



Advancing Women in Leadership

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Full Length Research Paper

Thriving and Striving: The Paradox of Leading and Following for Women Mid-level Administrators in the Community College

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This qualitative study explored the meaning that ten mid-level women administrators ascribed to the experience of being both a leader and a follower within the community college sector. Previous research indicates that mid-level women administrators are under-valued as leaders and followers despite their capacity and influential connectivity up, down, and across the organizational chart. Participants discussed their experiences through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and described the perceived effects of those experiences on their leadership and followership practices. Three overarching themes emerged from the transcript analysis of the narratives: leader identity construction; impact of following on leader identity construction; and navigating the community college environment. Implications from the findings suggest that community colleges can advance the mission of their organizations by leveraging mid-level administrator talent to build greater leadership capacity across the entire organization. Additionally, an intentional focus on identifying and eliminating implicit gender and racial bias will contribute to improved outcomes for faculty, staff, and students. By understanding the leading and following experiences of women in mid-level administrative positions in the community college, this study contributes to a broader inclusion of leadership beyond the privilege of senior-level positions.

Keywords: administrator, community college, leader, follower, women, mid-level

Mid-level leadership has been acknowledged as crucial to the effectiveness of higher education organizations in achieving academic success and implementing change initiatives in the United States, Canada, and New Zealand (Marshall, 2012). Women hold the majority of mid-level administrative positions in community colleges (Phillippe, 2016) and, as both leaders and followers, are uniquely situated to exert influence up, down, and across the institution as they effectively juggle a myriad of competing priorities (Rosser, 2004; Wild et al., 2003). As comprehensive, open-access institutions, community colleges are often tagged as "People's Colleges" (Meier, 2018), emphasizing universal access for all, innovation, and growth. Yet the expected cultural and racial acceptance, opportunities, and networks that are assumed characteristic of such institutions are not always experienced by White women and women of color in mid-level administrative positions (Amey & Eddy, 2018). Masculine norms of leadership are still ingrained in the organizational structures of community colleges and women leaders are judged against these norms (Eddy & Khwaja, 2019). Rather than regarding their leadership based on its own merits and contributions to the college, women mid-level administrators are characterized as professionally limited by the bureaucratic nature of the community college where they become "stuck in the middle" by spending too much time in management positions (Eddy & Ward, 2015, p. 9). This marginalized viewpoint reflects a failure to recognize and

maximize female leadership and is further complicated by scholars who lament the loss of talent when those who aspire to lead from the middle do not seek higher-level positions (Ward & Wendel, 2017). The influential connectivity of mid-level women administrators, within the community college, ensures they are uniquely positioned to positively effect change and significantly contribute to the leadership capacity of the organization, despite an institutional environment that places needless pressure on the construction of their leader and follower identities. By understanding the leading and following experiences of women in mid-level administrative positions in the community college, this study contributes to a broader inclusion of leadership research beyond the privileged of senior-level positions. Valuing the roles of mid-level women administrators will help community colleges better support these leaders and increase the leadership capacity across the entire organization in order to move their institutions forward and meet the complex challenges they face today and tomorrow.

Background

Much of the literature on community college leadership presents leaders from the primary lens of a White male hero leader with formal autocratic and bureaucratic authority (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006). Studies on women in community college leadership have primarily focused on the presidency (Cejda, 2008; Garza Mitchell & Eddy, 2008) leadership styles (Eddy,

2010; Gill & Jones, 2013) and barriers that obstruct their progression up the career ladder (Diehl, 2014; Leatherwood & Williams, 2008; Yearout et al., 2017). Research on women in mid-level administrative positions in the community college is underdeveloped compared to that of senior-level roles (Branson et al., 2016) and often centers on management (Boggs & McPhail, 2020; Jones, 2011; Yamasaki, 1999), as well as job related activities and associated stress (Bailey, 2008; Gonzales & Rincones, 2013; Rosser, 2004; Tunguz, 2014; Wild et al., 2003). Empirical research on women of color in community college administrative positions is scant and focuses on mentoring (Patton, 2009), leadership development (Davis & Maldonado, 2015) and career pathways (Delgado & Allen, 2019).

Gender Stereotypes

Research regarding gender stereotypes and leadership has shown an incompatibility between the role of the leader and the gender role. Gender stereotypes are oversimplifications of traits attributed to men and women, which endorse negative beliefs about a woman's job performance by constructing a perceived "lack of fit" (Heilman, 2012, p. 114) between the traits attributed to women and the traits believed essential for success in traditionally male roles such as leadership (Fletcher, 2004; Madden, 2011). For example, when enacting communal behaviors such as being kind, expressing concern for others or using consensus-based decision-making, women may be liked but not respected (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Fletcher, 2004; Madden, 2011). Conversely, women who enact agentic attributes and behaviors associated with men may be viewed as competent but are not liked and are often perceived as abrasive, arrogant, and self-promoting (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Heilman, 2012). Because success is stereotyped as male and masculine, women are expected to strike a precarious balance between masculinity and femininity. Williams and Dempsey (2014) refer to this type of double bind as a tightrope, in which women must work twice as hard as men to overcome gender stereotypes while constantly managing perceptions of their leadership behaviors as either "too masculine" or "too feminine" (p. 61). Thus, in order to be seen as equally skilled leaders, women, more than men, are compelled to prove their competence over and over again.

Women of color are subjected to double jeopardy in which they experience the outcomes of both gender and racial bias (Beal, 2008; Williams et al., 2016). Building upon this work, Crenshaw (2017) conceptualized intersectionality to examine how social categories such as race and gender simultaneously interconnect, resulting in the systemic oppression of women of color. Others have asserted that people with intersectional subordinate identities experience distinct modes of oppression known as "intersectional invisibility" (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). According to this view, Black women, for example, are often marginalized because they are not seen as prototypical members of their racial group or their gender group.

Community Colleges

As traditional bureaucratic organizations, community colleges are reliant on hierarchical leadership, enabling gender and class disparities (Costello, 2012; Eddy & Cox, 2008). While the student body in two-year institutions is comprised of 59% women and 41% men (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023), the percent of female CEOs at community colleges has remained flat over the last decade, barely moving from 36.5% in 2010 to the current rate of 36.6% (Phillippe, 2023). White males constitute the majority of presidents with high salaries (Edwards, 2017) while White women and women of color make up the majority of low-paying support staff positions (Ash, 2017). What it means to be a leader in the community college sector is further complicated by a lack of equity on the Board of Trustees, where 82% of board members are White, and only one in three are women (Eddy, 2017). Leadership expectations are still structured around ideal worker norms of being on call around the clock while having a partner manage the worker's personal & family responsibilities (Eddy, 2010; Eddy & Khwaja, 2019). Although some women mid level administrators in two-year institutions enjoy high levels of job satisfaction (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006), others elect not to move into administrative positions due to the culture and context of leadership (Ward & Wendel, 2017). Instead of the racial and gender-neutral democratic institutions they purport to be, community colleges operate through a gendered substructure, often invisible, that maintains processes and practices which continually create gender and class inequalities (Acker, 2012).

Leadership and Followership

The process of internalizing leader and follower identities is laden with obstacles for women who must establish credibility in a world that is deeply troubled with female power and authority (Ely et al., 2011). When organizational performance is attributed solely to leaders, the contribution of followers is devalued. Instead of defining leadership as a one-directional social interaction in which leaders influence the behavior of their followers, studies suggest that followers themselves can positively or negatively influence leadership outcomes (Tee et al., 2013). How a mid-level administrator perceives her identity as a leader and a follower impacts her behaviors related to power dynamics and contextual elements, in addition to intersecting aspects of identity such as gender, race, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status (Kezar & Lester, 2010). At its core, identity refers to an individual's self-definition, how they answer the question, "who am I?" (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016, p. 113). In this study, the process of identity construction enables the individual to define the extent to which they internalize a leader as well as a follower identity. The internalization of a leader identity empowers individuals to more effectively participate in leadership processes that enable the accomplishment of organizational objectives (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

This study used a feminist, multi-frame approach to examine the intersections of gender, race, institutional structure, leadership, and followership as an overall orienting lens in understanding how mid-level women administrators make meaning of their identities in the community college sector. Feminist approaches often begin from a woman's standpoint and empower researchers to reflect on the invisibility of women within the academy while providing a unique view of their everyday lives (Blackmore, 2014). Standpoint theorists advance the belief that knowledge is socially situated for women and others who are marginalized by intersecting systems of oppression (Harding, 1987; Hartsock, 1987; Smith, 1990). Feminist scholars of color have been instrumental in evolving standpoint theory to hold that women have multiple standpoints along lines of race, social class, sexuality, nationality, and other socially determined categories of difference (hooks, 1984; Collins, 1986; Sandoval, 2000).

In line with feminist scholarship that gender is fundamentally complicated by class and race/ethnicity (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984), Acker (2006) extended the concept to include organizing activities that constitute inequality regimes, defined as "loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations" (p. 443). Higher education institutions have historically been organized along gender lines with women in predominantly subordinate positions to men (Ash, 2017; Edwards, 2017). The theory of gendered organizations (Acker, 1990, Acker, 2012) is used in this study to understand the means in which gender norms, as experienced by mid-level women administrators, are upheld or suspended by existing institutional practices in the community college.

Traditional approaches to studying leadership involve role-based views reliant upon leader traits and behavioral styles as foundational to organizational outcomes. However, the study of mid-level administrators, who both lead and follow, requires a constructionist approach that views followership as a necessary element in the co-construction of leadership. DeRue and Ashford's (2010) theory of leadership identity construction views leadership and followership as socially constructed processes in which leader and follower identities shift back and forth as individuals engage in mutual influence processes. In this approach, followership is not tied to a role but to following behaviors that can include leader and follower claiming and granting as well as resisting or negotiating with another's influence attempts (Uhl-Bien, et al., 2014). In summary, the conceptual framework used for this study consisted of feminist standpoint theory (hooks, 1984; Collins, 1990; Hawkesworth, 1999), gendered organizational theory (Acker, 2006; Acker, 2012), and leadership identity construction (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). The research question was: How do mid-level women administrators in the community college make meaning of their identities as both leaders and followers? This multi-pronged framework offered a more comprehensive approach than has

been used in previous studies and answered the call by Eddy and Khwaja (2019) for community college leadership scholars to interrogate norms and practices that restrain women from thriving as leaders.

Research Design and Methods

Informed by this multidimensional framework, the study utilized a qualitative design drawing upon a phenomenological approach to obtain rich data about the lived experiences of mid-level women administrators. The primary method was in-depth interviewing, which is an effective method frequently used by feminist researchers to uncover the subjective understanding that participants bring to a given situation (Hesse-Biber, 2014). The study employed criterion sampling to recruit participants in the Midwestern United States who held mid-level administrative positions of director, assistant/associate dean, or dean in community colleges for at least three years. From 42 potential participants, ten administrators agreed to participate in their response to an email invitation. They self-identified as two Black, one African American and seven White women, and ranged in age from 40 to 67. Five held a master's degree, three held a doctorate degree, and two were enrolled in a doctoral program. All participants selected a pseudonym. Identifiable information about their positions as well as particular institutions was omitted.

Two in-depth semi-structured 90-minute interviews were conducted over three weeks with each participant. The first interview centered on establishing the participant's early experiences with leading and following and included open-ended questions related to her career in higher education, current role, and areas of responsibility. The second interview included open-ended questions about the details of the participant's experiences as a leader and follower and the meaning those experiences held for her. To stay close to the experience as lived, follow-up questions were asked such as "When did this happen? What were you doing? Who said what? What did you say to them? What happened next? How did it feel? What else do you remember about the event?" (van Manen, 2014, p. 316). Responding to semi-structured questions with additional prompting sub-questions enabled participants to share a rich and detailed experiential account of their experiences.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was informed by the tenets from feminist standpoint theory (Collins, 1990; Hawkesworth, 1999, hooks, 1984), gendered organizational theory (Acker, 2006; Acker, 2012), and leadership identity construction (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). The data analysis process recommended for qualitative studies of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018) also guided this study. The process included transcription of the interviews, note-taking, forming codes, creating patterns, and developing themes (Saldaña, 2013). Themes were integrated, and participant analysis and third-party analysis were compared to further illuminate the emerging themes (Anfara et al., 2002). The themes were used to write a description of what the participants

experienced as well as the context that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon of leading and following from the middle. Thematic memoing was used throughout the data analysis process to bolster analytic thinking and stimulate insights into the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Saldaña, 2013).

To safeguard consistency between the findings and the experiences described by the participants, four specific strategies were employed to promote internal validity: member checking, thick description, peer debriefing, and reflexivity (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Through member checking, all participants responded with additional feedback to the interview transcripts sent to them for review and eight provided feedback to a summary of the preliminary findings. To ensure rich, thick description (Geertz, 1973), strong action verbs and quotes were used and interconnected details from general ideas to more specific themes were provided (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Peer debriefing was utilized to explore potential biases and assumptions as well as to check for weaknesses in the researcher's reasoning. By writing memos during data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation processes, the researcher engaged in her own reflexivity in order to remain open about her assumptions and ideas as they emerged throughout the study.

Limitations

There were four limitations of the research design to consider for this study. First, while the recommended sample size for phenomenological interviews is three to ten participants who have all experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014), the sample size is a small subset of the entire population of mid-level community college administrators. Therefore, the perspectives and experiences collected for this study may not reflect the full range of mid-level women administrators' experiences. Second, the researcher sought to fill a gap regarding the dearth of research on women of color in community college leadership. However, the study participants represented only Black and White women, therefore limiting access to the experiences and perspectives of other women of color mid-level administrators. Third, participants were selected from those who responded to an e-mailed invitation and thus open to discussing their narratives. Other community college mid-level administrators who identified along the continuum of gender identity and did not respond to the invitation may have different experiences or perspectives that are not represented in the study. Fourth, participants were selected from the Upper Midwest region of the United States. It is possible that regional differences in community college contexts could impact the leadership experiences of mid-level women administrators in other parts of the United States. Further, no participants lived or worked outside of the United States. It is also likely that national differences in higher education cultures could affect how women experience leading and following in mid-level administrative positions.

Findings

The multiple frameworks utilized in this study revealed how participants made meaning of their identities as leaders and followers in the middle and how their leadership and followership practices were impacted by their institutional context. Three main themes emerged from the transcript analysis of the narratives: (1) leader identity construction; (2) impact of following on leader identity construction; and (3) navigating the community college environment. The themes represent the principal areas of commonalities in the experiences of all ten participants.

Leader Identity Construction

Contributing Factors

The participants in this study worked in mid-level administrative roles in student life, academics, and instructional and academic support. Before employment in their current institutions, they held a variety of jobs in other industries as well as other sectors of higher education. Past work experiences along with participation in professional learning communities, leadership roles in national and state organizations, and terminal degree attainment in higher education all influenced how they came to conceptualize their own views of leadership. When discussing their reasons for working in a community college, participants expressed strong convictions about the importance of its open-door mission, the focus on students, and serving the community. All of the administrators echoed Louisa's view about why they selected two-year institutions over other sectors, "We serve a lot of non-traditional at-promise students, and this is where I felt that I could probably make the most difference."

For the majority of participants, developing talent and supporting the success of faculty and staff were key components of their leadership practice. They described the gratification they felt in coaching direct reports to improve their skill sets in order to be more successful in their positions. Giving back through mentoring others was also important for many participants because they themselves had benefited from mentors along their own leadership journeys. As summarized by Rachel, "I believe that the mark of a good leader is creating more good leaders." Thus, prior work experiences, learning opportunities, the community college mission, and influential mentors served to inform impressions about leaders and how each administrator constructed her leadership identity.

Leading Faculty, Direct Reports, and Staff

In describing their leadership work, participants emphasized the importance of effecting change to ensure student success. Effecting change was achieved through influencing strategies such as asking faculty and direct reports to consider the student perspective when implementing policies and procedures. For example, Lucy pointed out that faculty preferred to build schedules for their own purposes, rather than for students, and always wanted three- and four-hour classes. To implement a schedule more responsive to student needs, she asked them to

reflect on what it was like for them as students. She engaged them in discussion about how much learning really occurs when students have to be in class for long periods of time, a few days a week, rather than for shorter periods on multiple days. By placing students at the heart of the discussion, Lucy helped faculty understand why schedules built to meet students' needs would result in better outcomes.

Another influencing strategy often discussed by administrators in this study was the use of data for decision making. In order to be seen as credible leaders, participants were unwavering in their application of data to convince faculty, direct reports, and staff that their decisions were based on solid facts, whether that was the budget, enrollment numbers, or survey data that indicated an initiative was or was not working for students. Participants emphasized that influencing strategies were more successful when coupled with relationship building. In order to accomplish change initiatives, the administrators indicated they had to have buy-in and make people feel they were all going in the same direction. Rachel pointed out, "It's about building and nurturing relationships and then leveraging those relationships to achieve goals. That's how you get stuff done." Building relationships and hence, leading faculty and staff, also involved listening, being patient, and referring to policies. For instance, Rhonda indicated that faculty resistance to change was diminished after she reviewed neglected policies with them and explained how she would hold everyone accountable to those policies to ensure student success.

Participants also shared examples of when their leadership actions did not result in corresponding followership actions by peers or staff. In these instances, they might go to their direct supervisor or someone else's boss, but only when they could not get compliance with a crucial request. Some participants indicated that union-negotiated regulations negatively impacted their ability to obtain support for leading actions with faculty. Others felt their leading actions were sometimes not supported because the same faculty had been in place for years. Lucy stated, "They've had it their way for so long. They don't think they need any assistance in anything." Participants sometimes utilized other administrators or faculty members as conduits to move the faculty in a particular direction. An example of this strategy was highlighted by Louisa in describing implementation of a new student coaching program:

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

Even with resistant followers, Louisa demonstrated the importance of influence and relationship-building to effecting change and moving the institution forward. While the administrators in the study described some experiences in which followers resisted their efforts to exert influence and lead, the majority of participants' experiences related to examples in which faculty, direct reports, and staff positively affirmed their efforts to lead. This affirmation then fostered subsequent leading actions, which informed the administrators' sense of self as a leader and conveyed that those with whom they closely worked viewed their fitness for the role as positive (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011).

Impact of Following on Leader Identity Construction

Relationships with Supervisors

Almost all participants reported positive relationships with their current supervisors and provided examples of beneficial support they received. These examples included coaching and mentoring, recommendations for leadership development opportunities, and demonstrated trust in their decisions, all of which they regarded as votes of confidence in their leadership capabilities. When reflecting upon earlier positions in their careers, several participants talked about negative experiences with previous supervisors that adversely impacted their ability to do their jobs and compelled them to leave their positions.

Leading while Following

Located in the middle of the organizational chart, mid level administrators enact the follower role with their own supervisors and other senior leaders while simultaneously leading faculty, direct reports, and staff. Some participants, such as Marie, viewed their follower role as that of a team player, "I'm perfectly happy to take a pretty clear plan of action and help make it happen". Others described experiences in which their supervisor took credit for ideas they brought forward. A few administrators, such as Bella, did not see themselves in the follower role at all, "I see it as working together for a common goal." At times participants endeavored to lead up regarding initiatives with which they did not agree. For example, Lucy worked to persuade senior leaders not to move a department to another division within the college. To make her case, she pointed to the faculty's success with implementation of their curriculum and how they were on the path to continued success, which she believed would be negatively impacted if the change was implemented. As a result of Lucy's input, senior leaders decided not to move forward with the proposed move after all. In a few instances, participants described interactions in which their input was not well received by senior leaders, and no action was taken.

Navigating the Community College Environment

Working Conditions

Participants described several aspects of their institutional work environments which caused them to question the value placed upon their leadership contributions. These included taking on more responsibilities with no additional pay, performance

evaluations that were not reflective of their work, and a substandard work-life balance. Rhonda explained that she would stay late at work on some days because her supervisor expected to see her working on campus after hours. Rachel disclosed that she received emails from her supervisors throughout the night and on weekends, “There was an expectation that I was working 24/7 and it got to be a lot”. Amanda talked about being torn between the work she had to do in the institution and making sure her children had access to high-quality education and experiences. In addition, participants discussed challenges related to implementation of remote work and heightened stress levels for themselves and their faculty and staff due to ongoing COVID-19 issues.

Implicit Gender Bias

Subtle and veiled forms of implicit gender bias negatively contributed to participants’ ability to integrate leadership into their core identities. Rachel described a previous institution as a place where women were not for other women, “I never felt she was an ally. I felt that she was always waiting for me to screw up so she could say gotcha”. Others described how they were talked over at meetings and their ideas and contributions were ignored or unacknowledged. Several participants explained that they altered their facial expressions, so faculty and staff did not perceive them to be emotional or angry. Others disclosed that they modified their straightforward communication style because it was better received by men than women and others described using softening techniques such as putting requests in the form of a question. Josie explained further, “You damn well better be kind or people will turn on you. They’ll eat you alive if they have the chance.” Some administrators shared that more men than women were promoted to leadership positions in their institutions. Others described senior leaders who were either threatened by their work as mid-level administrators or viewed them as lacking ambition if they weren’t trying to advance to senior level positions.

Racial Bias

Construction of leader and follower identities was further complicated by race for Amanda, Rhonda, and Nichole. They shared stories of how women are often underestimated, especially Black women. They described encounters in which White faculty and staff members perceived them to be an angry or scary Black woman. They narrated accounts in which they were placed in a position to explain, defend, and validate current events and environmental factors related to racial injustice. They stated that being situated by White colleagues as the sole subject matter expert for a racially marginalized group led to exhaustion. Nichole explained:

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

To cope with ongoing physical, mental, and emotional fatigue, Amanda, Rhonda, and Nichole sometimes engaged in self-care activities related to exercise and healthy eating. At other times, however, they just tried to suppress their feelings, which resulted in additional stress from the trauma of dealing with both racial and gender bias.

Discussion

The concept of leadership as primarily focused on traditional, individualistic models that celebrate predominantly white, masculine positional leaders at the top of the organization remains in place in community colleges today despite their perceived status as institutions of social equity. The multi-pronged approach used to analyze the research in this study provided evidence that mid-level women administrators lead, follow, and navigate the organizational culture in order to effect positive change in support of the overall success of their institutions. These findings also contribute to deconstructing broad concepts of leadership and gender to bring attention to specific policies, practices, and actions for reconceptualizing leadership roles across all levels of the community college.

Construction of a Leader Identity

A key component to the construction of a leader identity is developing a sense of purpose through the pursuit of goals aligned with personal values that advance the greater good (Ely et al., 2011). All participants in this study developed a compelling sense of purpose centered on making a positive difference in the lives of community college students through their work with direct reports, faculty, staff, and supervisors. Consistent with other research findings that the community college was the institution of choice for women leaders because they were committed to the mission it serves (Cejda, 2008), participants in this study articulated that service to students is what they valued most. Thus, their identities as leaders were integrated with a principle larger than themselves and crystallized what they stood for as leaders in their institutions. Participants also indicated that developing the talents and championing the success of their direct reports, faculty, and staff were important components of their leadership practice as well. Therefore, by connecting to purposes larger than themselves, on which they placed a high value, the mid-level administrators in this study gave meaning to the experience of being a leader by making a difference in the lives of direct reports, faculty, and staff, thus developing, and fostering a leader identity. Some participants utilized their work with international or state level organizations to develop and hone their leadership skills; others pursued advanced or doctorate degrees which they believed gave them more credibility as a leader in their institutions. Many of the participants discussed strong mentoring relationships with past supervisors or other senior leaders, who provided opportunities and encouraged them to pursue senior-level positions because they recognized their leadership potential. Through participating in leadership development and receiving positive reinforcement from leaders whom they admired and trusted, the administrators in this study began to make sense of what it means to be a leader

early in their careers and applied that learning to their own practice of leadership as they progressed to mid-level administrative roles.

In addition to developing a compelling sense of purpose, becoming a leader is a process of mutual influence in which one internalizes a leadership identity through claiming and granting leader and follower roles (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). The findings provided insights into how mid-level administrators associated their work most closely with leading followers – faculty and direct reports. The participants described many experiences in which they asserted leadership by taking purposeful action such as convening meetings, facilitating reflective conversations, and using data to drive decision-making. They discussed how they used interpersonal skills of influencing and relationship building with faculty and staff to claim leadership for change initiatives related to student success. These findings are supported by other researchers who found that mid-level administrators reported a higher ability to successfully achieve initiatives through influence than senior leaders who reported limitations in their amount of power and control (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006). When the participants in this study took actions to claim leadership, findings indicate that leadership was often granted and thus, a leader identity was relationally recognized by faculty and direct reports, who accepted the reciprocal role identity of follower. Conversely, there were times when some participants claimed a leader identity, but leadership was not granted by faculty and staff. In these instances, participants' self-confidence was diminished, and they were discouraged from subsequent assertions of leading. Based on their experiences over time, however, the majority of administrators realized that the pattern of claiming and granting behaviors with faculty, direct reports, and staff was reciprocal and mutually reinforcing and would continue to result in consistent leader-follower relationships (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). This realization contributed to their resilience and internalization of a leader's identity.

Impact of Following on Leader Identity Construction

Almost all participants made more meaning of their identities as leaders than as followers, which may be the result of their own implicit leadership theories as well as the amount of time spent with faculty, direct reports, and staff versus with senior leaders. A critical component of how mid-level administrators made sense of their follower identity was directly related to the relationship with their direct supervisors. Several participants attributed a positive relationship with their current supervisor as the reason they were able to extend influence upward in order to implement change initiatives that were important to them. Others were not able to broaden such influence even though they reported positive relationships as well. Bella remarked, "Sometimes they listen and sometimes they don't". When talking about previous supervisors, several participants spoke about negative situations in which they had to navigate turbulent organizational waters on a daily basis. They tried to make sense of those experiences by intentionally choosing not to replicate

the behaviors of their supervisors. However, as participants came to recognize those situations as serious threats to their leader and follower identities, they made the decision to leave in a bid of self-preservation. This finding speaks to the significance of the mid-level administrator's follower identity and the corresponding relationship with her supervisor in construction of a positive leader identity. It is worth noting that when supervisors do not grant leadership claims, it may be due to implicit followership bias which keeps women in followership positions because others believe they are well suited to the follower role (Braun et al., 2017). Future research on leader and follower identity construction could include the perspectives of senior leaders to better understand their roles in relational recognition of mid-level administrators.

Participants' follower identities were sometimes complicated by their leader identities and the simultaneous roles they played in both following and leading. Several participants discussed challenges in which they had to weigh the risks and benefits of asking for permission from their supervisor versus forgiveness when making difficult decisions. They noted the delicate balance between coaching younger colleagues who required feedback and senior leaders who also needed direction. They described experiences in which their input was requested by senior leaders, and in response, they had to be courageous and provide feedback that may have been viewed as critical or noncompliant. These findings point to a proactive construction of follower identity in which the administrators viewed themselves as active participants in the leadership process. As such, they exhibited competencies related to negotiation, conflict management, development of political alliances, and leading change, all skill sets that are often considered to be exemplary of highly effective leaders (White, 2014). These findings suggest that for community colleges focused on meeting ongoing challenges, a sustainable and insightful approach would be to intentionally look to mid-level administrators for the kind of strategic leadership that is needed rather than rely primarily on senior leaders.

Impact of the Community College Environment on Leading and Following

Amey (2022) reported that studies over the last 30 years have consistently shown how community colleges have remained gendered organizations – unsupportive of leaders who are women or people of color, especially in relation to inequitable human resource policies, impractical work-life expectations, and unchallenged hegemonic cultures and structures. The findings reported here support this claim. When discussing their leadership and followership practices, participants noted they put in more time, took on other positions, or supervised additional employees without further compensation. They often felt obligated to go the extra mile, whether it was responding to emails before and after the workday or spearheading additional initiatives. For the administrators in this study, making sense of what it means to be a leader was often compounded by pressure to prove their capabilities time and again in order to be viewed

as competent, if not more competent, than others. This finding was even more significant for Black participants who described experiences of racial bias related to professional barriers they faced as well as the double jeopardy of being both a woman and a person of color. It is well documented in the extant literature that Black women experience both sexism and racism throughout their careers. The findings from this study are consistent with those of similar studies. For example, Hall et al. (2012) found that Black women experienced stress from racial and gender stereotypes held by their co-workers and supervisors and were often placed in the position of being the voice for the Black race. This study supports previous research suggesting that gender and racial inequalities are often indirect and unspoken and can obstruct the leadership identity development of women leaders (Ely et al., 2011; Williams & Dempsey, 2014).

An unexpected finding of this study found that many participants tried to navigate the subtle workplace biases and negative stereotypes they encountered by combining their competencies with specific social behaviors in order to manage the options of being respected or being liked. For example, many took on additional projects to raise the profile of their departments or to provide additional assistance to other units related to technical skills and accreditation. They often tried to demonstrate that they were personable, “As I met people, I made sure to leave them better off than I found them. If there was anything I could do to be helpful or just put an emphasis on pleasantness” explained Fern. In some situations, participants provided additional, unsolicited reports to supervisors in an effort to instill more confidence in their leadership capabilities. Other times, they became the de facto leader of a cross-divisional mid-level administrator workgroup where they took responsibility for facilitating meetings and recording minutes with upbeat energy and a cheery attitude. Most of the participants in this study were reluctant to speak about the existence of gender bias in the policies and practices of their institutions. Yet in making meaning of their identities as leaders and followers, they described experiences in which they were held to higher standards of performance than males, disparaged for being too assertive or too passive, asked to make trade-offs between their careers and their families, and criticized by other women on the appropriate way to be a woman – all examples which contradict the idea that gender bias is absent from their organizations. Future research should focus on investigating how mid-level administrator identities as leaders and followers shape the context of the organizational culture over time. Alternatively, an important question is whether leader and follower identities evolve to match the organizational culture of the institution.

Implications and Conclusion

This study has contributed to identification and understanding of the significant contributions women mid-level administrators make when leading and following in their institutions in spite of professional and organizational challenges. Grounded in the findings from this research, community colleges can reconceive

the role of mid-level administrators and fundamentally change the way positional power and agency are distributed throughout their organizations. Increasing leadership capacity across the entire institution through dynamic, interactive relationships among all leaders will enable these institutions to better navigate the critical issues of the present as well as the future. To become less predisposed to the effects of implicit gender bias, community colleges can educate faculty, staff, and administrators to first, recognize it and second, understand how it manifests in the organization. Additionally, community colleges must work to recognize the existence of racism in the workplace and address its effects on the psychological well-being, self-concept, and interpersonal relationships of people of color. Community colleges can begin by educating all personnel on the meaning, identification, and impact of microaggressions and then support faculty, staff, and administrators with strategies and individual skills to reduce and remove microaggressions from the organization.

In conclusion, a multi-frame approach to this research enabled a complex and discerning examination of leadership and gender in the community college sector. By critically examining the experiences of mid-level women administrators, this study confirmed that identity construction is a complicated and multidimensional concept for women, related to the way an individual perceives herself with respect to the environment and influenced by social interactions with those with whom she works. This study revealed that issues related to gender and race continue to fester just beneath the surface of the institutional environment. Most significantly, the women leaders in this study, drawing upon a higher purpose when faced with adversity, provided a positive example of how to effectively lead and follow to move their organizations forward.

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