeavors to represent inclusion, diversity, engagement, and empowerment. Its primary focus is the students and the quality of education that faculty members produce. The other major component that supports the students and faculty in their successes are the administrators. Historically, faculty held a more prominent role outside the classroom, but many of these duties have transitioned into professional administrators (Archibald & Feldman, 2012). Public and private nonprofit sectors experienced this shift in allocating professional administrators towards student services (College Board, 2017). Administrative lattice facilitated this transition as there was an expansion of support services, such as academic advising, career services, and recruitment, available over time (Archibald & Feldman, 2012). Administrative bloat followed to support the need for more non-faculty staff and administrators (Archibald & Feldman, 2012).

Retaining exceptional administrators is valuable to an institution's success. Positive morale and engagement lead to loyalty and retention. Morale is not easily defined but can be considered two-fold: satisfaction of the individual and the satisfaction of a group of people within a unit in a campus environment, and its commitment to the institution (Johnsrud, Heck, & Rosser, 2000). The perception is that the higher the morale, the higher the performance, but this is not easily measured (Johnsrud, Heck, & Rosser, 2000). Engagement is interpreted as participation in on-campus and professional development opportunities and advancement. To the institution's benefit, retaining talented, educated employees can enhance student success, quality of service, and, ultimately, institutional effectiveness. However, a component of low morale and engagement for administrators is the lack of appreciation and limited career advancement and professional development (Johnsrud, Heck, & Rosser, 2000). Retained early and mid-level

administrators in higher education can pursue opportunities that lead to senior-level administrative roles.

Statement of Problem

Leadership roles are not easily attainable by women. Years after being seen considered a male role, women struggle to reach these positions. One of the many excuses is that women's leadership styles are not of an effective leader. Perceptions of good leadership are seen to have masculine characteristics (Turner, Norwood, & Noe, 2013) and originate from having white men holding senior-level positions for extended periods (AAUW, 2016). Therefore, women are not likely to be considered leaders, even less for women of color (AAUW, 2016). Women's leadership takes an interactive, relational, flexible, situational approach that supports building trust and reciprocity relationships (Bornstein, 2007). This type of approach may allow for effective leadership with collaboration, proactive, and feedback versus aggressive and reactive models (Bornstein, 2007). Another factor shaping the low percentage of women represented in senior-level leadership is a concept of the "pipeline myth," where many believe there are too few women qualified for leadership positions (Gasman & Travers, 2015; Johnson, 2017). However, research proves that women earn more degrees than men and are more likely to have direct previous professional experiences (Johnson, 2017). Women university presidents are more likely to have their doctorate degrees than their counterparts (Johnson, 2017). More women of color are attending college to increase their earning power (Lennon, 2013). Some believe they are not denied leadership opportunities but rather, those opportunities disappear at various points along the way (AAUW, 2016; Dominici, Fried, & Zeger, 2009). Ultimately, women are less likely to be presented with the opportunity to obtain high-level positions, which translates to representation of women in higher education leadership (Lennon, 2013).

The challenge of increasing women's representation to create gender diversity in higher education leadership is essential. Women in leadership positions promote inclusion and can increase engagement and morale in the workplace. Revealing an institution's investment in their women administrators could bring about a sense of satisfaction and recognition, and create job enrichment (Robbins, 2003). It is ideal to create initiatives in order to diversify each unit and high-level positions. This can be done through the hiring process and increased professional development where positive networks can be formed. Occasionally, the lack of diversity in senior level administrative positions is due to a lack of qualified applicants (Gasman, Abiola, & Travers, 2015). They further define "qualified" as an excuse or euphemism that "allows people to ignore the need for diversity and thus to discriminate in hiring" (Gasman, Abiola, & Travers, 2015, p. 1). However, women and women of color are qualified and often have more experience. The push should be made for diversification, as many institutions commit to diversity and make a diversity statement in their missions and hiring postings. Annual evaluation and assessment of hiring and promotion policies, diversifying search committees, and evaluating the institution's commitment to diversity at a significant level and individual units' level is important in determining if changes are necessary (Johnson, 2017). Diversity training for supervisors and higher-level administrators can be available to assist in providing a pathway. Also, bridging the salary gap and rethinking the institution's approach to professional and leadership development can contribute to breaking down gender bias. These will assist in identifying and supporting the advancement of women.

Significance of the Study

Women are underrepresented in higher education senior-level leadership positions. Of the few in leadership positions, even fewer are women of color. Twenty-six percent of college

presidents across all institutions are female (Johnson, 2017); seventeen percent are women of color (AAUW, 2016). Women's representation in positions of power displays "increasing efforts to develop multicultural learning communities on campus"; promotes different worldviews and leadership styles; and for women of color, provides better mentorship relationships with relatable people (Patitu & Hinton, 2003, p. 89). This outlook, coming from diverse backgrounds, "encourages a breadth and depth of ideas that cannot be found in a homogeneous pool" (Lennon, 2013, p. 12). "Frequent high-quality interactions with successful women role models have been shown to improve college women's self-concepts of their leadership abilities and career ambitions" (AAUW, 2016, p. 33). By having few women in leadership roles, it limits the power of women to make a difference (AAUW, 2016); limits the scope of research and knowledge (Lapovsky & Larkin, 2009); and in terms of women of color, shows little to no commitment to racial and ethnic diversity (AAUW, 2016). Additionally, when representing an institution with a diverse study body, it is vital to have an administration that reflects this, including women in leadership roles. Increasing the representation of women professionals in higher education leadership is imperative, but the pathway is met with hurdles. Therefore, investigating the experiences of women mid-level career professionals is essential to learn further. This is the population before achieving senior-level positions, and more insight into their experiences can illustrate why women are underrepresented in these areas. Learning about the experiences and responsibilities of the mid-level professionals can give a better view as to why there is little who transition to senior-level opportunities. In gaining more understanding around what assists their professional growth, practices can be put in place to better support that development. In learning what hinders and challenges exposes what is needed for improvement. Ultimately, researching this population allows examination of the pathway and preparation for senior leadership.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the shared professional experiences of women mid-level professionals in higher education. The focus was on women who self-identified as mid-level career professionals at an urban public four-year institution on the eastern coast. The objective was to define mid-level career professionals, examine their lived experiences and investigate what hindered or assisted their professional career growth. There was an additional level of examining the role of work relationships, mentorship, and institutional support along these career paths. The study explored the influence of social capital, leadership self-efficacy, and intersectionality between race and gender on the dynamics of women mid-level professionals in the workplace.

The current literature includes ample information on senior-level professionals' career trajectories with details on the challenges faced, perceptions of what leadership is, and the struggles of women in the workplace. However, there is limited research on the perspectives of mid-level career professionals and the contribution of work relationships and institutional support along their career paths. Mid-level career professionals contribute significantly to higher education and have considerable personnel growth but have high turnover (Rosser, 2004). This study aimed to fill in those gaps and add more research on the perspectives of this population in order to increase understanding of the experiences of mid-level career women professionals and professional growth in higher education.

Summary of Research Methods

This was a qualitative study (Holloway & Brown, 2012; Laverty, 2003; Peoples, 2021) that took place in an urban four-year institution. This study followed a phenomenological approach to give understanding to the lived experiences of women mid-level career professionals

(Holloway & Brown, 2012; Laverty, 2003; Peoples, 2021). The research questions were: (1) What are the shared experiences of mid-level women professionals in higher education? And (2) How do work relationships influence the experiences of mid-level women professionals in higher education? The findings from this study focused on the experiences of fifteen participants whose responses answered the research questions. The participants completed two semi-structured interviews averaging 45 minutes in length. During these interviews, the participants were asked to discuss their professional path until their current position. Questions include challenges faced, mistreatment in the workplace based on gender, a reflection of supportive relationships, definition of mid-level career professional, career aspirations, participation in professional development, and morale. The interviews were conducted via the video conferencing technology Zoom®.

After each interview, the audio was uploaded into the transcription service Trint® to be transcribed. Once the transcription was made available, each transcript was edited by listening to the audio and reviewing each line to ensure accuracy. Cleaned transcripts were uploaded into Dedoose® to be analyzed and organized through a coding process. Once complete, the codes in Dedoose were downloaded into Microsoft Excel® for further analysis. Example codes used included relationships, institutional influence, take control/be confident, women-specific/qualities/skills, and obstacles. These codes were developed into categories of information. Example categories included professional identity, leadership styles, mentorship, morale, and family obligations. Finally, these categories were grouped into key themes that address the research questions.

For validity, I journaled to address personal bias as the researcher and engaged in reflexivity, reported rich descriptions of the data, and provided member checks. I journaled any

thoughts, reactions, follow-up questions, and self-reflection during the interview, post-interview, and again when reviewing the transcripts. Direct quotes were used in the reporting of the findings. Through this transparency, the reader can see the source of information and that the researcher's interpretation was accurate. All fifteen participants were asked to review their transcript or quotes from their transcript for accuracy.

Summary of Findings

The participants in this study defined mid-level as someone who was: not the head of unit or had a "seat at the table," not the final decision maker, depended on the years of experience and title, and there were mixed reviews whether supervisory experience was needed. Based on the responses from the interest form, demographic questionnaire, and interview, seven themes emerged and were organized into three categories: (a) perceptions of leadership styles & professional identity, (b) challenges, support, & morale in the workplace, and (c) work relationships influence on career growth.

The findings from the study confirmed what previous literature have disclosed. According to participants, effective leadership includes strong emotional intelligence, not being impulsive and "thoughtful decision making," "consistent strategizing," and being two/three steps ahead. Relationship building, problem-solving, and clear visions were essential factors of a person's professional identity in being successful in the workplace. All participants spoke positively in their ability to lead and exhibited strong leadership self-efficacy. Opportunities for advancement were challenging. However, some of the participants were able to move forward in their offices, while others were met with a glass ceiling. Social capital was used through their supportive relationships were integral in career guidance, navigating decision-making and office politics, and networking. Balancing personal and professional commitment continues to be

tough. In investigating this topic, women mid-level career professionals continued to face obstacles along the career ladder. Supportive relationships and professional development assist in career growth. Some of these women took advantage of the professional development offered, while others continued to focus on the work they provided in their office. Once they hit a wall, they either change offices or leave the institution entirely.

There were three unexpected findings in this study. It was revealed that the experiences of Black women mid-level professionals did not differ much from the experiences of participants who identified as white. There was an interesting range in titles of the participants who listed that they were mid-level career professionals. This varied from assistant directors to assistant deans. Lastly, sponsorship was introduced as a relationship that supported career growth which was not discussed thoroughly in previous literature. Three participants spoke to the assistance of a sponsor in their career. They were all women of color.

Recommendations for future research included conducting more studies in many different areas that reveal more about mid-level career professionals. The first recommendation includes quantitative studies that examine workplace relationships more. We saw that the supportive relationship was essential, but there are many different types, informal relationships, mentorships, and sponsorship. It would be helpful to break down and explore the effectiveness of each type as it pertains to which was advantageous in a women's career. Since sponsorship was important to women of color, there was an opportunity to intersect gender and race in this area. On the same point as supportive relationships, a quantitative or qualitative study on women supporting other women was another recommendation as these relationships were integral in connecting mid-level and senior-level. Determining ways women could support other women would support more representation in senior-level leadership. Another topic for recommendation

was a qualitative study investigating the intersection of sexuality and experiences of masculine-presenting women vs. feminine-presenting women. Are these experiences the same or different? If successful leadership styles were seen as masculine, the experience of masculine-presenting women should be accounted for in women's overall experience. This leads to a recommendation of an updated study on the perceptions of leadership. Exploring if the perception of leadership remains the same when the participants observe and mirror a more flexible leadership style. Future research is needed to debunk the idea that masculine leadership styles are needed to open more leadership opportunities. The last recommendation is a qualitative study on senior-level women career professionals to investigate their experiences as mid-level career professionals and the transition to senior-level leadership. Many of the participants did not know their career aspirations. A study on the reverse trajectory is needed to see where the bottleneck begins in the movement from mid-level to senior-level by having both viewpoints. Recommendation for practice includes creating a program that promotes and increases networking and mentorships and creating a place for women to share their experiences. This would span across the whole institution and make all women at this institution feel valued and supported no matter at what point in their career. Limitations of this study included expanding on the interview questions around leadership and career aspirations to pull more information and recruitment to include more people across the university.

Definition of Key Terms

There are a few key terms for this study. This study primarily focused on women professionals who self-identified as mid-level career professionals.

- o **Mid-level career professionals, or mid-level professionals:** Defined as those who were middle-line managers and could be distinguished by the "span of authority, control of

resources, and complexity of programs and services supervised" (Wilson et al., 2016, p. 558). Mid-levels reported directly to the senior officer, oversaw at least one student affairs function, or supervised one professional staff member (Wilson et al., 2016). This definition of mid-level career professionals was not provided in the recruitment and interviews of this study. Throughout, you will see mid-level career professionals and mid-level professionals used synonymously.

o **Black women:** These mid-level professionals who participated in this study were of all ethnicities, ages, titles, and professional experience. In addition, Black women were highlighted to share their experiences at this level. African-American and Black are used synonymously to describe this population.

o **Work relationships:** In reviewing the influences of work relationships, this included supportive relationships, sponsorships, and mentorship. Supportive relationships were guidance in an unofficial capacity. Mentorship was guidance in an official capacity where both participants established this relationship through conversations. Sponsorship was when an individual vouches for another individual, with or without their knowledge.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Chapter two provides a review of the literature on women professionals in higher education. The current literature examined challenges and barriers, leadership, mentorship, and other obstacles faced along the career path. Additionally, there was information about the experiences of Black women administrators on their path to leadership. This chapter will detail the current literature in these areas, present the theoretical framework, and specify the gaps in the literature.

Leadership Styles

Leadership roles were not easily attainable by women, and there were many roadblocks in place. Gender-based patterns such as low salaries, lower ranks, slower rates of promotion and retention, and less recognition were evident (Dominici, Fried, & Zeger, 2009). Personal circumstances such as life outside of work, mental health (illness, stress, etc.), personal relationships, and children were seen as hindrances for women seeking senior leadership positions (Airini et al., 2011). Despite the roadblocks and the obstacles faced, women professionals provided robust and effective leadership that met the needs of a college or university in complex environments.

Perceptions of leadership styles deemed effective were male-centered and encased in masculine characteristics (Diehl, 2014; Jones & Palmer, 2011; Turner, Norwood, & Noe, 2013). Previous scholarly work on leadership centered around men professionals, and as a result, dictated the standard of characteristics and behaviors for a leadership role (Dunn & Hyle, 2014). Also, this view originated from having white men holding senior-level positions for extended periods (AAUW, 2016). Gender stereotypes influence what was seen as effective leadership, thus forming prejudices against women professionals (Diehl, 2014; Hoyt, 2005) since

stereotypical feminine qualities were not what comes to mind when thinking about successful

leadership (Jones & Palmer, 2011). Broadly speaking, leadership was often seen as

aggressiveness, decisiveness, willingness to engage in conflict, confidence, and strength

(AAUW, 2016). Therefore, women were not likely to be considered leaders as their styles may

differ, even less for women of color (AAUW, 2016). O'Neil, Hopkins, and Bilimoria (2015)

described a "think manager, think male" perspective which associated men with leadership roles

(p. 258). However, women were successful leaders when given the opportunity. According to

Bornstein (2007), women in new leadership positions were more likely to generate consensus

around the future direction of their institutions than arrive with a complete plan. Women's

leadership took an interactive, relational, flexible, situational approach that supported building

trust and reciprocity relationships (Bornstein, 2007). This type of approach was different from a

masculine approach but allowed for efficient leadership where there was collaboration,

proactive, and feedback versus aggressive and reactive models (Bornstein, 2007).

For women who reached leadership positions, they were faced with challenges. These

obstacles included proving their ability to operate in their leadership position; constantly working

to prove and establish a positive rapport with their male colleagues; fighting against isolation

when there were few women peers at their level; and as supervisors struggling to balance

between the role of "token women" administrators and building relationships (Jones & Palmer,

2011). The isolation from other women colleagues limited the opportunity to receive feedback on

leadership practices (Jones & Palmer, 2011).

Leading in a complex environment with consistent change required balance. There could

be loneliness within this role as the person balanced being a colleague and a boss, a team

member, and the decision-maker. Hertneky (2010), in their qualitative study of examining the

role balance plays in leadership self-identity of women college presidents, explained that leadership self-identity was a subtle and complex concept constructed through experiences and self-knowledge developed over time. Relationships assisted in finding balance. Additionally, managing their self-identity and the boundary between being an individual and the role of a leader came at a personal cost. There was a challenge to combine their perception of how they were as a leader with the information received from their environment while observing and controlling how she presented herself to others (Hertneky, 2010). Hertneky's participants described themselves as collaborators, facilitators, change agents, role models, and teachers. They prioritized developing relationships as it was effective.

Some studies depicted what positive women's leadership and advancement entailed. Waring's (2013) qualitative study examined leadership views among African-American female presidents and found that the conception of leadership that was skill-based and inherent to the individual was successful. Decisiveness and willingness to take responsibility for actions were primary leadership attributes as they created trust. Also, strong communication skills were essential. Relationships with people were a critical component of leadership. This included their ability to listen and understand their wants and needs. Relationships made them better leaders and allowed for decentralized decision-making and delegation.

Strong leadership self-efficacy was important. Hoyt's (2005) quantitative study spoke about the role of leadership self-efficacy. The use of leadership self-efficacy examines one's perception of the ability to lead, meaning an increase in confidence correlates to high efficacy. This influences choice, goal setting, effort and persistence to task, coping with adversity, and performance. Hoyt's study indicated that women with high self-efficacy would disagree with the "think leader, think male" stereotype and, in turn, work towards proving this stereotype wrong.

Conversely, women with low self-efficacy were more likely to confirm this stereotype (Hoyt, 2005). Overall, not all leadership needed to be masculine. As long as women learned the tools, they could successfully lead. Turner, Norwood, and Noe (2013) identified key competencies needed for advancement: creating a vision; practicing effective decision making, communication, and professionalism; identifying an appropriate leadership style; participating in leadership programs; recognizing your emotional intelligence; and networking to create positive relationships and support. Other helpful tips were becoming knowledgeable of the industry and trends in higher education, being aware of the changes and special initiatives within their institution, organizational structure, and time management (Turner, Norwood, & Noe, 2013).

Glass Ceiling

"Glass-ceiling," a systemic barrier, prevented women from growing professionally and taking on leadership roles (Ballenger, 2010; Johnson, 2017; Washington, 2011). Specifically, "the glass ceiling is an invisible barrier built in the social structure of organizations that women face in gaining entry into top management positions regardless of their accomplishments or merits" (Diehl, 2014, p. 54). Some signs of the glass-ceiling effect were gender-based compensations and cultures of an organization where policies and procedures work in favor of men (Washington, 2010). There was a misconception that women were not qualified for leadership positions. Since 2006, women have earned more than 50% of all doctoral degrees, and since 1982 women have earned more than 50% of all bachelor's degrees (Johnson, 2017). Although women may hold higher education attainment in some cases than men, it was not often reflected in leadership opportunities. Women university presidents were more likely to have their doctorate degrees than their counterparts (Johnson, 2017). More women of color attended college to increase their earning power (Lennon, 2013). Gender and racial diversity in leadership were

not always viewed positively. Many people were unwilling to step out of their comfort zone to extend leadership opportunities to women and women of color even when it was beneficial for the institution (Gasman & Travers, 2015). Ultimately, women were less likely to be presented with the opportunity to obtain high-level positions, which translated to the low representation of women and women of color in higher education leadership (Lennon, 2013).

Relationships in the Workplace

Workplace relationships played an integral part in a woman's career. As noted earlier, Hertneky's study found that women presidents prioritized developing relationships as a part of their leadership approach. Challenges around this include women being more often excluded from informal networks of intellectual leadership than men (Dominici, Fried, & Zeger, 2009). In turn, this hindered their ability to continue to grow as professionals in their positions.

Women Supporting Women

Women supporting women contributed to the conversation of workplace relationships. The literature illustrated there are supportive and non-supportive experiences within these relationships. Jones and Palmer's (2011) mixed-method study explored the perceptions of women supporting women in career advancements and how the institution supported the professional development of women leaders. Airini et al. (2011) investigated what assisted or hindered advancements to leadership roles. Work relationships between women were often not supportive when some actively undermined their authority and credibility, sabotaged each other (Jones & Palmer, 2011), peers stigmatized other colleagues, and publicly challenged their academic integrity (Airini et al., 2011). Additionally, jealousy and competition were apparent regarding career advancement (Jones & Palmer, 2011). Women who aspired for leadership opportunities camouflaged their ambitions, so they were not viewed negatively by coworkers.

Another barrier was the generational differences and the dynamics of older women versus younger women. Older women's perception was that younger women should adopt traditional clothing and communication styles that could be seen as more masculine, where the younger generation felt freer to be themselves. Supportive women-to-women relationships were helpful to advancement (Airini et al., 2011). This included congratulatory responses to peers when appropriate, providing leadership opportunities, encouragement, and collaboration (Airini et al., 2011). This led to increased confidence, resilience, job retention, reciprocity, and sharing (Airini et al., 2011). The absence of these relationships and underrepresentation of women in power minimized the ability to create associations (Jones & Palmer, 2011).

Good Old Boy Network & Sponsorship

Ballenger's (2010) quantitative study examined barriers and opportunities encountered by women leaders in their career paths to presidency. The "good old boy network" was a barrier to women's growth in professional positions. This referred to a limited circle where decisions on persons and positions were made (Ballenger, 2010). The informal network was male-dominated, and often women were not included until after the fact as they were not welcoming or inviting to women (Ballenger, 2010). Often, the activities where a discussion on promotions or leads to special projects may occur were in male-dominated environments such as golfing, hunting, fishing, going out for drinks, etc. This gives limited access for women participation.

Sponsorship is when an individual, often at a higher professional level, vouches for another individual, influencing their career and reputation. Men were likely to sponsor other men (Ballenger, 2010). However, Davis and Maldonado (2015) found in their qualitative study, which explored the intersectionality of race and gender, that women of color received unexpected sponsorship from white men and sometimes Black men with direct connection to white male

supervisors, which helped to connect career opportunities. These informal networks served an integral role in a women's career growth and performance (Washington, 2011).

Mentorship

Mentorship was an invaluable resource in a woman's career development (Moore-Brown, 2006). Moore-Brown's (2005) qualitative study investigated the mentor relationships among female college presidents. Washington's (2011) quantitative study examined the perceived barriers of women in entry-level and mid-level positions who were mentored. Mentorship is a mutually beneficial relationship to both mentor and the mentee (Moore-Brown, 2006, Washington, 2011). However, one of the main challenges women faced in climbing the career ladder was limited access to mentoring or less effective mentoring (Washington, 2011) and not having the opportunity to be vouched for in advancement opportunities (Moore-Brown, 2006). A mentor assisted in developing skill sets, provided meaningful feedback to mentees to advance and reach their goals (Washington, 2011). In fact, a strong network that included mentors and sponsors was needed for advancement (Washington, 2011). Mentorship relationships are beneficial to organizations. Through a mentorship program, an organization could see their employees in a more personable way and tend to their needs. It also promoted the company's best practices, policies, and procedures, better adapting to the organization's culture. The result was a more productive and loyal worker and better promotion of the organization's goals and objectives (Washington, 2011).

Creating a mentor-mentee relationship could be challenging. Many find difficulty identifying and finding someone to commit to being their mentor (Washington, 2011). There are two types of mentor relationships, formal and informal (Washington, 2011), but most were formed through individual interests or informal meetings (Searby, Ballenger, & Tripses, 2015).

The difference between the two was based on the structure of the relationship (Washington, 2011). This structure included a level of commitment, mutual respect, and similar goals relating to career development. Factors that influenced the creation of mentor relationships included demographic characteristics (gender, age, and education), career factors, relationship factors, and types of relationships (Moore-Brown, 2006). Informal mentorships were more long-term than formal relationships, affecting the constant guidance for proteges as they develop professionally (Washington, 2011). Formal mentorships could be seen as forced. Mentors provided access to resources, networks, and feedback to overcome challenges to advancement that contributed to long-term career success (Washington, 2011). Mentors were important to career success because the mentee was introduced to the formal and informal norms and rules of the organizational culture (Crawford & Smith, 2005). Lastly, there was power in having multiple and diverse mentors (Moore-Brown, 2006; Searby, Ballenger, & Tripses, 2015), and it was just as crucial for women to be mentored by both men and women and to mentor both men and women (Moore-Brown, 2006).

Experiences of Black Women Administrators

Black women coped with additional hardships as professionals in higher education. Black women in the workforce faced a lack of support, isolation, and alienation (Patitu & Hinton, 2003). Jean-Marie, Williams, & Sherman's (2009) narrative qualitative study investigated the intersection of gender and race in Black women's leadership experiences. Black women encountered a term called "double jeopardy," where they experienced both sexism and racism (Jean-Marie, Williams, & Sherman, 2009). Black women encountered marginalization, isolation, limited mentoring opportunities, and unwelcoming campus communities (Claybourne & Hamrick, 2007). Marginalization was defined as any "issue, situation, or circumstance that has

placed these women outside the flow of power and influence within their institutions" (Patitu & Hinton, 2003, p. 82). Marginalization placed Black women outside the power and influence of the institution. Their authority was undermined, their competence was compromised, and their power was limited (Jean-Marie, Williams, & Sherman, 2009). With this experience, they often feel like a "double outsider" and were excluded from informal networks (Jean-Marie, Williams, & Sherman, 2009). This formed isolation and alienation. Black women were often isolated from politics, policymaking, contact with senior-level administration, underprepared by their supervisors, and lacked resources (Claybourne & Hamrick, 2007).

In the workplace environment, Black women also experienced a lack of support which led them to be less effective in their positions (Patitu & Hinton, 2003). This lack of support came in the form of sexual harassment from the immediate supervisor, budget constraints, denial of programming, and verbal abuse (Patitu & Hinton, 2003). The combination of race and gender for Black women, race, and gender were bound and not separate entities, and the impact of both race and gender discrimination were felt in the workplace (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). In the end, it forced some Black women to possess a fighter's mentality and improved maturity (Patitu & Hinton, 2003), which had them working harder in their leadership roles.

Theoretical Framework

For the theoretical framework, the theories considered in this study related to women professionals in higher education are social capital, leadership self-efficacy, and intersectionality between gender and race. It is essential to investigate the current inequalities and the tools and resources needed to be successful. Social capital is the core theory used to explore the types of relationships experienced by the women participants and their access to networks that would be useful in helping them shape and develop their leaderships styles and grow in their careers. A

secondary theory was leadership self-efficacy, which was used to establish how the participants identified professionally and determined effective leadership. Lastly, a guiding theory, intersectionality between race and gender, focused on how Black women were navigating their careers and their perception of leadership within higher education and whether it was different from their White women peers. These theories assisted in understanding the research questions by examining the experiences of mid-level professionals through these lenses.

Social capital refers to networks of people and community resources (Yosso, 2005). Lack of social capital and positive support in the workplace hindered growth for women in the workplace. Women who found it challenging to secure advancement positions may lack the social capital required for career progression, and these connections helped create job opportunities. Social capital was necessary for women to break down career roadblocks. Women must interact with colleagues, establish positive relationships, network with other men and women, and seek mentorship opportunities (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). These relationships provided support along the professional path, allowed for guidance through making important decisions, and opened job opportunities. Diversity within the types of mentors was essential from the same race and gender groups and those from different racial backgrounds across job titles. Additionally, mentorship aided in navigating invisible rules and internal politics (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). In this area, women of color were more at a disadvantage as they were typically more isolated and less likely to garner mentors or networks of support within the workplace (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Social capital builds a network of professional support and mentorship for women seeking leadership opportunities and growth in their careers and can offset isolation and alienation.

Self-efficacy theory examines an individual's self-perception to deal with difficult situations (Chen, 2008). Leadership self-efficacy is the person's perception in the ability to lead (Hoyt, 2005). Positive perception of leadership styles and strong leadership self-efficacy produced confident and proactive women in leadership positions. Stereotypes serve as an obstacle. One argument is that women were not qualified for leadership positions because they did not exhibit masculine tendencies of aggression, decisiveness, and willingness to engage in conflict (AAUW, 2016). These stereotypes produce prejudices where women were not viewed as effective leaders. High leadership self-efficacy allowed women to reevaluate their ability to be effective leaders and leadership styles and move forward with confidence.

Intersectionality examines the role of identity and context and how this constrains or supports women and women of color in the workplace revealing inequalities (Nunez, 2014). Intersectionality between race and gender gives a different perspective for understanding the experiences of women administrators by analyzing multiple identities in the context of a workplace (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). This approach examined the interaction of race, class, gender, ability, and sexuality to understand leadership identity, behavior, and effectiveness (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Thus, the exploration of experiences by acknowledging identities revealed barriers. Leadership and identity were closely linked (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Identity was formed, in part, through interactions with others, and the workplace contained formal and informal interactions (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Leadership was a social process where self-identity, social identity, and group identity were formed, and gender and ethnic differences were important and highlighted (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). The intersection of gender, race, and leadership highlighted the inequalities that exist within the experiences of all women professionals in higher education.

Gaps in Literature

The literature primarily focused on women in senior-level positions such as college presidency and chief academic officers. There was ample information on the challenges faced, perceptions of leadership, and the struggles of Black women in the workplace. However, there was limited research on the perspectives of mid-level career professionals, the institution's involvement in supporting career progression towards leadership opportunities, and a specific focus on the importance of positive work relationships and social capital.

Mid-level career professionals, or mid-level professionals, contributed significantly to higher education as they supported its educational goals and mission. They continued to be one of the larger areas of personnel growth within university and college and have high turnover (Rosser, 2004). They are defined as those who are middle-line managers and could be distinguished by the "span of authority, control of resources, and complexity of programs and services supervised" (Wilson et al., 2016, p. 558). Mid-levels reported directly to the senior officer, oversaw at least one student affairs function, or supervised one professional staff member (Wilson et al., 2016). "They manage directions from supervisors while providing daily support and guidance to staff members and enforce policies that affect both employees and students" (Wilson et al., 2016, p. 558). Mid-levels interpreted institutional direction and priorities to frontline employees and communicated any frontline concerns up the ladder (Wilson et al., 2016). Rosser (2004) called them "unsung professionals" because their contributions were rarely recognized, but they were committed, loyal, and performed at a high level.

Given the gaps in the literature, this qualitative study explored perceptions of leadership and experiences in higher education. It focused on women who self-identified as mid-level career professionals in higher education instead of senior-level administrators. The research examined

their shared experiences at certain points in their careers and what hindered or assisted in their

professional growth. Emphasis was placed on work relationships, supportive relationships and

mentorship, and support from the institutions. In addition, this study highlighted how social

capital, leadership self-efficacy, and the role intersectionality between race and gender helped

understand the dynamics of women mid-level career professionals in the workplace.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

This qualitative study aimed to explore the shared professional experiences of women mid-level career professionals in higher education. The focus was on women who self-identified as mid-level career professionals at an urban public four-year institution on the eastern coast. The objective was to define mid-level career professionals, examine their lived experiences and investigate what hindered or assisted in their professional growth. There was an additional level of examining the role of work relationships, mentorship, and institutional support along these career paths. The study explored the influence of social capital, leadership self-efficacy, and intersectionality in highlighting differences in experiences based on race and gender. Chapter 3 presents the research design, rationale for the study, and the role of the researcher. In addition, the selection of participants, data collection procedures, data analysis, and any limitations or ethical concerns is described.

Research Design

Many of the literature used a qualitative approach in implementation. Some geared towards a narrative approach. This study followed a phenomenological approach to give understanding to the lived experiences of women mid-level career professionals. Phenomenological research is used to describe and interpret people's lived experiences on both an individual level and a general level (Holloway & Brown, 2012). It allowed the participant to speak on the topic from their individual experiences in their own words and point of view. With this approach, each participant described their lived experiences pertaining to their career trajectory. The researcher then examined these experiences at a general level for any patterns that speak to issues that impacted multiple participants (Holloway & Brown, 2012). Ultimately, the objective was to investigate the shared experiences of mid-level women professionals on an

individual level and how it contributes to the bigger problem of the under-representation of women in senior leadership roles in higher education. The research questions of this study were:

1. What are the shared experiences of mid-level women professionals in higher education?

2. How do work relationships influence the experiences of mid-level women professionals in higher education?

Research Setting

This study occurred at a four-year institution housed in an urban neighborhood in one of the major cities on the eastern coast in the U.S. In this city, residents who identified as Black or African American made up of approximately 40% of the population (U.S Census, 2019). The large public institution had an overall size of over 35,000 students and over 8,700 employees. Of the total of employees, 53% were female, and 47% were male. For women employees, approximately 55% identified as White and 22% identified as Black. According to an institutional report, administration and staff were separated by job categories: technical and paraprofessional, skilled crafts, service/ maintenance, executive/admin and managerial, and clerical and secretarial. Approximately 63% of administration and staff categorized as "other professionals" identify as women. Within the "other professionals" category, approximately 55% were White, and 21% were Black. This included men and women. The above data showed the demographic of this city and the breakdown of employees within the institution by title, gender, and race. There was an overwhelming number of women listed in the other professionals category. Additionally, there were few Black professionals within the "other professionals" category.

Through its human resources department, this institution offered a variety of programs: leadership academy, management academy, and supervisory academy. The leadership academy

was offered to full-time faculty and senior-level administrators who were seen as rising leaders. Management academy was available for high-performing/high-potential mid-level employees. For these two programs, staff and administrators were determined by the pay level and cost of the department/college. The supervisory academy was for all supervisors to strengthen supervisory and leadership skills. Eligibility included supervision of another employee. In addition to these programs, employees had access to other HR workshops given throughout the year and LinkedIn Learning.

Participant Recruitment

The population of interest for this study were women who self-identified as mid-level career professionals in the higher education field at one urban four-year institution on the eastern coast. The sampling was purposeful and permitted snowballing. The recruitment process involved sending a targeted email to six key administrators at the target institution who were asked to forward it on to professionals on their staff and listservs. The initial targeted email included a description of the study and a participation interest google form (Appendix A). Snowball sampling granted referrals of other women to participate (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The information collected from the interest form included the following: gender, ethnic background/race, years of professional experience, career level, and job title. This information revealed who self-identified as a mid-level career professional along with their current job title and gender identity. It also helped to identify women of color.

Twenty-nine women administrators completed the interest form. Six were eliminated as they did not meet the requirements of identifying as a mid-level professional and working at the target institution. Twenty-three eligible women were invited to complete the demographic questionnaire (Appendix B), and interview availability (Appendix C) google forms. The information collected in the demographic questionnaire included: age group, education, and

years of supervisory experience. It contained a true or false section with questions about supportive work relationships, mentorship, and participation in any institutional and non-institutional programs. The last section inquired about the current state of morale at the office and institutional level, opportunities for advancement, professional development, and mentorship. Of the twenty-nine women who finished the demographic survey, nineteen women who self-identified as mid-level professionals at this institution moved forward to participate in the interviews. Data saturation was reached with the inclusion of interviews with nineteen participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Laverty, 2003; Peoples, 2021). Based on their availability, the participants were sent an email with the date of their first interview. After reviewing the depth of the responses as they related to answering the research questions, ultimately, data from fifteen participants were analyzed for the study. Participant demographic data (see Table 2) is provided in chapter 4.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred between February 2021 and March 2021. The instrumentation used in this study was the demographic questionnaire and two in-depth interviews. Once the participants completed the availability google form, they received an email with their interview date. A confirmation response was required, and offered to create a calendar invitation. Once they confirmed, they received a second email with the informed consent (Appendix D), a calendar invitation, and a zoom link. The informed consent contained the following: title of the research, investigator, and department, why they were invited to take part in the research, what they should know about the research, what happens if they agree to be in it, what happens to the information collected, and contact information of who the participants can talk to if they have

any questions or concerns. At the beginning of the interview, I reviewed the informed consent and confirmed when the recording began.

Interviews were constructed social interactions based on the conversation between an interviewer and the interviewee (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Personal interviews allowed for the in-depth synopsis of the individual's lived experiences related to the interview questions. Participation required two interviews per person with the option for a follow-up interview if needed for further clarification and questions. The interviews were semi-structured with an interview guide and questions. The participants spoke about their career path in higher education, with questions surrounding challenges and barriers, mentorship, institutional support, and professional identity. The interview questions were determined based on the research questions. The first research question focused on understanding shared experiences. Based on what was previously known about women professionals, interview questions focused on their career path and aspirations, challenges faced, professional identity and leadership, and why they believe they fall into the category of mid-level career professional (Appendix E). The second interview spoke to the second research question on the influence of work relationships. These questions included supportive relationships, mentorship, professional development, and institutional support (Appendix F). The pre-written interview questions permitted the interviewer to stay on topic. The participants saw a sample of those questions in the informed consent document. However, probing occurred to provide clarity and explore ideas further. Interviews were conducted via the video conferencing technology Zoom® and lasted for 30 - 60 minutes with an average of 45 minutes. The Zoom session was recorded and downloaded the same day of the interview and stored on Microsoft One Drive.

Data Analysis & Validity

The video conferencing technology Zoom® provided the audio for the interviews. Once the audio was ready, it was uploaded into the transcription service Trint to be transcribed. Once the transcription was made available, I edited each transcript by listening to the audio and reviewed each line to ensure accuracy. Cleaned transcripts were uploaded into Dedoose to be analyzed and organized through a coding process. First, deductive coding was followed to group together significant categories of information. During this process, the focus is on a pre-set list of codes based on the questions from the interview and knowledge of the literature on the topic. Open coding added additional codes to capture information that was not a part of the initial research design. In Dedoose, several codes were created based on the research questions. This included career path, challenges & mistreatment, career aspiration, educational degree, hiring & supervision, I wish I knew…, level of institutional support, supportive relationships, mentorship, mid-level career professional, morale, gender, women of color, and professional identity and leader. Later the codes, no challenges, men vs. women, motivation, other, must use, and professional development were added. Reviewing each transcript line-by-line, statements from each interview transcript were highlighted and labeled as one of the pre-set codes. The codes in Dedoose were downloaded into Microsoft Excel for further analysis. The Excel sheet contained four columns: quote, code, categories, themes. There were 225 quotes pulled from the interview transcripts. These quotes were analyzed further in more detailed codes. In total, there were 26 codes. Example codes used included relationships, institutional influence, take control/be confident, women-specific/qualities/skills, and obstacles. These codes were developed into 33 categories of information. Example categories included professional identity, leadership skills, mentorship, morale, and family obligations. Finally, these categories were grouped into seven

themes that specifically address the research questions. Table 1 gives an example of the coding

process. The themes were reported as the findings of the study.

Table 1

Sample Coding Scheme

Quote	Code	Categories	Themes
"I wish I knew my own wisdom. I know a lot of stuff. I've been here a long time and even before I was here I had a lot of life experiences, you know? Yeah, I had worked a lot and lived a lot before coming to this institution, but I think I was still really unsure of myself as an administrator because it was like my first position where I was supervising people. But I didn't take into account how much I already knew about people and knew about working with people."	Take control/ be confident	What I wish I knew	Professional Identity, Leadership, & What I wish I knew
"It's hard to know the things that you're good at. And one of the things that they shared was I was someone who always had a clear vision of that. Even though I had a clear vision, that vision always had room for other people's visions, that it wasn't one-directional. We are moving forward no matter what it was. I have an idea. I have an understanding. I have confidence in the way I see this going. What do you think about that, how do your ideas get incorporated into that or not, and does it change your direction?"	Who am I as a professional and leader?	Professional Identity	
"I do consider myself to be a leader. Do I think that I'm a fully developed leader? No, I think that I still have a way to go. But I do think that I have made gains. And I also feel fortunate that I worked with that mentor who has the expertise and emotional intelligence because I feel like that rubs off on me. And I think that emotional intelligence is a big part of being a good leader."	Who am I as a professional and leader?	Leadership Skills	
"I've always seen sponsorship as an ally. Someone who's willing to validate your credentials, validate [your] work ethic, validate things about you, and even make efforts to kind of help push or drive you to your next level. I think mentorship is more of a personal one on one connection, [and] understanding really where I want to go, where are my dreams, what are my	Relationships	Sponsorship, Mentorship	Impact of Relationships in the Workplace & Value of Mentorship

challenges and my career or some of my weaknesses and strengths that what should I go on or just giving me more personal insight to their experience and work."			
"Mentorship has definitely played an active role in my path. Yeah, I would say without a doubt that I wouldn't be where I was or am today without the influence of people in my life helping me to navigate the path, helping me to see the path. I had my first mentor in my master's program. That was kind of when I first kind of someone took me under their wing. And since then, you know, I've consistently had at least one person that I count as a mentor seeking out their advice as I'm making decisions or considering certain things."		Mentorship	
"Seen turnover because of low morale. I think most of the turnover that I've witnessed is due to people's inability to move around in the university like they want to and to kind of make the advancements that they deserve. And so they leave, and sometimes they leave only for a little bit and come back because, you know, the university will do more of it coming from outside the inside. But, yeah, most of the turnover I've seen has been because of that. Even when the morale is low, people still are committed, I think, to the students. They're committed to the students and the types of students that come to [this institution] and the mission. Even when [institution] isn't committed itself to the mission."	Institutional Influence	Morale	Challenges, Institutional Support, & Morale
"There's like a caste system. And that can be really challenging for many women. They get kind of derailed in their careers when they have kids. I think that's probably really true of me. And a lot of women kind of run into that. There are a series of challenges, I think, really for women that have to do with child-rearing. Yeah, and it really does feel like an either/or like either you make time for your kids and your family, or you pursue leadership roles like, you know, it really feels like you can't do both well. There has to be a tradeoff, and it's a very difficult one."	Women specific/ qualities/ skills	Family Obligations	

Several strategies were used to enhance the validity of the study. For validity, I journaled to address personal bias as the researcher, reported rich descriptions of the data, and provided member checks. During the interview process, I kept notes in a journal. I would journal any thoughts post-interview and journal again when I reviewed the transcripts. I journaled any thoughts, reactions, follow-up questions, and self-reflection. This assisted in keeping in front of any personal biases and preconceived notions and tracked how that changed as I analyzed the data. Direct quotes were used in the reporting of the findings, and the demographic information on each participant can be found in Table 2 in chapter 4. Through this transparency, the reader saw the source of information and that the researcher's interpretation was accurate. All fifteen participants were provided a document of both interviews with the coding made visible in June 2021. It was made clear what the highlighted coding was and how it would be used. The participants were given a month to review the entire document or just the parts that were highlighted/coded. They had the opportunity to clarify any statements either through email or by setting up a third interview. Two participants returned their documents with grammatical revisions to the highlighted quotes. This provided accuracy and creditability. They could see how they were represented, which showed transparency.

Confidentiality

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary, confidential, and anonymous. Participants could elect not to participate any further, and any information provided was deleted. This was stated in every communication. By pursuing the heads of the departments at the target institution for permission to share information about the study, access to the participants was created. The informed consent process provided all information in one place where participants could reference them. The document included the research title, investigator, and department, why they were invited to participate, what they should know about the research, what happens if

they agree to be in it, what happens to the information college, and contact information. Additionally, the informed consent form provided information if a participant would like to withdraw at any time during the study. Confidentiality is achieved by using pseudonyms for all participants and institutions and eliminating all identifying information.

Researcher's Role & Positionality

This research interest stems from my personal career trajectory and growth to a mid-level career professional. Mentorship, creating positive networks, and professional development has been instrumental in my career advancement. However, it was challenging and required me to be strategic. The work does not just speak for itself. At times I experienced frustration from being overlooked for promotions and took on more responsibilities than can be handled to become a viable candidate. It felt calculating to seek mentorship intentionally but once obtained, it made all the difference.

For the research design, I selected hermeneutic phenomenology founded by Martin Heidegger (Laverty, 2003). I chose this approach because it did not require personal biases and preconceived notions to be bracketed. Instead, it allowed for self-reflection, pre-understanding, and for personal biases and assumptions to be embedded into the interpretive process (Laverty, 2003). Self-reflection was inserted in the journaling process. After each interview, part of the debriefing process was journaling thoughts, questions, and reflecting on my personal journey. The hermeneutic circle was incorporated which is defined as "a description of the process of understanding" (Peoples, 2021, p. 32). As I gained more understanding of these experiences, my preconceived notions were revised. Through data analysis, the hermeneutic circle continued as new understandings emerged (Peoples, 2021).

Limitations

There were two main methodological limitations to this study. The location of the study and sector investigated were a limitation. Since this study focused on women at an urban institution on the eastern coast, this did not permit generalization to the overall experiences of women mid-level career professionals. However, this perspective added to the literature. It assisted in closing a research gap specifically in looking at the pathway and lived experiences of this population related to the route to senior-level leadership positions. It would be beneficial to see future studies that include a larger population from diverse regions across different university types, such as Predominantly White institutions (PWI) versus historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU), or two years versus four years.

Due to the global pandemic, COVID-19, the implementation of this study was conducted virtually. All correspondence was conducted via email, and data was collected virtually via the video conferencing technology Zoom®. Originally, observations of women in their day-to-day activities, including meetings or their interactions with others in their offices, were intended to be included in the data collection. While this detour was not harmful to this study, the ability to observe these women in their professional environment would have added another level of analysis in this environment.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This study was designed to examine the shared experiences of self-identified mid-level career women professionals at an urban public four-year higher education institution. During the semi-structured interviews, the participants were asked to discuss their professional path until their current job position. Interview questions included exploring challenges faced, workplace mistreatment based on gender, and a reflection of supportive relationships, mentorship, professional development, and institutional support in their career. The research questions were:

1. What are the shared experiences of mid-level women professionals in higher education?

2. How do work relationships influence the experiences of mid-level women professionals in higher education?

Chapter 4 presents the research findings of this study. It will begin with describing the demographic data of the participants and the definition of mid-level professionals. Then a presentation of the emergent themes that address both research questions. Three categories of themes emerged from this study: (a) perceptions of leadership styles & professional identity, (b) challenges, support, & morale in the workplace, and (c) work relationships influence on career growth. This chapter will conclude with a summary of the findings.

Demographic Data

The recruitment email was delivered via email to six administrators who have staff in the areas of student affairs, advising, diversity-focused offices, and within an individual college. Twenty-nine women administrators completed the interest form. Six were eliminated as they did not meet the requirements of identifying as a mid-level professional and working at the target institution. Therefore, nineteen women moved forward to complete the second demographic

survey and participate in one-on-one interviews. The findings from this study focused on the

experiences of fifteen of the nineteen participants. Their responses in their interviews best-

reflected topics that addressed the research questions. Descriptive data on the respondents are

presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Participant Demographic Data

Name	Age	What is your ethnic background/race?	What is your current title?	What are your years of professional experience?	Years of supervisory experience
Amber	35-44	White/Caucasian	Executive Director	11-20 Years	6-10 years
Dylan	45-54	Black/African American	Assistant Director	21 years or more	1-5 years
Jasmine	45-54	Black/African American	Assistant Director	21 years or more	Less than 1 year
Josephine	35-44	Black/African American	Associate Director	11-20 Years	More than 10 years
Karen	35-44	White/Caucasian	Assistant Dean	11-20 Years	6-10 years
Kiera	35-44	White/Caucasian	Associate Director	11-20 Years	More than 10 years
Laine	35-44	White/Caucasian	Associate Director	11-20 Years	6-10 years
Leah	35-44	White/Caucasian	Assistant Dean	6-10 years	6-10 years
Madison	45-54	White/Caucasian	Associate Director	11-20 Years	1-5 years
Melanie	25-34	Black/African American	Assistant Director	6-10 years	Less than 1 year
Michelle	25-34	White/Caucasian	Assistant Director	6-10 years	1-5 years
Naomi	35-44	Black/African American	Associate Director	11-20 Years	More than 10 years
Natalie	25-34	White/Caucasian	Assistant Director	6-10 years	6-10 years
Olivia	55-64	White/Caucasian	Assistant Director	21 years or more	1-5 years
Victoria	35-44	White/Caucasian	Assistant Director	11-20 Years	6-10 years

Fifty percent (n=7) of participants were in the 35- 44 age group. Twenty-two percent

(n=3) were between the ages of 25-34. Twenty-one (n=3) percent were in the 45-54 age group.

Seven percent (n=1) were between the ages of 55-64. In terms of ethnic background/race, 64%

(n=10) of participants were White/Caucasian, and 36% (n= 5) were Black/ African American. For title, 47% (n=7) were assistant directors, 33% (n= 5) were associate directors, 13% (n=2) were an assistant dean, and 7% (n=1) was an executive director. Eighty percent (n= 12) of the applicants held a master's degree, and the other 20% (n=3) had doctorates. Twenty percent (n=3) had 21 years or more of professional experience, 53% (n= 8) had 11- 20 years, and 27% (n=4) had 6 - 10 years. For supervisory experience, 20% (n= 3) had more than 10 years, 40% (n=6) had 6 - 10 years, 27% (n=4) had 1-5 years, and 13% (n=2) had less than 1 year of experience. Other questions on the demographic survey asked for participant feedback on additional topics, which include supportive work relationships and mentorship, mentorship, professional development, institutional support, and morale at an office level and institutional level. This data will be shown in more detail throughout the findings.

Defining Mid-level Career Professional

In addition to the themes presented, this study also provided the opportunity to delve into the mid-level career professional category. As a part of the recruitment process, the participants were asked to select how they identify: entry-level, mid-level, or senior-level. The participants self-identified as mid-level career professionals. Figure 9 illustrates the results from the interest form and demographic table. It details the women's current title, supervisory experience, and professional experience.

Figure 9

CURRENT TITLE
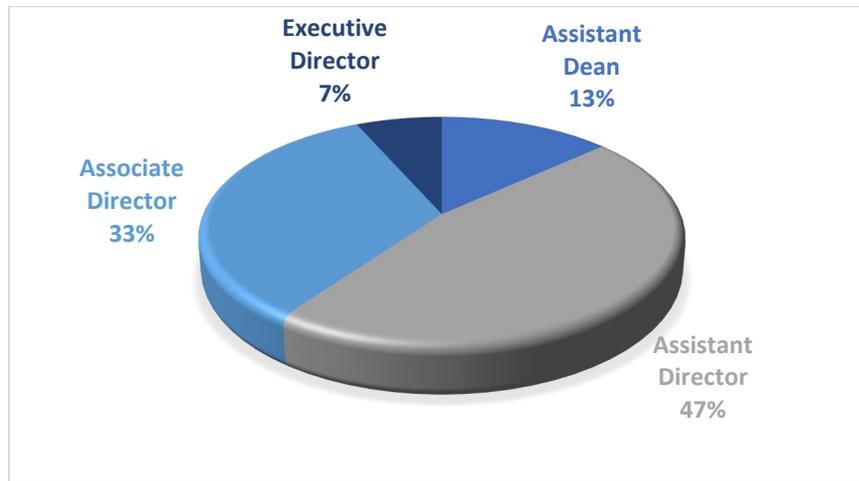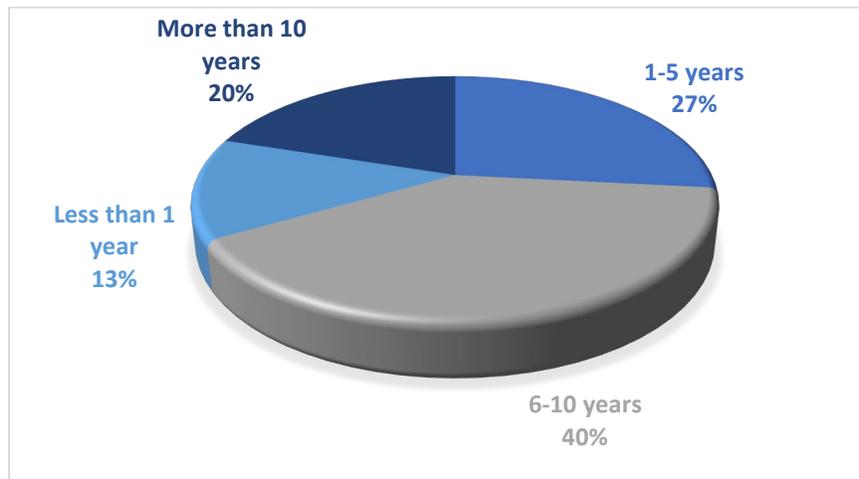
SUPERVISORY EXPERIENCE
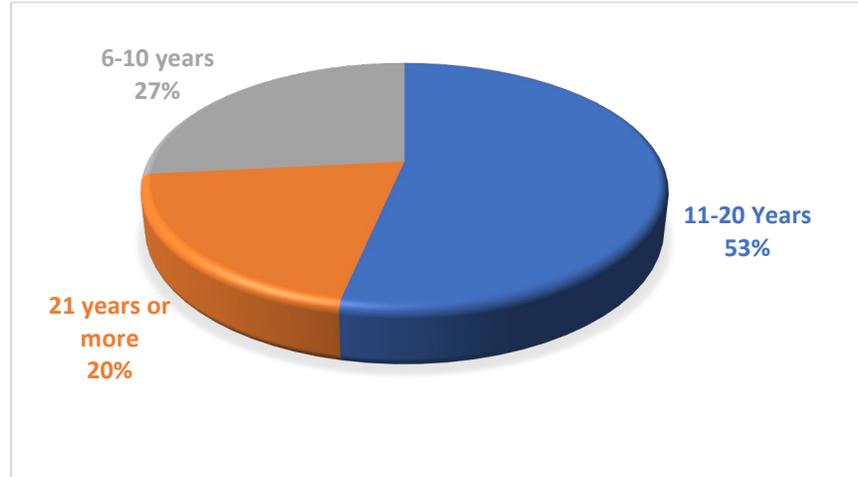
For current job title, forty-seven percent (n=7) were assistant directors, thirty-three percent (n= 5) were associate directors, thirteen percent (n= 2) were assistant deans, and seven percent (n=1) was an executive director. Twenty percent (n= 3) had 21 years or more of professional experience, fifty-three percent (n=8) had 11- 20 years, and twenty-seven percent (n=4) had 6- 10 years. For supervisory experience, twenty percent (n=3) had more than 10 years, forty percent (n= 6) had 6- 10 years, twenty-seven percent (n=4) had 1-5 years, and thirteen percent (n=2) had less than 1 year of experience.

This information was investigated further in the first interview with the question: What is your definition of a mid-level career professional, and why do you believe you fit this category? The responses included that the mid-level career professional was defined as someone who: was not the head of a unit; had a "seat at the table,"; and was not the final decision-maker. The mid-level professional definition depended on the years of experience, title, and there were mixed responses about whether supervisory experience was needed. Amber considered mid-level career professionals to be based on location in the organizational chart and how close you are to the president. She stated,

I guess I, for whatever reason, based it a little bit on proximity to the president. Like, how many degrees you are removed from sort of the ultimate decision? I know there are multiple stakeholders but thinking about that one kind of piece up at the top there, [either the] provost or vice provost. That's definitely clearly a senior-level leadership to me in what they participate in their decision-making authority for the entire organization as a whole, as opposed to where I am, where I am in a decision-making authority place for my team. And I can advise and consult up, which I do often frequently praise to my boss. But I'm not going to call the president, and I'm not going to call the provost, and it's kind of like that, it's almost like socially imposed, I guess, the mid-level professional.

Kiera's responses supported the perceptions of Amber. She stated,

Mid-level is like an assistant or an associate director where you have direct reports under you, you have a direct supervisor over you, but you're not like the top level in your department.

Naomi spoke to the decision-making, having a seat at the table, and supervisory experience. She stated,

I think a mid-level [professional] is someone who is required to have some supervisor, some supervisory requirements, whether it's direct or indirect engagement, and but is not, I guess, not at the table, you know. So if you're not at the table making a decision, you're not the person you know, maybe a majority of the rules are laypersons doing the work. You're the one in the middle trying to, like, navigate those two places. And I think that's where I'm falling into place. I have the senior leaders telling me what their goals are. And I'm like, all right. Now I got to kind of direct the people, the rest of the people on this mission. And that's where I find a mid-level person.

Findings

Several topics emerged during the analysis of the data. These seven themes were organized into three categories: (a) perceptions of leadership styles & professional identity, (b) challenges, support, & morale in the workplace, and (c) work relationships influence on career growth. The first finding, *perceptions of leadership styles & professional identity,* allowed reflection on their professional identities and what they consider effective leadership styles. The second finding, *challenges, support, & morale in the workplace,* explored their challenges along their career paths and institutional impact through professional development and morale. The last finding is the *work relationships influence on career growth*. This topic was significant as many expressed the importance of cultivating and maintaining relationships in the workplace. Together, these three areas illustrate the experiences of women mid-level career professionals along their career paths in this study.

Perceptions of Leadership Styles & Professional Identity

During the interview, the participants were asked these questions: What is your professional identity? Do you consider yourself to be a leader? If not, what skills are needed to be an effective leader? What do you know now that you wished you knew before? Overall, the respondents consider themselves to be women leaders. Many felt that they had room to grow in this area but still see themselves in this light. This spoke to their ability to lead and strong leadership self-efficacy.

Professional Identity. For this study, professional identity was defined as reflecting on their reputation and how they were perceived in the office environment, on projects, and as a supervisor. The participants were conscious of how they were perceived in the workplace and described relationship building and having a clear vision as a part of their professional identity.

Relationships will be discussed more in detail later, but a common strength was still listed. Specifically, the ability to create relationships, be a "supporter of people," encourage the development of others, build community, and cultivate a positive team culture was described. Leah spoke more on cultivating team culture:

> We worked really well together because I was really intentional about how I set the vibe for the team in terms of communication, collaboration, feedback, [and] working together. You know, I don't need the idea of a hierarchy or being demanding, power trip, anything like that. It's like how can we all move together? And sometimes, that's the slower route. I think that's what I understood, which is like you can get things done quickly by being demanding and forceful, but you're going to really potentially damage the culture of your team by doing so. If you really want to work on buy-in, transparency, and people moving with you [is essential]. It's not for me. It's for the work. It's for our students. It's for the college.

Other participants engaged in relationship-building by giving constructive feedback, growth and advancement opportunities, and active listening. Kiera supported this by stating, "I really try to advance all of my team members and see them for what they don't see in themselves." Another characteristic in supporting a team dynamic and strength was being a problem solver. Josephine stated:

> I think another big part of my professional identity is problem-solving; people do see me as a problem solver. And, in the [office], people are seeking me out to solve things big, small, or in between, [and] kind of talk through.

Josephine went on to speak about how she had to learn not to be as available. She found that she supported the development of others through her absence as they started to develop other skills.

Natalie spoke to having a clear vision for the unit as part of her professional identity. In preparing for an interview for a promotion once, she asked her coworkers what her strengths were. She stated:

> It's hard to know the things that you're good at. One of the things that they shared was I was someone who always had a clear vision and that even though I had a clear vision, that vision always had room for other people's visions. That it wasn't this like one-directional - we are moving forward no matter what it was. I have an idea. I have an understanding. I have confidence in the way I see this going. What do you think about that? How do your ideas get incorporated into that or not? And does it change your direction?

By having a clear vision, this allowed for direction of the unit and room for collaboration. Lastly, participants talked about the ability to create buy-in and think about the bigger picture. Amber stated:

> What I have found [that] has made me most successful is definitely my ability to create relationships and buy in. We don't have to be on the same page about something, but if we can come to an agreement on the same facts, I'm happy with that. I'm good. We don't have to get along right, [just be] friendly and cordial. So, I feel like that's always been that negotiation buy-in relationship-building piece [that] I have seen as being really vitally important for me. And also, the successful women that I watch around me. Like the things that I notice that they do really well is kind of the ability to bring others into the fold and to get it done. Ultimately, to come to some conclusion. If it means coming to a consensus or making some concessions, you do what you got to do to get it done, and you figure it out. You don't get a thick head about it. And if it is not going your way, you

just shut it down, which I have also seen less effectively. So I think those are some of the qualities. I also think in my role now, like the ability to kind of think bigger picture.

This was backed by transparency and pragmatism. Participants admitted that this was challenging, and these skills were developed as they climbed the ladder.

Leadership Styles. Part of this study explored what makes effective leaders and if these women considered themselves leaders. Most stated yes, they do consider themselves to be leaders within their units. However, a phrase that was often repeated in these interviews was "There are a lot of women in higher education." This permitted participants to identify a woman professional and observe how they led and handled situations. Some qualities identified as an effective leader were strong emotional intelligence, not being impulsive, "thoughtful decision making," "consistent strategizing," and being two/three steps ahead. Madison supported this by stating,

I do consider myself to be a leader. Do I think that I'm a fully developed leader? No, I think that I still have a ways to go. But I do think that I have made gains. And I also feel fortunate that I worked with that mentor who has [the] expertise and emotional intelligence because I feel like that rubs off on me. And I think that emotional intelligence is a big part [of] being a good leader.

Another point that was revealed was the fact that you do not need to supervise in order to be a leader. Dylan stated:

I consider myself [to be] a leader, but it's difficult when you don't supervise others to practice a lot of that leadership. I kind of went into the Leadership Academy to kind of learn how to be a leader without no one to supervise. There are some people in senior administration who don't supervise anyone, but they lead.

Dylan participated in an institutional program to learn more about supervision since that was not a responsibility in her current position. She continued to see herself in the role of a women leader.

The comparison between men and women in the workplace was an exposed aspect of leadership. Olivia stated:

There's a point at which we had the dean and three of the four assistant deans were all women, and our school was a lot more in tune with communication. We had more events to include all staff, faculty, and advisors. We would all be included in every conversation because there was an understanding of, hey, who needs to know? But sometimes it's, you have to work extra hard to get people to realize that everybody needs to be on the same page. Yeah, women leaders tend to think of that, not always, but they tend to think that a little bit [more] because they look at the bigger picture a little bit better. Male folks in positions of power tend to be very like decision focus rather than focused on like how is this going to affect this? This could affect [this]? This going to affect that? And even if you bring something like that up, if the person in a position of leadership doesn't respect the process, they only want action. And that's a dynamic, a male/women dynamic. But it tends to be a feminine/masculine or male/women dynamic where women want to see the whole process because that's just how it tends to be how we work to make sense of life, we have to. And for men, [it's] what I can do this thing right now, here's your answer. Here's your solution. But it's like, hold on. What about this? What about that? What about this? So we have to be big picture-minded all the time and then don't necessarily. Not that they can't. It's not what I'm saying, but it just isn't required in the same way all the time.

From their experiences, men professionals are decision focused whereas women professionals promote more communication and community building. Victoria echoed the difference through her words. She stated, "Mediocrity in men is completely acceptable, and perfection in women is required just for entry." In participants' view, women must work harder in their jobs than men, and once there, women promote more communication and community within the organization.

What I Wish I Knew. The interview question: "What do you know now that you wish you knew before?" explored what the participants have learned at this point in their careers that they did not know at the beginning of their journey. Responses included being more confident, advocating for oneself, career trajectories were not straight lines, and managing up. Kiera said, "There's been a couple of distinct times where I didn't have community, so I created it. But what I wish I knew earlier was how to advocate for myself better. I taught myself how to network, and I just developed that." This participant found that she had to rely on herself to create opportunities and network. Josephine detailed about being more confident in oneself, she stated,

> I wish I knew my own wisdom. I know a lot of stuff. I've been here a long time and even before I was here I had a lot of life experiences, you know? Yeah, I had worked a lot and lived a lot before coming to this institution, but I think I was still really unsure of myself as an administrator because it was like my first position where I was supervising people. But I didn't take into account how much I already knew about people and knew about working with people.

Kiera expressed that she had the experience, but she needed the confidence and to believe in herself. She understood she would not have been hired if she had been unable to do the position.

Challenges, Support, & Morale in the Workplace

During their interviews, the participants were asked the following questions surrounding challenges, institutional support, and morale: What are some challenges you faced in your career? In your current role? Any challenges faced due to being a woman of color? Have you felt you were mistreated in any way because you are a woman? Has mentorship played an active role in your career path? Have supportive work relationships influenced your career mobility? If so, please tell me about that experience. Tell me about the level of support of the institution. What institutional supported professional development opportunities have you participated in? How do you perceive morale at an office level? Institutional level? The participants' challenges included lack of opportunity for advancement within the institution, invisibility, lack of support from supervisors, and balancing family obligations. Office-level morale was expressed as positive, while institutional-level morale was low. Opportunities for participation in institutional supported programs and initiatives were encouraged and external opportunities such as national organizations.

Challenges faced. As stated by the literature, women professionals face many challenges along their career path. This section details the challenges the participants experienced in their professional careers. Four topics emerged from their responses: lack of opportunity for advancement, invisibility, lack of support from supervisors, and family obligations.

Lack of opportunity for advancement. The participants spoke about advancement at the university. Eight participants were able to gain promotions within their units or by changing offices at the same university. One stated that at times "things fell into place." However, most expressed frankly that it is a challenge to gain advancement. Josephine said,

I think also because the way [the institution is] designed, it's hard to move around. It's almost like you don't really benefit from moving around. And so, then if you don't have the ability where you are to move up, you move around. But you can't really make that much more money. The ceiling is so low in so many different ways, you know?

Madison supported this observation through her statement:

I mean, I would say that probably the biggest challenge is the opportunities to advance. I feel like you have more opportunities to advance in your career if you leave your current organization if you're in higher education. But within my own unit, I don't feel like there's really any room for me to move. If I were to move, I would have to leave my current department, which is fine. I mean, that's the way it is.

Others stated the reason people stay was a loyalty to the institution, its mission, and students. Nevertheless, the obstacle of advancement was a threat to growth.

Another challenge was being measured against men. Two areas highlighted by the participants were when interviewing for an opportunity and being overlooked and the expectation of how to embody leadership. Olivia said,

There have been a few opportunities where I've interviewed and been a finalist for a job and a male person got it instead of me. I mean, I don't need to be specific about that, but that has happened to my career. And I feel like sometimes male colleagues get the benefit of the doubt when women colleagues are [a] challenge. It helps when there is a little bit more women leadership. But that doesn't necessarily mean just because somebody is in a position of leadership who's a woman, that they're going to have a different perspective. They've been raised in the same sort of sexist system.

Olivia attributed these experiences to a sexist system that even women fall into when hiring. This again supported the notion that women are a challenge, whereas men get "the benefit of the doubt." Victoria spoke about the expectation of how a woman professional should be in the workplace. She stated,

> We are expected to be like men, and then [if] we are like men, we're told that we're too aggressive and too whatever. But then, when we act more like women, we're told we're too shy, too quiet, too quick to question, [or] too many exclamation points. We can't win. There is no winning. It's crazy.

Victoria expressed the frustration of not being able to win. There were many expectations for how women should lead and act in the higher education workplace.

Invisibility. Another challenge experienced by the mid-level career women in this study was invisibility. Participants described several examples where women who speak up were ignored due to being a woman and/or not having the professional title that granted them authority to speak out. Josephine stated,

> I've definitely been in spaces where, you know, what I've said has been disregarded. The person next to me says the same thing, and I'm like, well, I just said that. Or, you know, well, my boss and I will go to a meeting together. I mean, I can think of many instances where we'll go to a meeting together and they're just talking to her but I'm actually the decision maker in this particular instance or whatever the case may be.

Kiera's experiences supported these perceptions of title consciousness and invisibility. She said,

> I know a challenge that I've had in my own development is how title-conscious people are. I've asked to be in certain conversations and been told no because I don't have the proper title, where I'm like," how am I supposed to learn"? If I'm like, "I just want to

listen. I'm not going to say a word." I mean, this was pre-pandemic. So, it would have

been in person, like, how am I supposed to learn if I can't be in these conversations and

[receive] the feedback? A senior-level administrator [told me] that having people of not a

director title changes the temperature in the room. People won't be as candid as they

would be with each other if there's, like direct reports in the room, basically.

In this instance, Kiera wanted to learn but was not a part of specific conversations due to her

title. Naomi tied in her perception that these experiences were linked to campus politics. She

stated,

Working in [higher education] is political, and I'm just tired of politics. And I feel the

more you move up, the more politics you engage.

Naomi voiced that navigating politics was draining if you did not have the support of someone

assisting you. Kiera conveyed that she was unable to continue to learn at times because of a lack

of access to certain conversations.

Lack of support from supervisors. Participants described a lack of support from

supervisors as a challenge for women in the workplace. This lack of support was experienced in

the form of lack of communication, not being supervised closely, and the possibility of the

supervisor taking the direct report's ideas and disguising them as their own. Keira stated,

One of the challenges I've had, especially being in both of my jobs [here], is [that] since

I've known my supervisors, I think they assume that I don't need to be supervised as

closely. Like, "oh, she already knows this." Because I was off-site, they didn't come up;

they didn't check on me because they trusted me to run it. Like it was out of sight, out of

mind. And I always had to be like, "am I doing a good job? What should I do

differently?" And I remember, towards the end, I really started challenging my

supervisor, and I could tell he was just getting frustrated because I feel like he didn't have

anything to give me. But he wouldn't just say, like, you've reached your peak here.

[Instead] he goes, well, you know, "I heard [another office] is hiring."

Karen spoke to the lack of communication when a supervisor was not happy with their direct

reports.

There is a supervisor that I had a few years ago. And something changed or turned. We

had a really collegial relationship, and I felt like aspects of mentorship, given that she

was my senior not only in age but in position. And somewhere along the line, I mean, this

sounds really strange to say, but somewhere along the line, it felt like I became a threat to

her. She wasn't as communicative. Kind of held [things] close to the vest and wouldn't

bring me into the loop on things.

Instead of communicating with Karen, the supervisor chose not to share.

Family obligations. The final challenge depicted was the effect of family obligations on a

woman's professional career. Laine stated,

There's like a caste system and, I think, [it] can be really challenging for many

women. They get kind of derailed in their careers when they have kids. I think that's

probably really true of me, and a lot of women kind of run into that. There are a series

of challenges, I think, really for women that have to do with child-rearing, and it

really does feel like an either/or. Like either you make time for your kids and your

family, or you pursue leadership roles. It really feels like you can't do both well.

There has to be a tradeoff, and it's a very difficult one.

There are decisions to be made when you are in your role. It is a difficult one to make. Laine

further detailed why you may not see many women in leadership roles. She stated,

There are many higher education leadership roles where you don't really need to have come up through the academic ranks. But there are some of them where you do. And so it's maybe not that surprising that you don't see so many women deans because that's a role where you really have to have proven yourself. You know, you have to basically have tenure. You have to have proven yourself in terms of research and getting grants and that kind of stuff. And, you know, that's that is really tough. If you have kids, it's really difficult to balance those things.

Participants expressed that women must prove themselves for leadership roles which is difficult when you have family obligations.

Impact of Institutional Support & Morale. The institution contributes to employee satisfaction, retention, and growth. This study examined the types of support the institution provided to its employees. Specifically, the participants were asked about institutionally supported opportunities they participated in and how they perceived morale at an office level and institutional level.

Morale. The question of morale at the office and institutional level appeared twice in this study, first in the demographic survey (Appendix B) and again as a question in the second interview. Morale is described as the satisfaction of the individual and the satisfaction of a group of people within a unit in a campus environment and its commitment to the institution (Johnsrud, Heck, & Rosser, 2000). Figure 1 details the responses from the demographic survey on how the participants perceived morale at an office level.

Figure 1
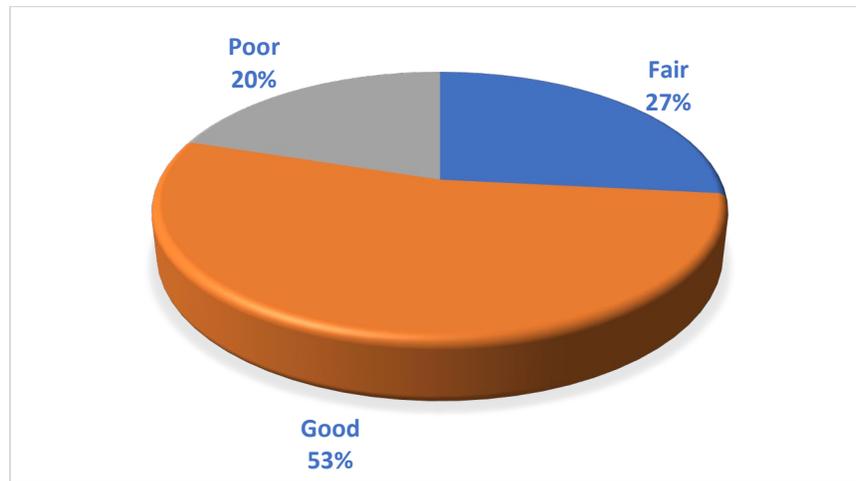
Zero percent (n=0) stated that office-level morale was excellent. Fifty- three percent (n=8) stated it was good. Twenty-seven percent (n= 4) stated that it was fair. Twenty percent (n=3) stated that it was poor. In the interview, they offered more detail about what morale felt like at their institution. Overall, the women stated that it was positive. However, employees were drained. Amber stated, "like not having met a lot of people, I think, within my team, it's pretty positive. But people are tired. They're definitely tired. And that seems to be pretty consistent." Also, it was stated that the office morale was influenced by institutional morale, which is detailed in the next section.

It is essential to note that this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and through a period of increased protests highlighting racial injustice. Some of the responses in this section were a direct response to those experiences. Figure 2 depicts the demographic responses to morale at the institutional level.

Figure 2

HOW DO YOU PERCEIVE MORALE AT AN INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL?
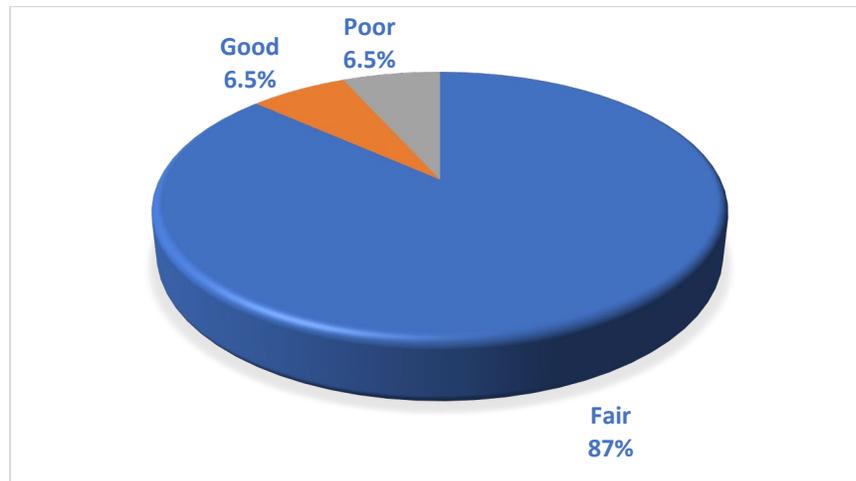
Overall, most of the participants ranked institutional morale as fair at eighty-seven percent (n= 13). Six-point five percent (n=1) stated it was poor, six-point five percent (n=1) said good, and zero percent (n=0) said excellent. Josephine spoke to morale under COVID-19. She said:

In general, the morale is pretty high. The whole COVID thing was like a huge curveball. But we pulled it together. We have a [office] that's running successfully, but it was hard. And the messaging from the institution is lacking. I feel like you don't trust it. They say one thing, and you're like, "well, is it actually going to be that?" You don't feel like they're actually thinking about the staff. You feel like, you know, it's all motivated by money, which in one respect you understand because you need money to operate. But within the [office], the morale is good. Institutional morale is also impacting office morale. I also think the university response to police brutality and racism has been ineffective, and that has impacted, I think, institutional morale, office morale, at least among some of us. Yeah, I think there are ways that the university paid lip service [in]

caring about Black and brown bodies, and that shows in different ways, and I think that people see that.

Kiera detailed further thoughts around institutional morale during this time.

I mean, especially because right now, I would say it's pretty low. There's a very small pocket of people that are allowed to make decisions right now, and we're all revolving around them. Not everything makes sense.

Communication during this time from the institutional level influenced the morale at an office level. A small number of people made decisions for the large institution, and Kiera did not find it transparent.

Another factor affecting institutional morale was the opportunity for advancement, detailed in the challenges section. Figure 3 shows the responses from the demographic survey.

Figure 3

How do you perceive (personal) opportunities for advancement?
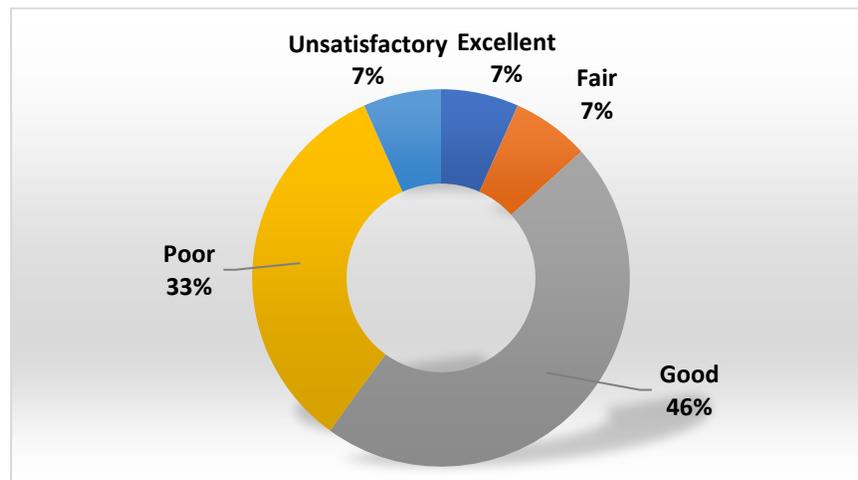
The results were mixed. Seven percent (n=1) stated it was excellent. Forty- six percent (n=7) stated it was good. Seven percent (n=1) stated it was fair. Thirty-three percent (n=5) stated it was poor. Seven percent (n=1) rated it unsatisfactory. Kiera stated,

There are people that are in their positions for a very long time. And I'm sure that's

probably true of higher [education], but it's very hard to move up or get promotions

because of the politics of HR. And that can be discouraging, especially with a lot of the

younger professionals right now.

Overall, responses to opportunities for advancement were mixed. While some have been able to

grow in their positions or across the institution, others have had trouble doing so. Josephine

speaks to the turnover she witnessed concerning morale. She stated,

[I have] seen turnover because of low morale. I think most of the turnover that I've

witnessed is due to people's inability to move around in the university. They want to

make the advancements that they deserve, and so they leave. And sometimes they leave

only for a little bit and come back so that they can [get paid more]. Yeah, because the

university will [pay more to someone] coming from outside [than] inside. But most of the

turnover I've seen has been because of that. [However,] even when the morale is low,

people still are committed, I think, to the students, the types of students that come to the

institution, and the institution's mission; even when the institution isn't committed itself

to the mission.

Natalie's experiences mirrored those of Keira. She shared,

I have heard a handful of colleagues say, "I didn't have a good supervisor, but I left

because of the culture." "I left because of the overarching university culture or

organizational culture."

While opportunities for advancement and more pay were a factor, organizational culture also

contributed. Victoria believed that women need to start working together more to address these

issues. She stated,

I do think that there [should be] more conversations with women about being women in

the workplace. But we don't do it. Anecdotally it happens, as you're leaving a meeting or

whatever. But there's not, at least I haven't experienced [here], any really intentional way

of addressing issues that affect all women in the workplace. And I feel like if we're really

striving for this like change, what inclusion looks like [at this institution], like that's a

place to start because we have so much diversity in the types of women or the variety of

women and the diversity of the women who work [here], who are committed to doing the

work and like because we're more likely to do the work than men are.

Overall, morale at the office level was positive. However, morale at an institutional level was

mixed. Institutional morale shaped perceptions of office morale. It was further influenced by the

external challenges of COVID-19 and racial injustice in the United States.

    Professional Development. Professional development was met with positive responses.

Several of the participants felt that there were multiple opportunities to participate in

professional development internally and externally through the avenue of professional

organizations, conferences, and workshops. This also was supported by their supervisors. Figure

4 represents responses from the demographic survey on participation in professional

development within the institution and externally.

Figure 4

PARTICIPATION IN INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL SUPPORTED LEADERSHIP PROFESSIONAL

DEVELOPMENT.
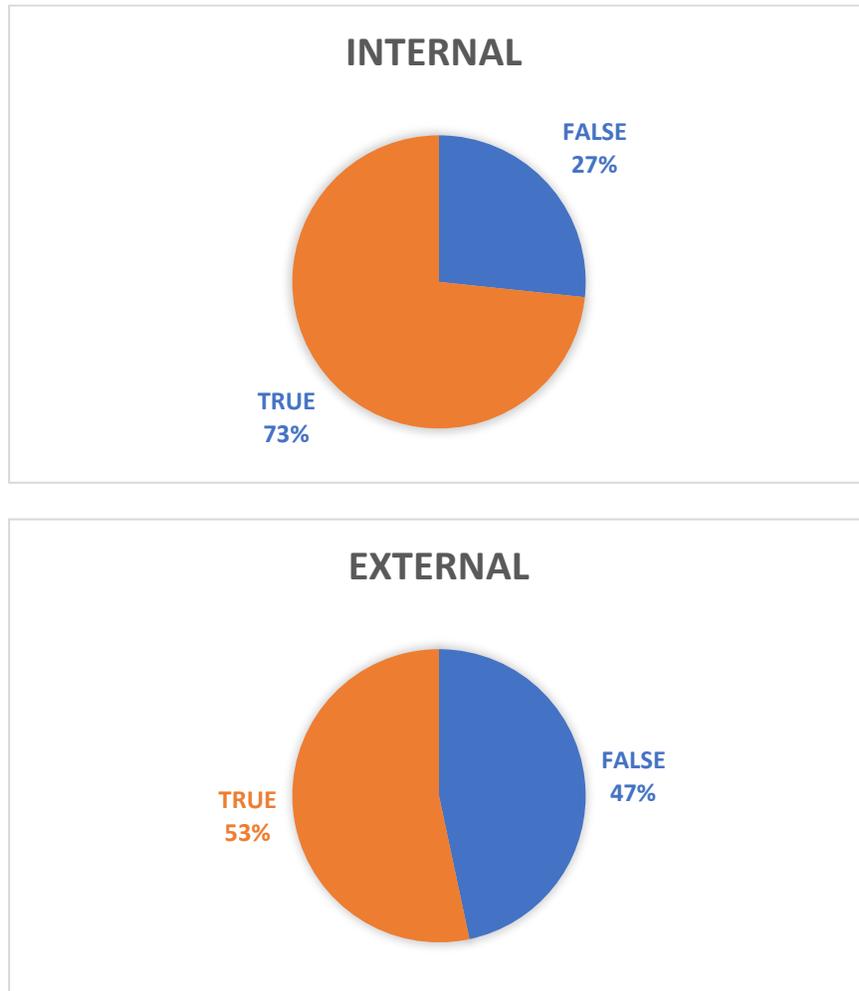
Seventy-three percent (n=11) participated in internal opportunities, and twenty-seven percent (n=4) did not. Fifty-three percent(n=8) participated in external opportunities, and forty-seven percent (n=7) did not. Some attended HR-sponsored workshops but overall felt there was repetition or recycled presentations. Additionally, some offices have what was described as a good system for in-house professional development, with a dedicated person or committee providing this to the unit. Several of the participants said that they attend conferences.

Work Relationships Influence on Career Growth

The participants stated that relationships in the workplace assisted in their professional careers. Participants in this study discussed a few types of relationships, such as supportive relationships, sponsorship, and mentorship. For the purpose of this study, supportive relationships are guidance in an unofficial capacity. Mentorship is guidance in an official capacity where both participants established this relationship through conversations. Sponsorship is when an individual vouches for another individual, with or without their knowledge.

Supportive Relationships. Figure 5 represents the responses for the influence of supportive work relationships on career mobility from the demographic survey.

Figure 5

SUPPORTIVE WORK RELATIONSHIPS HAVE INFLUENCED MY CAREER MOBILITY.
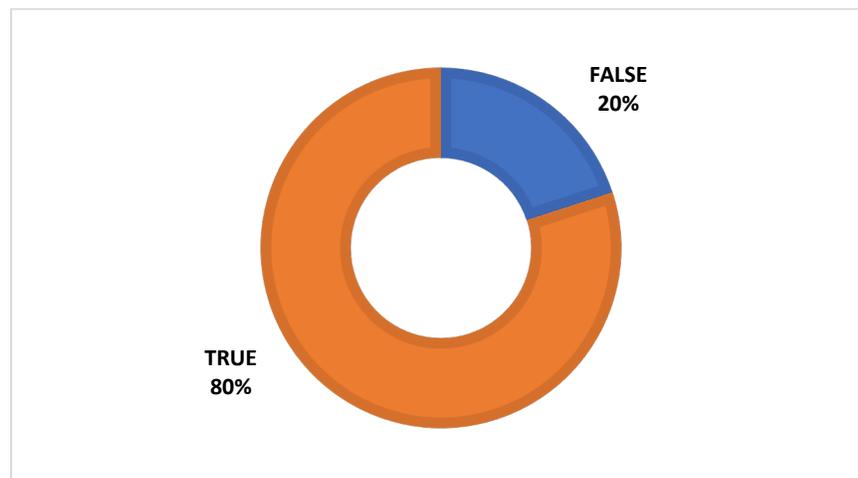
Eighty percent (n=12) agreed with the statement that supportive work relationships have influenced their career mobility. Naomi believed it is vital to build relationships. She said,

The only support I see is relationships. That's the only thing. There's no other way in this space unless you really take the time to build relationships. You'll get the sponsors that will say, "oh, yes, she does a good job"... What matters the most to me is the people that I

engage with [people] and how I am building a relationship with them and [an] understanding. And I guess it's more important to me, the relationship, than actually doing the jobs I do. The job will get done.

Many stated that the supportive relationships they experienced came in the form of colleagues and supervisors. Josephine stated,

Yeah, so [when] I think [about] supportive relationships, typically, I think about my boss. She can provide insight and guidance in a specific area. Like what I need to do to navigate this institution, you know, hands down, she's going to knock that out of the park and help me to really see and understand, you know, all that's in front of me. So, yeah, I tend to think of the support of workplace relations as supportive relationships in that way. They can help with one aspect and, you know, career development mobility.

Michelle stated that colleagues could be a supportive resource. She stated,

Our boss was not particularly good at his job. But we also kind of all ended up like laterally mentor[ing] each other. We started a group basically to be like we have noticed that our ideas get shot down if they aren't supported by others in the room. Basically, if one or two people backed up an idea, it would be taken up. But if it was only one person saying it, it would be like set aside. So we basically started actively thinking [about] how we were going to support each other in meetings and back each other up with policies and things like that. And so we [would] have meetings on purpose to talk about that, which was very helpful. Also, reading each other's materials for things like giving each other feedback, sort of like actively providing what we were missing from a good manager. So, like, we sort that out on purpose and help each other with it. That was helpful, but I think after grad school, it's mostly been like colleagues helping colleagues.

Melanie's reflection on this topic corroborated the experiences of both Josephine and Michelle. She stated,

> I have colleagues that I learn from, and we learn from each other. But I wouldn't necessarily say they're my mentors. I do think that I've learned a lot because I had the same supervisor for the last eight years. And so, I've definitely learned quite a bit from him. I think that he had an impact on my career path in terms of he was a supportive supervisor. He created an environment that made me want to stay in the role that I was in.

All three participants spoke about the important role supportive relationships played in the workplace.

Sponsorship. Sponsorship refers to when an individual, often at a higher professional level, will vouch for another individual, influencing their career and reputation. This term was not familiar to the researcher before conducting these interviews. In asking about supportive relationships in the workplace, specifically around mentorship, three participants spoke to the assistance of a sponsor in their career. These sponsors often don't have a direct connection with the individual. Naomi detailed,

> I think I've had more sponsors than mentors. And so individuals that I've worked with… got to know me and my skills that they would validate that, yeah, no direct like guidance or mentoring from them.

Naomi continued to state the difference between sponsorship and mentorship,

> I've always seen sponsorship as an ally, someone who's willing to validate your credentials, validate [your] work ethic, validate things about you, and even make efforts to kind of help push or drive you to your next level. I think mentorship is more of a personal one-on-one connection. Understanding really like where I want to go, my

dreams, what are my challenges in my career, or some of my weaknesses and strengths that should I go on. Or just giving me more personal insight to their experience and work. Sponsorship was mainly articulated by the black women in this study. It served as a chance to have their work validated, which assisted in career progression.

Mentorship. In the conversation of workplace relationships, this study explored the role of mentorship and how it factored along their career path. On the demographic survey during the recruitment process, the participants were asked three questions: How do you perceive (personal) opportunities for mentorship? (Figure 6); I am currently a mentor to someone (Figure 7), and I currently have a mentor (Figure 8).

Figure 6

HOW DO YOU PERCEIVE (PERSONAL) OPPORTUNITIES FOR MENTORSHIP?
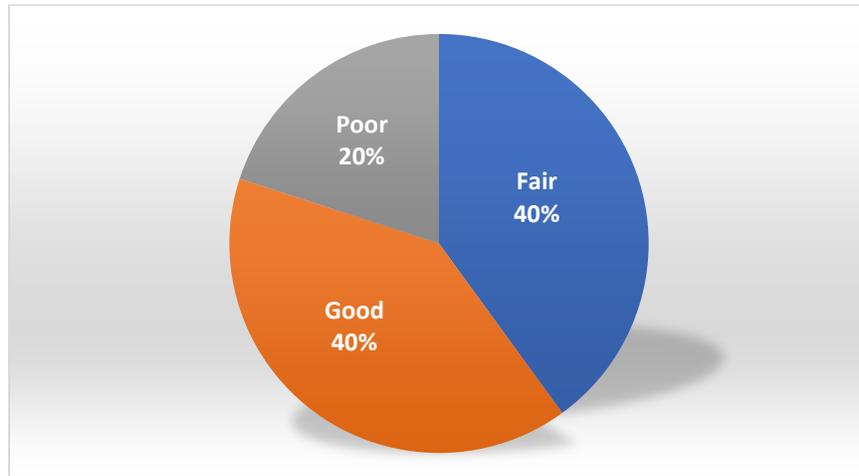
Figure 7

I AM CURRENTLY A MENTOR TO SOMEONE.
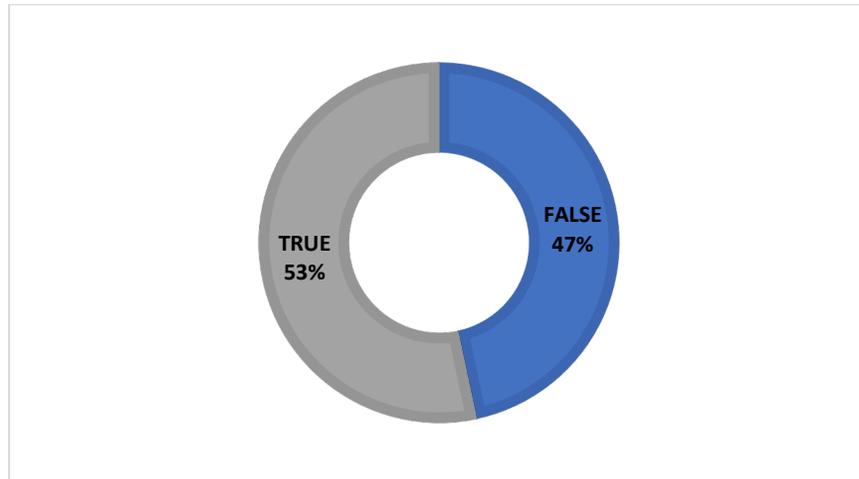
Figure 8

I CURRENTLY HAVE A MENTOR.
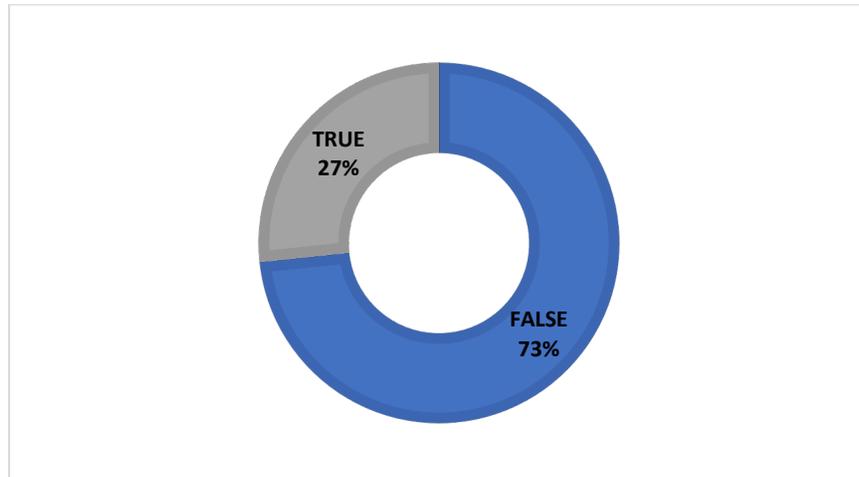
As illustrated in the figure, forty percent (n= 6) of the participants stated that the opportunity for mentorship was good. Also, forty percent (n=6) stated it was fair. Twenty percent (n=3) of participants deemed these opportunities to be poor. Regarding whether the participant was a mentor, fifty-three percent (n=8) said that statement was true, and forty-seven percent (n=7) were

false. Twenty-seven percent (n= 4) stated they have a mentor and seventy-three percent (n=11) said they did not have a mentor.

Mentorship performs an invaluable role in a woman's career. Mentors assist in navigating their career path, served as a soundboard through decisions, and were a cheerleader in seeing skills that the individual may not see within themselves. Josephine stated,

Mentorship has definitely played an active role in my path. Yeah, I would say without a doubt that I wouldn't be where I was or am today without the influence of people in my life helping me to navigate the path, helping me to see the path. I would probably say I had my first mentor in my master's program, that was when first someone took me under their wing. And since then, you know, I've consistently had at least one person that I count as a mentor seeking out their advice as I'm making decisions or considering certain things.

She continued to state,

So I think a lot of times it was just hard for me to see myself, to see the skills that I had, to see what I brought to places. And so the mentors that I've had really helped me to…see my skill and to see where they fit in some places. One of the ways they were really integral to me was understanding what was in front of me, and what and who I was and what I brought to the table.

Melanie expressed that she wished mentorship was something that was talked about at a younger age. She said,

I wish the importance of mentorship was talked about more at a younger age because I don't think that it was really discussed as much, at least when I was in undergrad. And I think it would have been beneficial to have a mentor. I also think that it probably varies

across career fields, too, because when I first graduated from college, I went into social work, and immediately I had a Black women supervisor. She was my first supervisor. And for that one year, she definitely served [as] a mentor to me. I think it was, again, connected to that job. But I think that had I stayed there longer, then maybe we've done things like that. Like she could have possibly stayed and served, like a role like that. But I think like in academia, like that's like so rare, especially in higher education.

How are these opportunities for mentorship formed? Some women participated in institutional programs centered around specific units or groups of professionals, while others preferred to have mentorship relationships formed organically. Some expressed interest in having a mentorship program that was university-wide. Olivia detailed how this would allow her to build mentorship opportunities, especially since she was at a point in her career where certain people in her area had not been there as long as her. She said,

It would be nice, and maybe pie in the sky, but it would be nice if that was already a prescribed sort of opportunity so that you don't have to be like, "Hi, will you be my mentor?" Like, that's just uncomfortable. It's like saying to someone, "will you be my friend?" Right? Uncomfortable thing to say. And you have to be vulnerable. And I think that's part of what we get to this sort of mid-level management place to be vulnerable feels hard. I've achieved this level of something right now. I want to show what I know. But if I have a mentor, well, do I know? What do I do? So it's kind of, there's a tension there. That being said, I'm also in a position where institutionally looking around, there are very few people in [my area] who've been there longer than I have. That's a problem. I mean, to ask somebody to be my mentor, I'm going to end up mentoring them just as much, which is a bad thing.

She also highlighted the vulnerability as a mid-level career professional and awkwardness in asking someone to be your mentor. But whose responsibility is it to create these mentorships? When asked this question, it was met with mixed responses. Naomi stated,

> I definitely think it's the mentee seeking out the mentor. And I only say this because when I think of where I'm like, I'm a busy professional, I have a family, I have a lot of moving pieces for me to put all my energy into. Just reaching out to you is a lot for me. Takes time, but I'm always open, you know, like my door is open when you, if you need me. And I think that's my approach. But I definitely think if you know that you need this, that you should seek someone to mentor you in that aspect.

Kiera also thought the responsibility should fall on the mentee. She said,

> It's probably on the mentee, like the person who is seeking one because no one's going to know that you want one unless you ask for it. I've thought about asking a few different people, but then I'm not sure what I want from that relationship yet. So I didn't want to say, "Hey, want to be my mentor?" And then, like, "what are your expectations? Are we going to meet every week." or like that whole conversation.? But I think you definitely have to put it out there in the universe unless it's a dynamic where somebody observes that you could use help, and they say, "Hey, would you want to meet with me to learn more about a specific topic."

Natalie draws from her own leadership to determine this responsibility. She said:

> I think from my own personal definition of leadership and how I want to show up for other people, the responsibility would be on the person offering the mentorship to say, like, "I have [the] capacity for this. I see a place where we can connect and grow together. Let me offer that to you." Though, I can easily see that someone who has a

different approach to leadership might say, like, I want someone to identify that they

want me as their mentor and that we have a match and pursue that relationship.

Olivia stated that the responsibility should fall on the individual and the institution. She said,

It's a two-part thing. I believe that there is some institutional responsibility for that to

keep people happy, but also to keep them well trained and informed and feel like they're

valued. But it's also the individual responsibility to ask for people to be their mentors.

To formalize mentorship, it comes with a level of commitment. Some participants stated that

what may prevent them from asking someone to be their mentor was that they do not want "to be

a bother." Laine detailed this further.

I guess because, you know, it's actually been on my to-do list for a while, like my mental

kind of personal to-do list, to investigate the idea of mentorship and to try to figure out

how it works. Because, you know, people talk about having mentors, and I'm like, how

do you, like I would I feel bad, like I can think of people I wish were my mentors. You

know, I have colleagues, more senior colleagues who I really look up to. And I think

they're really smart. And I think they probably could help me and give me advice. And

they know me, they sort of know my personality a little, and probably have insights into

the way that I operate that I could use. But I, I feel guilty asking them to be my mentor

because it feels like it's a time commitment. You know, it's like, "would you like to spend

the next who knows how many years checking in on my progress and caring about me?"

And so, I don't even know how to ask that question. I guess I just feel like it's too much

for me to ask of a person. If they wanted me to be their mentee, they would ask. The

whole thing, there's so much value to it. I think people get so much value from it. So it's

not that I don't in any respect the value of those relationships. I just don't even know

where to start.

This study also investigated what a mentorship relationship would bring to their career and their ideal mentor's characteristics. Some stated elements were navigating the political fences, vouching for individuals (similar to sponsorship), their decision-making process and how they handle decisions, and recognizing and speaking on potential. Natalie stated,

I think I would want a mentor who can help me identify the things that I should be doing.

I also think a mentor right now would be I would benefit a lot from navigating political

environments. Yeah, I think I would benefit greatly from role models who are actively

navigating those environments in ways that resonate with me as a person.

Karen stated,

I don't think I have colleagues to understand the context of which decisions might need to

be made, who I might reach out to for advice or feedback. I think a mentor would be

valuable and just kind of helping me reflect on and stay on track as it relates to [the]

professional trajectory, like, you know, what is all this work like leading towards? And

it's not like trying to strike that balance, and I think I have it right now where it's like just

living in the moment and sort of working with what is in front of me, kind of. Being

satisfied with the moment, but then also projecting out. All right, where is this going?

Where is this leading? I think a mentor would be helpful to just kind of understand at a

high level where I've been and where I'm going and what might be next, because I

certainly wouldn't want to feel or get stuck. I don't feel that way now. I really appreciate

the wisdom and experience of others.

In terms of what their ideal mentor would look like, the findings were mixed. It came down to relatability. Most participants expressed that the individual needed to be a woman or a Black woman due to relatability. Others are not opposed to having a male mentor. Victoria said,

I would prefer to have a women mentor because they would understand, like some of the challenges that I have faced, and maybe have sort of overcome similar challenges. And I think like having a male mentor gives you access to things like vouches for you with other men in a way that like we need, which sucks.

The Black women participants preferred to have mentors who were women of color. Melanie said, "So it's like if I did identify a mentor, like, you would have to be a Black woman who could at least like get me in some of the things that I would experience." Jasmine added,

Ideally, I would want it to be a Black woman. And then I would definitely agree, like a woman, you know. There are these people I can talk to because I have a relationship. That's important to have that rapport, like again is levels of how much I'm going to share with you. But I get real with the Black people because they have similar stories, so they can relate. If it's anything [related] to race, which probably shouldn't be that way, but I would feel more comfortable talking to Black women.

Natalie shared her thoughts on incorporating a male professional as a mentor. She said,

My initial answer, I thought, was going to be that I had connected most with the women leaders in my life, but as I was thinking about it, I actually think I had more male leaders that I sort of received mentorship from and who invested a lot of time and energy. My supervisor in my previous position was male-identified. A previous director of our department was male-identified. Our current director is male-identified. And I would identify those three and the dean of students that I mentioned at my undergrad; he was

male. So those people, I think, have embodied a lot of the things that I am looking to embody as a leader. But I will say the women-identified folks that I have also received mentorship from, I guess, or leadership, we just connected in such a different way. It felt more, I think it just felt a bit more personal. I think folks that are male-identified that I have connected with and are my role models for leadership. They're, the way that they sort of role model, like navigating political environments or things, I think we can kind of see this like weird gendered thing happening with those two groups of people that I identify with.

Natalie continued to state,

I learned more through observing my women mentors and the ways that they approach things, listening to how they would navigate an environment. I think I got more concrete like this, this, and this is what you do hear from my male mentors. And I think to your point that you're raising, like the research showing that men and women might navigate workplaces differently and approach situations differently. I can say that I do think I benefited from having that variety of sort of role models in the workplace. I would also say that a lot of the men that served as leaders to me, the way that they presented their maleness and their masculinity, I do think for some of them challenged sort of mainstream, dominant narratives about masculinity.

One participant communicated that women need to help other women more. Olivia stated,

I feel like women need to pull each other up a little bit more. I mean, maybe we need to be more overt about our interest in helping each other. I mean, your questions are making me think about that, which is, I'm glad, I'm grateful for that. But it does make you realize, if we don't pull each other up, nobody's looking out to help us now. It's not like the

president [is] walking around the university going, "where are the women I can help?"

And besides, that might come off the wrong way. I feel like we could be helping each

other more and being overt about it in such a way that it's appropriate.

It was also important to note that some participants felt they did not need a mentor and that the

supportive relationships in their lives were just as helpful and sufficient.

Summary of Findings

This study examined the experiences of women mid-level professionals in higher

education. These women defined mid-level as someone who: was not the head of the unit, had a

"seat at the table," not the final decision maker, depended on the years of experience and title,

and there were mixed reviews on whether supervisory experience was needed. Based on the

responses from the interest form, demographic questionnaire, and interview, seven themes

emerged and were organized into three categories: (a) perceptions of leadership styles &

professional identity, (b) challenges, support, & morale in the workplace, and (c) work

relationships influence on career growth.

The first set of findings investigated responses reflecting the themes of perceptions of

leadership styles & professional identity. Respondents stated that relationship building, problem-

solving, and clear visions were essential factors to their professional identity. Their team culture

was strengthened through their ability to be supportive, transparent, and give constructive

feedback. Leadership styles were modeled for them through observation of efficient leaders

along their path. Qualities they considered to make an effective leader included strong emotional

intelligence, not being impulsive and "thoughtful decision making," "consistent strategizing,"

and being two/three steps ahead. Several participants highlighted their perceived difference

between men and women leaders. Men were described as more decision focused whereas women leaders promoted more communication and community building.

The second set of findings detailed challenges faced, morale, and institutional support via professional development. Challenges included lack of opportunity for advancement within the institution, invisibility, lack of support from supervisors, and balancing family obligations. The participants described that gender influences the pathway to promotion and higher pay. Perceptions of campus politics influenced participants' ability to be able to sit in on conversations if they did not have the "correct" title. Lack of communication from supervisors or senior administrators, supervisors presenting their ideas as their own, and little direction/too much autonomy contributed to the discussion around low support from supervisors. Lastly, balancing familial obligations with work commitments was described as a challenge.

The study also explored perceptions of morale and institutional support via professional development. For morale, office-level morale was described as positive while institutional-level morale was low. The institutional-level morale was influenced, in part, by the environment in which the study took place, and the COVID-19 pandemic and racial tensions in the U.S. Opportunities for participation in professional development were overwhelmingly positive. Participants believe that there were many opportunities for professional development offered internally by the institution and individual offices, and externally through different national organizations. Many units and supervisors were described as being supportive of participation in these activities.

The third category of findings focused on supportive relationships and mentorship. Participants were absolute about the importance of relationship building. Eighty percent of the participants stated that supportive relationships impact career mobility in a positive way.

Mentorship relationships assisted with navigating participants' professional path and political fences, served as a soundboard for decision making, offered encouragement, and recognized their potential. Eight women served as mentors, and four currently had mentors. There were mixed responses about which was preferred: formal mentorship programs or those formed organically. There were mixed responses regarding whose responsibility it was to create those opportunities: mentors, mentees, and/or the institution. All participants understood the value of mentorship in any form. Several, if not, would participate in a mentorship program. However, several participants felt informal relationships seemed less forced and more organic. When describing who should create these relationships, many stated it should be on the mentee seeking guidance. One participant stated there was a vulnerability and an awkwardness in asking someone to be your mentor that might prevent a mentee from asking. Others stated it should fall on the institution as it would make the employee feel valued or the mentor since their time commitment may be limited and could identify similar skill and potential. When asked what they look for in their mentors, several participants stated relatability. They want to be able to relate to their mentor, whether it is someone with a family or a woman of color looking for another woman of color. The majority of participants stated they would like a women mentor. Others were not opposed to having a male mentor or felt they did not need a mentor at all. A specific type of mentorship role that was introduced was a "sponsor." Sponsorship is when an individual at a higher professional level vouches for another individual, influencing their career growth and reputation. For the Black women, sponsorship was advantageous for validating who they are in the workplace and what they bring to the table. Overall, participants in the study expressed they believe that women could be doing more for other women in terms of supporting them and their career aspirations and sharing experiences.

In summary, the findings of this study assisted in adding to the literature around mid-level professionals in higher education. Having the participants self-identify as mid-level career professionals supported defining what is considered the mid-level role but revealed much ambiguity. There was vagueness around the definition and depicted a range of professional experience and titles, making it harder to determine. Perceptions of effective leadership styles were contradictory. Research says its aggressive, decisive, male characteristics, but participants saw themselves or what they looked for as interactive, flexible, collaborative, and relationship building. Advancement opportunities could be challenging, and often, women hit a wall. This was not the case for all the participants. Some were able to move within their offices, but the majority did not. Participants felt invisible due to lack of support from supervisors, and title-consciousness played a factor in guidance. The balance of personal and professional lives was difficult and influenced decision-making in terms of career trajectory. An increase in women supporting women is important, and there was frustration around the lack of assistance and guidance in this area. This is part of the supportive relationships needed. Without this support, it minimized the ability to create associations (Jones & Palmer, 2011), leading to the underrepresentation of women in power. Lastly, the experiences of Black women mid-level professionals did not differ much from the experiences of participants who identified as white. However, all the women of color in this study spoke to sponsorship for validation.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the shared professional experiences of women mid-level professionals in higher education. The focus was on women who self-identified as mid-level career professionals at an urban public four-year institution on the eastern coast. The objective was to define mid-level career professionals, examine their lived experiences and investigate what hindered or assisted in their professional growth. There was an additional level of examining the role of work relationships, mentorship, and institutional support along these career paths. The study explored the influence of social capital, leadership self-efficacy, and intersectionality between race and gender on the dynamics of women mid-level professionals in the workplace. Two research questions guided this phenomenological study:

1. What are the shared experiences of mid-level women professionals in higher education?

2. How do work relationships influence the experiences of mid-level women professionals in higher education?

The current literature included ample information on senior-level professionals' career path and trajectory with details on the challenges faced, perceptions of leadership, and the struggles of Black women in the workplace. However, there was limited research on the perspectives of mid-level career professionals and the contribution of work relationships and institutional support along their career trajectory. Mid-level career professionals contribute significantly to higher education and have significant personnel growth but have high turnover (Rosser, 2004). This study was a noteworthy contribution that aimed to add more research on the

perspectives of this population in order to increase understanding of the experiences of mid-level career women professionals and professional growth in higher education.

Seven themes emerged from the study, which was organized into three categories: (a) perceptions of leadership styles & professional identity, (b) challenges, support, & morale in the workplace, and (c) work relationships influence on career growth. Chapter 5 leads a discussion on the findings from this study. It will begin with summarizing and analyzing the key findings as it relates to connections to theory and previous literature. The chapter continues with sections on limitations, recommendations for further research, and recommendations for practice.

Discussion of Findings

Defining the Mid-Level Role

Mid-level career professionals contributed significantly to higher education. Their contributions were rarely recognized but were committed to the institution (Rosser, 2004). They continued to make up one of the large areas of the personnel. Research stated that mid-level career professionals oversaw at least one office function, supervised at least one professional, and reported to a senior officer (Wilson et al., 2016). These professionals managed day-to-day duties while interpreting institutional direction and priorities to their supervisees then communicated any concerns up the ladder (Wilson et al., 2016).

The participants in this study were asked to self-identify their professional level. The participants defined mid-level career professionals as someone who was: not the head of unit; had a "seat at the table"; not the final decision maker; depended on the years of experience, title, and there were mixed reviews whether supervisory experience was needed. Having the participants self-identify as mid-level career professionals assisted in defining what was considered the mid-level role and revealed much ambiguity. An extensive range of professional

experience and titles was unexpected and brought a unique perspective to this study. There was a wide range of professional experiences as most of the participants had 11-20 years of experience at 53%, and the second most had 6-10 years of experience at 27%. This tells us that the amount of professional experience needed for mid-level professionals could be challenging to determine as the professional experience varied. However, even the title could be a challenge as the participants contained a wide array of titles from Assistant Director to Assistant Dean. In addition, the institution's organizational chart would be essential to include and examine the titles and professional experience to define a mid-level career professional. Years of experience and title were included in the definition provided by the participants, which can speak to those who had more experience. However, there were other qualities needed to identify this level. The literature dictated that supervisory was an element that was needed, but one participant in this study disagreed with this assessment (Wilson et al., 2016). This participant, Dylan, is an Assistant Director with over 21 years of experience. Her role did not require supervision, and she had taken advantage of the professional development offered by the university. This does not take away from her being considered a mid-level professional. Therefore, based on her experience, the supervisory experience was not needed to be considered a mid-level career professional.

Perceptions of Effective Leadership Styles

According to the literature, perceptions of effective leadership styles were viewed as male-centered with traits that included aggressiveness, decisiveness, willingness to engage in conflict, and confidence (AAUW, 2016; Diehl, 2017; Jones & Palmer, 2011; Turner, Norwood, & Noe, 2013). Since previous studies on leadership centered around men professionals, the standards and behaviors of leadership were stated (Dunn & Hyle, 2014). Additionally,

stereotypes based on gender influence what was seen as effective leadership, and feminine qualities were not seen as successful leadership (Diehl, 2014; Hoyt, 2005; Jones & Palmer, 2011). When given the opportunity, women were effective in leadership roles. Women's leadership took an interactive, relational, flexible, situational approach that supported building trust and reciprocity relationships (Bornstein, 2007). Collaboration, proactive, and feedback were promoted, and they were more likely to generate consensus around the future direction of their institutions than arrive with a complete plan (Bornstein, 2007).

The women in this study concurred with this assessment. Characteristics they highlighted were relationship building, problem-solving, strong communication skills, and having a clear vision. The participants shared that qualities considered to be effective leadership were strong emotional intelligence, not being impulsive and "thoughtful decision making," "consistent strategizing," and being two to three steps ahead. Many modeled their leadership styles after someone they observed as effective and valued as a resource. This often came in the form of both men and women colleagues in place of, or in addition to, a direct mentor. In support of the previous research, there was a perception of differences in leadership styles by gender. One participant stated in her experience that the difference between the two styles was that men professionals were decision-focused, and women professionals promoted more communication and community building. The women revealed frustration around the high expectations of how women should lead and act in the workplace and must prove themselves. After listening to Olivia's experience, it was evident that gender plays a role in the hiring process. Additionally, while a more flexible, thoughtful leadership style was valued, leadership opportunities were offered to men more. Women must still work harder to prove themselves in order to advance. It would be beneficial to study those women who overcame this roadblock, examine what steps

they took to prove themselves in the workplace and how others can do so. It was interesting to see how the difference between what was respected as an effective leader and the frustration of what was needed to achieve leadership opportunities was contradictory.

Leadership Self-Efficacy & Professional Identity. This study was guided by a theoretical framework that included leadership self-efficacy. Leadership self-efficacy examines one's perception on the ability to lead (Hoyt, 2005). This influences a person's choices, goal setting, effort and persistence to task, coping with adversity, and performance (Hoyt, 2005). The participants were asked to examine their own professional identity and consider themselves leaders within their units. They thrived on being "supporters of people" and being a reliable resource to their colleagues. The participants were conscious of how they were perceived in the workplace and described relationship building, supporting the development of others, cultivating a positive team culture, and having a clear vision as a part of their professional identity. Overall, the participants spoke positively about their ability to lead within their offices and exhibited strong leadership self-efficacy. This information on their ability to lead and how that mirrors effective leadership contributed to their ability to transition into leadership opportunities.

Shared Experiences

Opportunities for Advancement & Glass Ceiling. Women professionals face many challenges in the workplace. For seven of the mid-level career professionals in this study, the lack of opportunity for advancement proved to be a barrier to professional growth within their departments. They were met with a glass ceiling. The participants had the degree and professional experience to move forward, but the positions were hard to obtain after a certain point and only unless someone retired or left. Often individuals who wanted to advance to more senior-level positions and leadership roles were forced to either leave the unit to another office at

the institution or leave the university entirely. The other eight participants were able to gain promotions within in their units or by changing offices. There was an acknowledgment of loyalty to the institution, its mission, and the students. Another challenge was being measured against men for positions. One participant stated that a few opportunities were given to a man instead of her. Another stated there was a higher expectation for women and must prove themselves as having the capacity to lead, whereas men get the "benefit of the doubt."

For the women of this study, some were accepting of where they were at in their careers. However, a few others expressed frustration in not being able to grow at this institution or the need to move offices. One participant stated they were actively looking for opportunities within higher education but considering moving into corporate because it paid more. Generally, there was a clear understanding that if you want to advance, there is a chance it will not be in that particular office or even at the institution.

Invisibility. The participants spoke about invisibility in the workplace and the lack of support from supervisors. The women in this study expressed being viewed as invisible when in meetings and the need to have peer support and the correct title to be heard. The mid-level career professionals navigated environments in the workplace filled with internal politics that are difficult to breach without the assistance of others. This was seen in the literature as navigating internal politics was difficult without an ally or mentor (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). There was frustration when trying to continue to learn different skills for growth and advancement but were met with roadblocks such as the incorrect title.

Finding Balance. Many participants spoke to the hurdle of balancing their personal and professional lives and the sacrifices needed to grow in their professional lives. Personal circumstances such as familial responsibilities often fall on the women, which is seen as a

limitation in the workplace (Airini et al., 2011). One participant stated that there were decisions to make throughout your professional life that could affect your personal life, and it was a tough one to make. During 2020 and part of 2021, everyone was working remotely due to COVID-19. With that, professional and personal lives converged. Navigating and finding balance was difficult when there was no separation and childcare needed to be considered. It will be interesting to view the flexibility in work schedules post-COVID-19 to see if more balance is achieved.

Many of the participants stated that there was a substantial number of women in higher education. With this knowledge, there should be more understanding of women professionals' responsibilities at the mid-level. As stated earlier by Rosser (2014), this population contributed significantly to higher education. However, the challenges remain the same. Advancement was challenging to the point where there was potential for turnover. While the participants understood the importance of supportive relationships, there was still an invisibility factor when internal politics came into play. Finding a balance between professional and personal lives continues to be challenging. This makes the path and the preparation for leadership opportunities problematic. It also asks the question of what was the difference between the experience of the two levels. It appears the challenges just carry over into the senior-level position with higher stakes.

Influence of Work Relationships

Social Capital. Establishing social capital is required for career advancement as it is building a network of professionals to provide support and guidance (Yosso, 2005). For the women in this study, these networks were formed with a mixture of peer colleagues, supervisors, sponsors, and mentors. Each participant spoke to how those relationships have impacted their

career, whether on a smaller scale, like recognizing and encouraging their potential or on a larger scale by assisting with career opportunities. An abundance of social capital puts women in a better place in navigating their careers. Aligned with this finding, previous research stated that relationship building in the workplace was integral (Hertneky, 2010; Turner, Norwood, & Noe, 2013, Waring, 2013). For mid-level career professionals, having these relationships was necessary during their transition into leadership opportunities and senior-level positions.

Research states mentorship is essential and provides the opportunity women seek in providing feedback and assistance with decision making and navigating politics (Crawford & Smith, 2005; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Washington, 2011). Mentorship is wanted for navigation and guidance but was not always easy to create. Participants experienced limited access to mentorship, and/or their current mentor relationships were viewed as minimally effective. Creating these relationships was difficult and often was more informal than formal. Mentorship programs in place are helpful but greeted with mixed responses about their effectiveness. The responsibility for initiation and whose responsibility it is to create these opportunities mentor, mentee, or institution was also met with mixed reviews. A participant stated there is a vulnerability and awkwardness as a mid-level career professional in asking someone to be your mentor. Many prefer informal, organic relationships versus forced ones. However, many would still participate in a formal mentorship program if the opportunity presented itself. Most participants wanted their mentors to be relatable in the sense of their professional identity, aspirations, and also their personal identity. Others were open to male mentors without the pressure of needing to be a woman. In reality, 73% of the participants in this study did not have a mentor. Instead, they described having networks of people they can go to

for support and advice. This spoke to the notion that while relationship building is important, it does not necessarily need to be formal, such as a mentor relationship.

Women Supporting Women. Women supporting other women factor into how supportive relationships were in the workplace. The literature stated that in this area, there were experiences with supportive and unsupportive work relationships. Unsupportive relationships undermined their authority and credibility, sabotaged each other (Jones & Palmer, 2011), peers stigmatized other colleagues and publicly challenged academic integrity (Airini et al., 2011). Additionally, there was jealousy and competition regarding career advancement (Jones & Palmer, 2011). Supportive peer relationships included congratulatory responses to peers when appropriate, providing leadership opportunities, encouragement, and collaboration (Airini et al., 2011). For this study, there were examples of both supportive and unsupportive relationships. A couple of the participants felt a lack of assistance from their female peers. They would have liked women at their institutions, either another peer colleague or a woman in a higher role, to have opened the opportunity to attend or provide guidance in gaining access to certain situations. Instead, in their experience, they were shut out of conversations and meetings without follow-up communication or counseling. This released a frustration of not supporting each other in this environment. Other participants felt support from their supervisors and peers when there were times of invisibility and generally supported learning from each other. Ultimately, these positive relationships increased confidence, resilience, job retention, and reciprocity (Airini et al., 2011). Without this support, it minimized the ability to create associations (Jones & Palmer, 2011), leading to an underrepresentation of women in leadership positions.

Sponsorship. Sponsorship was a surprising development in this study. This term was not familiar to the researcher before conducting the interviews. Sponsorship is when an individual

vouches for another individual influencing their career path. The individual was often someone at a higher professional level vouching for another individual. According to the literature, men were more likely to vouch for other men (Ballenger, 2010). Three participants spoke to the assistance of a sponsor in their career. They were all women of color. This tells us that women of color were more likely to benefit from sponsorship in the workplace by having someone vouching for them. Also, this finding revealed intersectionality between race and gender as the white participants did not divulge this type of relationship. Since this term was unfamiliar to me, the next question was how they knew sponsorship was needed. Was it something they learned after a positive experience? In this sense, women helping other women would help expose what is needed to succeed in the workplace.

Experiences of Black Women

The experiences of Black women mid-level professionals were highlighted in this study. The research found that the experiences Black women faced were isolation, alienation, authority undermined, competence compromised, limited power, and lack of support (Claybourne & Hamrick, 2007, Patitu & Hinton, 2003). However, the findings of this study revealed that their experiences did not differ much from the experiences of participants who identified as white. These results were surprising as research essentially stated that this population encountered more challenges and had to balance sexism and racism. This was not the case for the Black women in this study. It is difficult to determine if the previous research was the actual experiences of Black women professionals since these five Black women participants did not encounter additional hardships. My interpretations are that there were many more factors to consider. If the Black woman finds herself in a supportive office, she will not encounter isolation, alienation, and lack

of support. If she were in a non-supportive office, she would encounter these experiences. Future studies should isolate this population to explore further because it would reveal more differences.

Summary

The findings from the study confirmed what previous literature has disclosed. According to participants, effective leadership includes strong emotional intelligence, not being impulsive and "thoughtful decision making," "consistent strategizing," and being two/three steps ahead. Relationship building, problem-solving, and clear visions were essential factors of a person's professional identity in being successful in the workplace. Opportunities for advancement were challenging. However, some of the participants were able to move forward in their offices, while others were met with a glass ceiling. Social capital was used through their supportive relationships were integral in career guidance, navigating decision-making and office politics, and networking. Balancing personal and professional commitment continues to be tough. In investigating this topic, women mid-level career professionals continue to face obstacles as they move up the career ladder. There are things in place such as supportive relationships and professional development that can assist in this growth. Some of these women take advantage while others continue to focus on the work they provide in their office. Once they hit a wall, they either change offices or leave the institution entirely.

This study detailed the shared lived experiences of mid-level professionals. It allowed for the definition of those who considered themselves to be at this level and revealed a desire and implementation of effective leadership that was more flexible, interactive, relational, and supportive. It makes one wonder if mid-levels are learning leadership styles through observation and practice at this level; are they getting feedback? Also, once they enter senior-level roles, are they met with negativity or find themselves changing to meet a more aggressive leadership style?

Also, this study confirmed, and added additional validity to the current research in many ways. What was surprising was that there were no differences in the experience of Black women mid-level professionals and the range of titles of those who chose to self-identify as women mid-level career professionals. Sponsorship was introduced as a relationship that supported career growth which was not discussed thoroughly in previous literature. These findings presented the need to continue examining the women at this mid-level role; it only opened the conversation more.

Limitations

Data from fifteen self-identified mid-level career professionals were included in this study. Participation included completion of an interest form, demographic survey, and two interviews that averaged 45 minutes. Two limitations of this study are the recruitment process and the scope of the interview questions.

The first limitation was around recruitment. The recruitment email was sent to six administrators at the targeted institution who oversaw or had access to a substantial number of staff. It was at their discretion to who was able to receive the information on this study. Therefore, the recruitment email may have only reached a certain demographic of participants. If I had access to a university-level listserv, these responses would have come from a larger array of people across the institution rather than a narrow view. They could have provided different responses to the interview questions. I could have also had additional Black women volunteer as participants. Instead, there was a gatekeeper who decided who could participate.

The second limitation was the interview questions. Knowing what I know now, if I had phrased questions differently or probed more on career aspirations and leadership, I would have gained more information around that topic. I kept the interview semi-structured and allowed the participant to speak to their lived experiences. I did not know that there would be so much

uncertainty around career aspirations and transitioning to a senior-level role. This prevented me from making connections between the two pathways. This pushes for more research on senior-level professionals reflecting on their mid-level experiences.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research study just skims the surface, and many other research areas should be explored to reveal more information about women mid-level professionals. This study touched on different topics in this area that spoke to the overall experience of their leadership career path. However, each part can be broken down further and explored. More studies around workplace relationships, their differences, and the effectiveness of each type are needed. There is not much research on sponsorship versus mentorship, and this is a valuable piece to the puzzle of effective workplace relationships. It will answer whether any workplace relationship is positive and valuable, or one is more beneficial than the other. Additionally, it will allow more opportunity for intersectionality between gender and race since the Black women in this study highlighted sponsorship. These studies should be quantitative to survey women across institutions and compare and contrast results.

A qualitative or quantitative study on women supporting other women is another recommendation as these relationships are integral in connecting mid-level and senior-level. Women supporting other women is a topic worth studying in terms of competition, jealousy, relationships, hiring practices, and climbing the ladder. Especially since many of the participants stated there is an abundance of women professionals in their area of higher education which allowed them to use them as a resource in both an official and unofficial manner. One of the questions that come to mind is learning further if women responsible for hiring practices feed into what may be perceived as a sexist system and prevent others from joining or subconsciously

making the women prove themselves. Frustrations are created around women who reach the

senior level, not aiding those who have not reached that accomplishment and instead contributing

to the roadblocks. Determining ways women could support other women would support more

representation in senior-level leadership.

Another recommendation is a qualitative study on other intersections such as sexuality

and the experiences of those who identify their sexuality in the LGBT+ community with the

additional layer of how they present themselves. Sexuality was exposed in this study on a small

level. In this study, when discussing specific experiences around having a voice at the table or

being privy to particular conversations, it was revealed through experience that when not

outwardly exhibit feminine qualities, the women are more likely to be heard. This is supported

by the literature in that leadership is seen as masculine and masculine qualities are seen as

successful. Women who present as masculine facing could have different experiences than a

woman who presents as feminine. This is an area worth exploring. If successful leadership styles

were seen as masculine, the experience of masculine-presenting women should be accounted for

in women's overall experience.

An update on the perception of leadership and what makes leaders effective, particularly

in higher education, is needed. Is it still seen as a role with a need for masculine characteristics,

and where is that line drawn? For some of the participants, their supervisors were women. They

stated that they are surrounded by women and observed them on how they lead. It would be

beneficial to view a man's viewpoint and their encounters with women leaders. In addition to

studying the perception of leadership styles, more qualitative research is needed on personal

identity, balance, and connecting it to leadership. Many women struggle in that balance between

professional and personal, and sacrifices were made. Previous research stated that family and

children were seen as a hindrance for women seeking senior leadership opportunities (Airini et al., 2011). However, future qualitative studies are needed to take it a step farther in dictating this balance. There must be examples of women who successfully make this balance. What were those experiences? In contrast, what were the experiences of those who made those sacrifices? How could women following in their footsteps navigate this, and was it an all or nothing?

During the interviews, one of the questions included revealing participants' career aspirations. Each participant said that they did not know. They do not have a specific goal in mind. However, they still would like to continue to advance. This made it tough to gauge whether senior-level leadership positions were a role they wanted to achieve or something they would stumble into. Examining the reverse and following the career trajectory of women senior-level administrators would be valuable. It will unveil whether their experiences at the mid-level impacted their path as they entered senior-level leadership. The research can explore where the bottleneck begins in the movement from mid-level to senior-level by having both viewpoints.

Recommendations for Practice

This study revealed that there are positive responses around opportunities for professional development both internally and externally. There is support for participation in national organizations' memberships, some offices have committed to providing professional development in-house, and human resources provides workshops and trainings. Connecting this to mentorship and providing more supportive relationships opportunities would be beneficial to the institution. An organization can provide networking through a program, see their employees more personably, and boost morale. It also promotes the company's best practices, policies, and procedures, better adapting to the culture of the organization (Washington, 2011).

It would be beneficial to take these initiatives one step further and create a large-scale mentorship program at the target institution to increase networks of support and extend social capital. This institution seems to have mentorship programs on a smaller scale and is siloed within specific areas such as academic advising and across student affairs but not across units. Opening these programs up to all women at this institution will provide more exposure and better networking relationships. A committee is needed to determine how the individuals are matched (i.e., career aspirations, personal interest, years of experience, supervision, etc.). This would make all women at this institution feel valued and supported no matter at what point in their career. Additionally, through this mentorship program, the institution can align its hiring practices around opportunities for internal promotions. As stated previously, promoting mentorship will strengthen the organization's goal, policies, and procedures and the morale and retention of its employees. The results are a more productive and loyal worker and better promotion of the organization's goals and objectives (Washington, 2011).

Another recommendation for practice is having research and support groups or safe spaces to give opportunities for mid-level professionals to discuss their experiences, whether this is formally or informally. A small part of the finding spoke to the frustration in not having occasions for off-the-record conversations with colleagues and how this could help career guidance. Many of the participants were excited to join this research study and have the ability to reflect on their career paths. This was represented in the number of women who signed up to how many ultimately participated. Many at the end of the interviews were appreciative of being able to tell their story and have it assisted in this research in any way. Some jokingly called it a "therapy session." These sessions could also assist in solidifying institutional policies and

practices as everyone shares their experiences and increase exposure to senior-level leaders who are willing to counsel mid-level professionals.

Conclusion

Women's representation on campus is essential for today's complex society. It creates gender diversity, promotes inclusion, and increases engagement and morale. This representation brings different perspectives, approaches to leadership, builds networks of support among women colleagues, and provides role models to others. By having a limited amount of women at the senior-level limits the power of women to make a difference (AAUW, 2016)); limits the scope of research and knowledge (Lapovsky & Larkin, 2009); and in terms of women of color, shows little to no racial and ethnic diversity (AAUW, 2016).

This research study aimed to expand on the literature of mid-level career professionals. It investigated what contributed, positively and negatively, to their growth along their career path and if they aspire to continue to the next level. Through semi-structured interviews, this study affirmed the information presented in the literature. There were challenges that included lack of advancement opportunities, invisibility, lack of support from supervisors, and concerns in balancing personal and professional lives. It revealed that while morale is positive at the office level, there was dissatisfaction at the institutional level and how certain things were handled. Supportive relationships contribute significantly to career growth, and this can come in the form of informal peer relationships, sponsorships, and mentorships.

This research expands our knowledge on the experiences of mid-level career professionals. This knowledge contributes to the bigger problem of underrepresented women at the senior level because it illustrates their career progression beginning with mid-level professionals. It gives a little window into the experiences prior to the senior-level, what

obstacles they encountered, how they navigated them, and what assisted them on this journey. It displays what best practices can be put in place to support them better and create chances to increase the visibility of women in higher education leadership roles.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Google Form

Study Participation Interest Form

Thank you for your interest in participating in the Women Mid-level Career Professionals Study! The goal of this project is to define mid-level career professionals, examine their shared experiences, and explore what is hindering or assisting in their professional growth. There will be an additional level of examining the role of work relationships, mentorships, and institutional support play in the experiences of mid-level career professionals. The results will contribute to the importance of increasing women's representation, inform ways current practices can improve, and bring more awareness to the topic and the importance of diversification.

Are you a women administrator or staff at an urban university? We are looking forward to your valuable contribution. The information collected in this document is confidential and will only be used to confirm your eligibility to participate. If eligible, we will contact you within 3-5 days to complete a brief survey (15 minutes) and arrange for the first of two 60-90 minute interviews via zoom.

Please note that completing this survey does not obligate you to participate in the study and if you do not participate in the study, your submitted information will be destroyed.

Please let me know if you have any questions. You can email me, Candice Frazer, at candice.frazer@temple.edu. Please feel free to share this study within your networks.

(This research has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Temple University - Protocol #27723)

Email address: _____

Gender: How do you identify?
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-binary
- ☐ Transgender
- ☐ Other

What is your ethnic background/race?
- ☐ Asian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ Hispanic/ Latino
- ☐ White/Caucasian
- ☐ Black/ African American
- ☐ American Indian/ Native American

☐ Other:_____

What are your years of professional experience?
- ☐ 5 years or less
- ☐ 5 to 10 years
- ☐ 11 to 20 years
- ☐ 21 years or more

I identify as a….
- ☐ Entry-Level Professional
- ☐ Mid-level Professional
- ☐ Senior- Level Professional

What is your current title? _____

By providing my name below, I give consent to contact for further participation of this study.

Name:_____

Appendix B

Google Form

Demographic Questionnaire

Thank you for your interest in my study!

Please answer all questions as accurately as possible. The information collected in this document is confidential. Please note that completing this survey does not obligate you to participate in the study and if you do not participate in the study, your submitted information will be destroyed.

Purpose:
The goal of this project is to define mid-level career professionals, examine their shared experiences, and explore what is hindering or assisting in their professional growth. There will be an additional level of examining the role of work relationships, mentorships, and institutional support play in the experiences of mid-level career professionals. The results will contribute to the importance of increasing women's representation, inform ways current practices can improve, and bring more awareness to the topic and the importance of diversification.

Please let me know if you have any questions. You can email me, Candice Frazer, at candice.frazer@temple.edu.

(This research has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Temple University - Protocol #27723)

Email address: _____

Age
- ☐ Under 25
- ☐ 25- 34
- ☐ 35- 44
- ☐ 45- 54
- ☐ 55- 64
- ☐ 65 or older

What is the highest level of education you have completed?
- ☐ Less than High School diploma
- ☐ High School
- ☐ Some College
- ☐ Bachelor's Degree
- ☐ Master's degree
- ☐ Doctorate Degree (PhD, EdD)
- ☐ Doctorate Degree (JD, MD)

Years of supervisory experience
- ☐ Less than 1

- ☐ 1 - 5 years
- ☐ 6- 10 years
- ☐ More than 10 years

I identify as a….
- ☐ Entry-Level Professional
- ☐ Mid-level Professional
- ☐ Senior- Level Professional

True or False

Supportive work relationships have influenced my career mobility.
- ☐ True
- ☐ False

I currently have a mentor.
- ☐ True
- ☐ False

I am currently a mentor to someone.
- ☐ True
- ☐ False

I participate in institutional supported leadership professional development programs.
- ☐ True
- ☐ False

I participate in non-institutional supported leadership professional development.
- ☐ True
- ☐ False

Focusing on your current role, rate the following statements. Rate the following statements.

How do you perceive the morale at an office level?
- ☐ Unsatisfactory
- ☐ Poor
- ☐ Fair
- ☐ Good
- ☐ Excellent

How do you perceive the morale at an institutional level?
- ☐ Unsatisfactory
- ☐ Poor
- ☐ Fair
- ☐ Good
- ☐ Excellent

How do you perceive (personal) opportunities for advancement?
- ☐ Unsatisfactory
- ☐ Poor
- ☐ Fair
- ☐ Good
- ☐ Excellent

How do you perceive (personal) opportunities for leadership/ professional development programs?

- ☐ Unsatisfactory
- ☐ Poor
- ☐ Fair
- ☐ Good
- ☐ Excellent

How do you perceive (personal) opportunities for mentorship?
- ☐ Unsatisfactory
- ☐ Poor
- ☐ Fair
- ☐ Good
- ☐ Excellent

By providing my name below, I give consent to contact for further participation of this study.

Name:_____

Appendix C

Google Form
Interview Availability: Women Mid-level Career Professionals: Navigating their Career Trajectory to Higher Education Leadership
Please provide all interview availability.
Purpose:
The goal of this project is to define mid-level career professionals, examine their shared experiences, and explore what is hindering or assisting in their professional growth. There will be an additional level of examining the role of work relationships, mentorships, and institutional support play in the experiences of mid-level career professionals. The results will contribute to the importance of increasing women's representation, inform ways current practices can improve, and bring more awareness to the topic and the importance of diversification.
Please let me know if you have any questions. You can email me, Candice Frazer, at candice.frazer@temple.edu.
(This research has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Temple University - Protocol #27723)
Email address: _____
Available Days
- □ Sunday
- □ Monday
- □ Tuesday
- □ Wednesday
- □ Thursday
- □ Friday
- □ Saturday

Available Times
- □ Weekday Mornings (8AM- 12PM)
- □ Weekday Lunchtime (12PM- 2PM)
- □ Weekday Afternoons (2PM- 5PM)
- □ Evenings (5:30- 8PM)
- □ Weekend Mornings
- □ Weekend Mornings (8AM- 12PM)
- □ Weekend Afternoon (12PM- 5PM)
- □ Weekend Early Evenings (5PM- 7PM)

 Any restrictions?

_____

Informed Consent

Title of Research	**Women Mid-level Career Professionals: Navigating their Career Trajectory to Higher Education Leadership**
Investigator and Department	Jennifer Johnson, PhD – Principal Investigator Candice Frazer, Doctoral Student – Student Investigator Higher Education (19031) Policy, Organizational & Leadership Studies College of Education and Human Development Temple University
Why Am I Being Invited to Take Part in This Research?	We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you identify as: • Women • Mid-level career professional • Employed at an urban, public university
What Should I Know About This Research?	• Someone will explain this research to you. • Whether or not you take part is up to you. • You can choose not to take part. • You can agree to take part and later change your mind. • Your decision will not be held against you. • You can ask all the questions you want before you decide. • There is no compensation offered for participating in this research.
What Happens if I Agree to Be in This Research?	Initially, you will be asked to complete a Study Participation Interest Form (10-15 minutes) to express your interest in participating in the study. If interested, you will be sent a Demographic Questionnaire (10-15 minutes) to gain more information about you and your experiences. Participation also includes two in depth interviews (60 to 90 minutes) via video-conference. Total interview time is approximately 120-180 minutes. Examples of questions that will be asked include: 1. Please describe your career path up until this point. 2. What are some challenges you faced? 3. What makes a woman leader successful? 4. What skills do you need to be an effective leader? 5. What do you know now that you wish you knew before? 6. Has mentorship played an active role on your professional path? 7. What is your professional identity? 8. What are your professional aspirations? 9. Please tell me about your relationships within the workplace that have or have not supported your career? 10. What professional development programs have you participated in?

	Within 4 weeks of your interview, you may be asked to participate in a 30-minute follow-up interview to elaborate or clarify information shared during your interviews. You may decline to participate. With your permission, each individual interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed professionally via a transcription service. The electronic audio files and transcriptions will remain saved as password-protected accessible to Candice Frazer.
What Happens to The Information Collected for This Research?	To the extent allowed by law, we limit the viewing of your personal information to people who have to review it. We cannot promise complete secrecy. The IRB, Temple University, and other representatives of those organizations may inspect and copy your information. To protect your identity, you will be able to select a pseudonym for this project. If you do not select a pseudonym, one will be created for you. Your true name, contact information, or other identifying information will not be linked in any way to your transcripts. Your contact information will only be maintained for follow-up purposes and will be saved as a separate file with Candice Frazer. Risks associated with communicating and sending documents via the Internet will be minimized by not requiring identifying information in the documents and maintaining information containing your name or email separately from your demographic questionnaire responses and interview transcript(s). Email communications with attached documents will be downloaded, saved as a hard copy, and immediately deleted upon storage. Access to contact information and transcriptions will be limited to Candice Frazer. Contact information, electronic audio files and transcription records will be deleted/destroyed once the research is completed.
Who Can I Talk To About This Research?	If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, contact: Dr. Jennifer Johnson, Principal Investigator – jmjohnson@temple.edu Candice Frazer, Student Investigator, candice.frazer@temple.edu This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board. You may talk to them at (215) 707-3390 or email them at irb@temple.edu for any of the following: · Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team. · You cannot reach the research team. · You want to talk to someone besides the research team. · You have questions about your rights as a research subject. · You want to give information or provide input about this research.

Appendix E

Interview Protocol
Date: Spring 2021
Place: Via Zoom
Interviewer: Candice Frazer
Interviewee: Women Mid-level Professional
Key: Interviewee Pseudonym will be used to protect the individual's identity and others stated throughout the interview.

Interview Questions
Explain the purpose of the study and interview protocol. Gain verbal consent from participants to engage in the study. Gain verbal consent to record the interview.
1. Please describe your career path up until this point.
2. In your current position, what are your role and responsibilities?
3. What are your career aspirations?
4. What are some challenges you faced in your career? In your current role?
    a. If women of color: Any challenges faced due to being a woman of color?
5. Have you felt you were mistreated in any way because you are a woman?
6. Did you find that having a degree or not having a degree impacted your path? Why or why not?
7. Do you consider yourself to be a leader?
    a. If not, what skills do you need to be an effective leader?
    b. What skills are needed to be an effective woman leader?
8. What is your professional identity?
9. What is your definition of a mid-level career professional?
    a. Why do you believe you are a mid-level career professional?
10. What do you know now that you wish you knew before?

Appendix F

Interview Protocol
Date: Spring 2021
Place: Via Zoom
Interviewer: Candice Frazer
Interviewee: Women Mid-level career professional
Key: Interviewee Pseudonym will be used to protect the individual's identity and others stated throughout the interview.

Interview Questions
Explain the purpose of the study and interview protocol. Gain verbal consent from participants to engage in the study. Gain verbal consent to record the interview.
1. Has mentorship played an active role in your career path?
    a. Do you have a mentor?
    b. Are you a mentor?
    c. Who is responsible for creating those opportunities and relationships?
    d. Why is mentorship important?
    e. What does your perfect mentor look like? Do you seek only women mentors?
2. Have supportive work relationships influenced your career mobility? If so, please tell me about that experience.
    a. Any negative experiences?
    b. Tell me an experience you have had with a positive relationship in the working that has supported your career?
3. Tell me about the level of support of the institution.
    a. Are there opportunities for….
        i. Advancement?
        ii. Leadership or professional development?
        iii. Mentorship?
4. What institutional supported professional development opportunities have you participated in?
    a. Internal? External?
        i. Any non-institutional supported leadership professional development?
    b. Professional Organizations?
        i. Are you a part of any organizations that support women in leadership?
5. How do you perceive morale at an office level?
    a. Institutional level?
6. Do you have the power to hire? If so, in this role, what do you look for in your applicants? Does gender or race play a factor?
7. Is there anything else you want to say that I have not asked you?