



# Advancing Women in Leadership

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*Full Length Research Paper*

## **Promoting Diverse Leadership: An Examination of Professional Experiences and Career Advancement Perceptions of Black Women in Higher Education**

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**The professional experiences and career advancement perceptions of Black, female, higher education professionals were examined in an effort to obtain qualitative and quantitative data that could positively impact practice and policy in higher education leadership. Data were collected using a mixed questionnaire that included survey items, open-ended questions, and demographic inquiries. One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVAs) was conducted to assess the difference in mean perception career advancement scores based on participants' professional classification, highest level of education, and years of professional experience. No statistically significant differences ( $p > .05$ ) were found. The lack of differences across demographics indicates that Black, female, higher education professionals have similar perceptions of career advancement, regardless of professional classification, education achieved, or years of experience.**

**Keywords:** African American women, authentic leadership, senior administrator

According to the American College President Study, the demographic trend of the average college president has not changed much in decades and position holders continue to be White men in their early sixties (Stripling, 2017). Furthermore, out of the 1,546 college leaders nationwide who participated in the study, 1,283 were White and 1,082 were men (Stripling, 2017). While some progress has been made, Black, female, higher education professionals are still underrepresented in postsecondary senior-level leadership, particularly at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). White men and women made up over 80% of university and college presidency seats, while women of color collectively accounted for 5% of college presidents, and Black men and women combined made up 8% (Gagliardi, Espinosa, Turk, & Taylor, 2017). In 2014, Black students made up 14% of undergraduate enrollment and 14% of post-baccalaureate enrollment at degree-granting institutions in the United States (U.S.). Of the Black undergraduates and post-baccalaureate students, 62% and 70% were women, respectively (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). This data reveals a disparity in diverse leadership in higher education. The presence of Black women in top-tier leadership is not readily visible in American higher education and, in many cases, the racial makeup of the university is not reflected in high-ranking positions.

On a college campus, human diversity can enhance student learning outcomes and institutional efficacy (Smith &

Schonfeld, 2000). Furthermore, Sherbin and Rashid (2017) asserted that diversity and inclusion are a basis for competitive advantage, innovation, and organizational progression. Identifying the perceptions of Black women, in regard to barriers, aspirations, professional growth, and representation, could guide efforts towards the understanding and eventual elimination of underrepresentation, which could lead to other benefits surrounding diversity. Black women are the largest dually minority group in the United States. Examining this group, minority by gender and race, could result in major impact for women of color and benefit smaller, female, minority groups.

The purpose of this study was to examine the professional experiences of Black women in higher education, including their perceived professional growth opportunities and perceived barriers to career advancement. Participants' responses revealed specific, perceived causes or reasons for the poor reflection of Black women in upper administrative roles in higher education. Additionally, we examined the ways in which Black women in postsecondary education view gender and race representation and their perceptions of career advancement. Responses provided details negative perceptions in this area as well. Therefore, the goal of this study was to examine Black, female, higher education professionals' experiences and perceptions of career advancement opportunities and views of leadership representation in senior-level, university administration by collecting data related to the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of career advancement among Black, female professionals who are employed at colleges and universities?
  - a. How do the perceptions differ between respondent groups?
2. What are the career advancement related experiences among Black, female, higher education professionals?
  - a. What barriers are Black women currently experiencing as employees at colleges and universities?
  - b. What aspirations or professional growth plans do Black women have as employees at institutions of higher education?
3. What perceptions do Black women have regarding the representation of Black women in senior-level administrative roles at colleges and universities?

The data collection method to be used for this study was a survey, which included closed-ended items that require scaled responses and open-ended questions that aim to provide rich data to inform the scaled survey responses.

Results may assist leaders and organizations in identifying needs related to diversifying senior-level administration, inclusive of Black women. Findings may guide methods to diversify leadership in higher education, which might allow Black women to be appropriately represented in top-tier leadership, especially at PWIs, in ways that are more reflective of the university's population. Furthermore, significant findings could have greater societal outcomes for Black women and leadership at universities where underrepresentation is an issue.

### **Literature Review**

According to Wolfe and Dilworth (2015), there is a shortage in literature regarding the representation of African American administrators in higher education and their experiences as employees within PWIs. Furthermore, researchers who have produced research studies and national reports have confirmed that a majority of senior-level administrators, specifically college presidents, are middle-aged, White men (Stripling, 2017). According to the American College President Study 2017, 58% of college presidents were over the age of 60, 83% were White, and 70% were male in 2016 (Gagliardi et al., 2017). This racial and gender disparity has been in place since the establishment of higher education in the United States. in the 17th century (Stripling, 2017). Additionally, there is a paucity of literature on African American, female college leaders and their professional development or career advancement in higher education, as the literature often focuses on White men, women, or people of color in a generalized manner rather than focusing on Black women specifically (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015).

In her foundational work, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, Crenshaw

(1989) offered a Black feminist critique of doctrine, theory, and politics; she presented issues that marginalized Black women by not acknowledging their experiences as both Black and female, which does not value intersectionality. Crenshaw discussed how feminist theory and politics originated from the context of White women and does not speak for or to Black women, and how antiracist politics do not acknowledge the compounded nature of being Black and female. Crenshaw demonstrated through court cases a discord between justice for Black, female plaintiffs and the understanding of the Black and female experience. Crenshaw identified a single-axis analysis as problematic in understanding the experiences of Black women and suggested that society embrace the intersection between race and sex to facilitate inclusion, improve antidiscrimination efforts, and understand the multidimensional experiences of Black women.

Davis and Maldonado (2015) claimed that research on the impact of intersectionality, where race and gender cross, on African American women's professional development as university leaders has not been adequately examined. They proposed that a framework is needed to understand the Black, female experience and a reference point is needed to identify and eradicate cultural obstacles that may hinder their career advancement. Furthermore, the researchers reported that the results from the 2012 American College President Study highlighted the need for more minority women in collegiate leadership positions and revealed barriers faced by Black women. (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). The 2017 American College President Study reported that new leadership trends are occurring slowly, as percentages for women and minorities have increased by four points since 2011 (Sesay, 2017). Recent works, such as research conducted by Gagliardi et al. (2017), Davis and Maldonado (2015), and Wolfe and Dilworth (2015), suggested that there are opportunities for more diversity in higher education leadership. They also suggested that there are gaps in literature concerning Black women in academia, opportunities for exploration of new research and data, and discussions that can be expanded to include Black, female, higher education professionals.

Data show some improvement in the area of diversified leadership, but progress is slow, as college presidencies are still overwhelmingly White (Sesay, 2017; Stripling, 2017). The number of female and minority candidates who are qualified for these positions has grown as the number of women and people of color who have earned advanced degrees has grown (Wallace, Budden, Juban, & Budden, 2014). Growing diversity in employee and student populations continues to be a major topic in higher education as evidenced by current articles in popular higher education publications, such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Insider Higher Ed*, and academic journals that focus on equity and diversity.

In order to more fully understand the leadership culture in U. S. higher education, as well as the Black woman's place therein, it would be reasonable to examine the history of higher education in the United States, the culture of patriarchy in American higher

education, and the history of Black women in education and the workforce. It is also important to note the peculiar connection and disparity between White men, who are currently in the majority as leaders in higher education, and their African American female counterparts, who are not well-represented in senior-level administration.

From the inception of U. S. higher education in the 1600s to present-day, the position of President at PWIs has been held primarily by White men. Additionally, these men have held positions as the majority population, which some would claim includes authority, perceived superiority, power, and favorable bias in the role of academic leadership (Blain, 2017; Marcus, 2017; Stripling, 2017). These benefits, as they may apply to White men, suggest that women and people of color are at a disadvantage in pursuit of senior-level leadership at institutions of higher education. Barriers such as patriarchy and the glass ceiling are concepts that often position men as the leaders or portend to hinder women's progress and increasingly impede progress for women of color (Beckwith, Carter, & Peters, 2016; hooks, 2004).

While women have had obstacles to overcome because of their gender, and Black men have faced similar barriers related to race, Black women have experienced the difficulties encountered by both groups. For this reason, Black women in the U.S. have a unique narrative with added layers of complexity. This narrative includes the use of African American women as slaves and domestic servants, women's suffrage and the women's rights movement, the Civil Rights movements of the 1950s and 60s, and present-day lobbying and protesting in social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo. In U. S. academia, Black women have been subject to additional challenges, from the prohibition of education during slavery to the current underrepresentation of African American women in higher education tenured faculty and leadership positions (Johnson, 2017).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Lederman and Lederman (2015) stated that although research was conducted prior to the development of now well-known and widely used theories, all scholarly works of today, regardless of the methodology used, need cogent theoretical frameworks to explain the significance of the studies. Additionally, Grant and Osanloo (2016) claimed that as researchers prepare their dissertations, the theoretical framework serves as a blueprint for the work, which guides and supports the study. It also provides structure and defines the researcher's logical, procedural, and analytical approach. Therefore, to support research regarding the underrepresentation of African American women in senior-level administrative roles in postsecondary PWIs in the United States, the researcher chose critical race theory (CRT), social dominance theory (SDT), and Black feminist theory with Black feminist thought. These theories, collectively, were used to justify the study's importance and act as a guide to better address and understand the subject matter.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory was founded in the 1980s by Derrick Bell, who revealed the law's failure to deliver racial justice following *Brown v. Board of Education* and provided a lens for studying inequality in legal studies (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). In 1995, Ladson-Billings and Tate applied CRT to education as a framing tool designed to challenge racial inequalities, but it was first used in American law schools to address critical legal studies' failures to account for the experiences of the racially-oppressed (Gasman, Abiola, & Travers, 2015; Patton, 2016; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015; Yosso, Parker, Solorzano, & Lynn, 2004). CRT is a theoretical framework guided by principles that can be used to study and argue the influence that race and racial discrimination have on educational constructions, systems, and dialogues (Yosso et al., 2004). McCoy and Rodricks (2015) defined CRT as:

a form of oppositional scholarship that centers race and racism while challenging the Eurocentric values established as the accepted norm in the United States; is used to examine the unequal and unjust distribution of power and resources politically, economically, racially, and socially; a movement of scholars committed to challenging and disrupting racism and other forms of oppression; composed of the following key tenets: the permanence of racism, experiential knowledge, interest convergence theory, intersectionality, whiteness as property, the critique of liberalism, and commitment to social justice. (p. 91)

Furthermore, McCoy and Rodricks (2015) asserted that postsecondary institutions are White structures that favor White norms. Patton, McEwen, Rendon, and Howard-Hamilton (2007) claimed that the underrepresentation of racial minorities in university leadership is an instance of CRT and reveals that racial minorities have less status and power than the dominant race.

Yosso et al. (2004) identified genealogy and influences of CRT in education and presented a gap between praxis, practice that is informed by theory, and theory; but also, the connections that all of the subjects have in relation to one another, particularly studies of ethnicity, women, and multiculturalism, relative to this research problem. It is also important to note that while CRT points to race and racism as the core ideas to be examined, it also acknowledges how other scholarly practices and studies contribute to the framework. CRT concurrently acknowledges that additional oppressive beliefs, particularly sexism in this case, are joined to explain the systemic conditions of a person's existence. Rationalizing the idea of multiple oppressions as a condition is complex and should not be generalized (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Yosso et al., 2004).

CRT encourages people of color to share their stories to combat the oppressive narrative of the dominant culture (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Martinez, 2014). To the contrary, a perpetuation of negativity projected onto the minority by the

majority may be a factor that leads to underrepresentation in senior-level administrative roles in U. S. higher education (Gasman et al., 2015). CRT calls for a “rejection of liberalism, meritocracy, colorblindness, neutrality, and objectivity—these notions reinforce the self-interest of Whites in the position of power” and failure to reject such ideas indicates a disregard for the minority’s narrative (Gasman et al., 2015, p. 4); ultimately, the acceptance of such ideas will not benefit the majority or address the issues related to racial discrimination (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015).

### **Social Dominance Theory**

Social dominance theory was introduced in the 1990s by Sidanius and Pratto as a way to study societal structure. More recently, Sidanius and Pratto (2011) offered this statement as part of an overview of SDT:

Stated most simply, social dominance theory (SDT) argues that intergroup oppression, discrimination, and prejudice are the means by which human societies organize themselves as group-based hierarchies, in which members of dominant groups secure a disproportionate share of the good things in life (e.g., powerful roles, good housing, good health), and members of subordinate groups receive a disproportionate share of the bad things in life (e.g., relatively poor housing and poor health). (p. 1)

Furthermore, the classifications for SDT are age, gender, or patriarchal and arbitrary-set systems. The age system indicates that adults have power over children, while the patriarchal system indicates that men have more power than women. This power can be social, political, military, or economic (Sidanius, Cotterill, Sheehy-Skeffington, Kteily, & Carvacho, 2016; Sidanius & Pratto, 2011). Race might be arbitrarily assigned as a system that implies that a dominant group has power over another, and myths that legitimize the oppression work to normalize the inequality (Sidanius & Pratto, 2011). For example, using this system in conjunction with the understanding of America’s historical context as it relates to racism, the inference could be made that Whites retain a disproportionate and greater amount of power and possessions than Blacks.

This explanation of systems offers a lens for studying the underrepresentation of African American women in senior-level leadership roles in U. S. PWIs. Considering these systems as part of society-imposed, group-based hierarchies, it would appear that young, African American, female candidates would be considered last for these positions, be paid less than White professionals and Black, male professionals as well. Furthermore, this societal organization uses group-based ideologies that promote hierarchy to rationalize the disparities, which places marginalized groups at a greater disadvantage (Sidanius & Pratto, 2011).

Sidanius and Pratto (2011) identified system-wide, intergroup, and person levels of SDT and the relationships between concepts

within the theory. It is important to note that on the personal level, social dominance orientation (SDO) concerns a person’s desire for their group to dominate another. However, if a person who is in an outgroup has a high level of SDO, they would prefer that the hierarchy and structure remain the same, which promotes oppression (Sidanius et al., 2016). This statement suggests that a person who prefers hierarchy is willing to support hierarchical rule—even if they are not in the dominant group—and face inequalities, rather than challenge the status quo. In contrast, a subordinate group member with a low level of SDO will advocate for change and resist discriminatory or hierarchical policies.

SDT has been applied to many domains and has been used at length to study organizational behavior in the workplace, as well as prejudice and discrimination (Sidanius et al., 2016). Because of its previous application, this theory is fitting to use to identify inequities as the underrepresentation of Black women in senior-level leadership at PWIs is being examined. The inequities could be products of SDO, hierarchy, legitimizing myths, social institutions, social context, group behavior, or discrimination that Sidanius et al. (2016) have studied.

### **Black Feminist Theory and Black Feminist Thought**

Black feminist theory is a by-product of feminism, which encompasses White women, and Black Women’s Studies, which is inclusive of Black women (hooks, 1989). Black feminist theory acknowledges the challenges of being both Black and a woman, asserting that race and gender cannot be isolated entities and that the oppressions are compounded (hooks, 1989; 2000). Davis and Maldonado (2015) claimed that “African American women may have different experiences of power, growth, and development compared to other women,” and “Black feminist theory provides African American women the opportunity to speak from an experience unbeknownst to other women” (p. 53). It is this ideology that recognizes the differences among Black women and between Black women and other groups. It also supports the significance of studies specific to Black women and their experiences and perceptions.

Black feminist theory is rooted in Black feminist thought, as it is the responsibility of Black, female scholars to construct theories about the experience of being a Black woman that will explain Black women’s perspectives (Collins, 1986). Furthermore, as a critical social theory, the objective of Black feminist thought is to support efforts against the oppressions of being Black and being female that overlap (Collins, 2000). Collins (1986), the architect of Black feminist thought, identified three key themes. First, Black women’s self-definition and self-valuation involves self-empowerment. The interlocking nature of oppression is the second theme, which deals with the Black woman’s opposition to persecution due to race, class, and gender. Lastly, the importance of African American women’s culture is recognized and used to combat discrimination. In 2000, Collins (2000) broadened the concept by introducing additional core themes that are often issues of concern for women in the workplace and

society, such as sexual politics, love relationships, motherhood, and activism, which are important pieces of the theory.

### **Relevant Theories**

There are a number of theories used to better understand the unique experiences of minorities in the workplace and various leadership theories that relate to diversity. For example, some scholars recommend using Miller and Stiver's relational-cultural theory model—which focuses on mutual engagement, empathy, and empowerment—to understand the experiences of Black, female faculty members at PWIs (Edwards, Bryant, & Clark, 2008). Edwards et al. (2008) offered a different theory, Kanter's (1993) theory of proportional representation, to understand the minority experience in groups. This theory suggests that the minority experience differs based on the group's structure and composition. With regard to diversity in academic leadership, Page (2003) asserted that leaders will accept their responsibility to serve the well-represented in addition to the underrepresented populations of the institution, if a university maintains the ideal that leadership must mirror its population's make-up and make role models available for others in leadership positions. These are just a few theories that can be used to better understand the links between the experiences of minorities, diversity, and leadership.

Gardner, Barrett, and Pearson (2014) used a conceptual framework that focuses on adjustment issues, institutional factors, career dynamics, and career outcomes to examine the barriers and enablers of career success for African American administrators at PWIs. The four minority women who shared their experiences in this qualitative study were quoted on topics of mentoring relationships, commitment to diversity, discrimination, perceptions of prejudice, social networks and family support, and healthy self-image and motivation. Claiming to be the first to employ the tenets and procedures of consensual qualitative research (CQR), the authors reported that the use of CQR's constructivist approach resulted in the selection of "successful" participants to interview for the purpose of their study. Gardner et al. (2014) suggested that placing more emphasis on supportive structures and eradicating barriers of career success at PWIs might improve chances for African American student affairs administrators to achieve success in their professions.

Rosette, Leonardelli, and Phillips (2008) examined whether race is recognized as a characteristic of the leader archetype. The researchers utilized leadership categorization theory and collected evidence supporting their projection that race, particularly being White, is an attribute of the leadership prototype. Additionally, they investigated whether this finding could describe the variances in assessments of White and minority leaders. Evidence from this part of the study found that White leaders were more favored in evaluations than African American leaders, which contributes positively to their opportunities for advancement over the non-prototypical leaders. This study included four experiments and concluded that "transparent barriers likely persist that prevent racial minorities

from rising to the most esteemed positions of leadership in corporate environments" (Rosette et al., 2008, p. 773). These studies support the concept that White men are the prototype for leadership, which contributes to the underrepresentation and advancement issues of other minority groups, specifically African American women.

### **Methods**

To obtain findings that could address the problem of practice, wherein Black women are underrepresented as senior-level professionals at PWIs, the first author conducted an embedded mixed methods study to pursue answers to the research questions. Research study participants—Black, female professionals who worked at American postsecondary institutions—completed Coleman's African American Student Affairs Administrators Survey about their perceptions of career advancement in higher education, resulting in quantitative data, and provided demographic and background information related to the study. Open-ended questions were presented to participants as well to further address participants' perceptions regarding career advancement, thoughts surrounding Black, female representation in senior-level leadership, and career goals in higher education. This qualitative analysis gave the researcher and participants an opportunity to partner in a research process aimed to respond to a social problem that impacts a underrepresented group in an effort to identify contributing factors and possible resolutions.

### **Research Design**

This study was conducted using a mixed methods design, specifically an embedded design. An embedded design is used when there is a need for one set of data to be supported by another, such as this study, which was largely quantitative with the qualitative data taking a supporting role in the larger design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This instrument design was a mixed questionnaire, "a questionnaire that includes a mixture of open-ended and closed-ended items," with scaled items and open-ended discussion questions (Johnson & Christensen, 2014, p.199). Trends found in the survey responses (the quantitative component) were explained, opposed, or further explored through the open-ended questions (the qualitative component) to better understand the findings from the survey, or vice versa. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected, maintained, and analyzed electronically. The interpretations of the responses from both methods were used to answer the research questions and address gaps in the literature. Additionally, the first author engaged in reflective journaling was employed in the research process which strengthened the methodology by making the author's experiences and thoughts visible (Ortlipp, 2008).

### **Quantitative Reliability and Validity**

Coleman (2002) used this survey to examine 27 factors of career advancement related to Black, female administrators in

Alabama. Belk (2006) used a revised version of the same survey to study the “impact of gender, institutional characteristics, years of professional experience in higher education, and highest earned degree on perceptions of career advancement factors held by mid-level Black female and male student affairs administrators” (p. ix). Coleman reported that the final version of the African American Student Affairs Administrators Survey was reliable with an item-to-total correlation range of 0.317 to 0.808, Cronbach alpha of 0.93, and standard error of measurement of 3.85. Coleman also reported satisfactory content validity for this instrument.

**Qualitative Reliability and Validity**

After qualitative data were collected, the extent to which results were plausible, credible, consistent, and trustworthy was determined through verification strategies. These strategies included ensuring coherence between the research question and components of the method, utilizing an appropriate sample, collecting and analyzing data concurrently, thinking theoretically, and moving between a micro-perspective of the data and a macro-conceptual/theoretical understanding (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). In addition, open-ended questions were reviewed by the researcher’s committee chair and peers to ensure that appropriate standards were met. By doing so, the researcher employed two of Creswell’s (2013) recommended validation strategies, enabling external audits and involving peer reviewers, to ensure validity and that the survey remained consistent throughout the study to ensure reliability. Validation is necessary, as the qualitative data from the open-ended questions were used to support the quantitative data revealed by the survey responses for a more nuanced view of the findings.

**Participants**

Individuals who were identified as potential participants by their association with groups of higher education professionals or Black women were contacted for participation. Upon closing the data collection portion of the study, 110 submissions were received from self-reported Black, female, higher education professionals who are or were employed in higher education roles in the United States participated in this study by completing the electronically distributed survey in the setting of their choosing. Fully or partially submitted responses to the survey were included. Some participants worked in senior administrative roles at their institutions, while others did not. With regard to age, 80.9% of participants were 19-50 years of age and 11.8% were over 50 years old. Approximately seven percent did not indicate age or respond to any of the items on the survey. Most participants reported employment, current or previous, at a PWI versus a minority serving institution, public versus private institution, and four-year versus two-year institution. While job titles varied significantly from support staff to deans, 11.8% of participants self-identified as senior-level, 47.3% identified as mid-level, 16.4% as entry-level, and 1.8% as other (see Table 1). Of those who responded to the

professional classification questionnaire item, eight identified as senior-level administrators at PWIs.

Table 1

*Professional Classification of Research Participants*

Classification	N	%
Senior level	13	11.8%
Mid-level	52	47.3%
Entry level	18	16.4%
Other	2	1.8%
No response	25	22.7%

Over 20% of respondents reported a terminal degree as their highest level of education and less than 2% reported holding an associate’s or high school diploma as their highest level of education (see Table 2). Thirty-three percent of participants had less than five years of professional experience in higher education, 23.6% had five to 10 years of experience, and 20% had more than 10 years of experience (see Table 3).

Table 2

*Highest Level of Education of Research Participants*

Education Level	N	%
High School Diploma	2	1.8%
Associate’s Degree	1	<1%
Bachelor’s Degree	14	11.8%
Master’s/Education Specialist Degree	41	32.7%
Doctorate Degree	25	22.7%
Other	3	2.7%
No response	25	22.7%

Selection was based on participants’ availability and willingness to provide feedback, as well as viability of the contacts provided by organizations and through various networks. Therefore, participants were from different institutions, regions, academic backgrounds, etc. The rationale that drove the invitation of participants was to identify those who were most likely to provide rich data. Therefore, the sample consisted of those who self-reported as the target group of the research study (i.e., Black, female, higher education professionals). Rich data could introduce themes associated with leadership in higher education and the participants’ perceptions of career advancement opportunities for Black, female employees. With this goal in mind, the first author sent approximately 80 direct emails inviting people to complete and/or share the survey link for this study. Additionally, the first author asked seven groups to share the invitation with their members. Participants, who were invited and subsequently participated, were members of national, state, and local professional organizations that focused on higher education, diversity, and women in the academy. The first author also invited members of informal groups and other organizations, whose membership primarily consisted of female professionals and higher education professionals, to participate as well. The invitation encouraged recipients to share the survey link with other potential participants.



## Role of the Researcher

The first author conducted this study for her dissertation with support from the second author, a member of the dissertation committee. The researcher (first author) attempted to minimize personal influence on the study by communicating with participants through electronic means, rather than in person. Coleman's African American Student Affairs Administrators Survey was delivered electronically with minimal interaction between the researcher and the participants. The researcher remained unbiased in data collection by using all responses submitted and reported unmanipulated findings relative to the established research questions. The researcher acknowledged the influence that her own social, political, and religious views, as well as her personal and professional experiences as a Black female, could have on her perception of the participants and data interpretation. Therefore, the researcher employed reflexivity to maintain self-awareness and positionality to maintain objectivity in her thinking and interpretation process. Additionally, reflective journaling was employed in the research process which strengthened the methodology by making the researcher's experiences and thoughts visible (Ortlipp, 2008).

## Researcher Context

At the time of the study, the first author was a doctoral student and the second author was faculty and a member of the first author's dissertation committee with extensive experience in mixed methods research. This manuscript is a result of collaboration between the first author, who is now a director for incoming and prospective student programs in higher education, and the second author who is a current faculty member in higher education. The first author has an interest in diversity in leadership, professional development and retention, and university advancement. The second author's research interests involve gender and leadership in higher education and issues of social justice. This collaboration was the result of a shared desire to make known the issues faced by those who are underrepresented. Bourke (2014) asserted that "our own biases shape the research process, serving as checkpoints along the way" (p. 1). With positionality in mind, the female authors made intentional efforts to identify their biases and approach the research in a way that would unbiasedly address the needs of the group being examined.

## Procedures and Data Collection

The researcher obtained permission from the university's Institutional Board (IRB) to execute the procedures as outlined below. With the proper permission, the African American Student Affairs Administrators Survey (Coleman, 2002) was used to assess the perceptions of career advancement for African American women in higher education. Next, the survey instrument was administered using Qualtrics Survey Software, an online survey tool, which provided an anonymous link via an emailed invitation to participate.

The researcher took the following steps to obtain participants:

1. Participant contacts were acquired from various professional and social organizations and collegial networks, in an effort to obtain data related to the research questions.
2. Potential participants received an electronic invitation letter to participate from the researcher directly or indirectly.
3. An informed consent form was provided prior to the survey to all participants.
4. The survey was linked to the consent form and distributed electronically to Black, female, higher education professionals and affiliated groups nationwide.

Numerical values were assigned to the participants' responses that reflected negative or positive perceptions for the scaled items. The scaled responses were evaluated for trends, using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), and analyzed to determine statistical significance. The open-ended questions were presented to participants in an effort to collect qualitative data regarding the professional experiences and perceptions of career advancement among African American women in higher education who are or have been employed at colleges and universities in the United States. Six weeks following the initial distribution of the survey, responses were coded and analyzed to identify themes.

To ensure accuracy, electronic data collection was not altered, and the researcher-maintained access. To ensure confidentiality, data were saved electronically on the researcher's computer and secured with password protection. Any data that specifically revealed the identity of a respondent or institution were destroyed upon conclusion of the study.

## Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS; version 26.0; IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY). Descriptive statistics were used to provide an analysis of response frequencies and to discover trends in reported experiences and perceptions. One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was utilized to evaluate differences among participant mean career advancement perception scores based upon Professional Classification (senior level, mid-level, entry level, and other); Highest level of Education (High School, Bachelor Degree, Master's Degree, Educational Specialist, Doctorate, and other); and Years of Professional Experience (less than 1 year, 1 to 3 years, 3 to 5 years, 5 to 7 years, 7 to 10 years, 10 to 15 years, and more than 15 years). If the overall F test was significant, follow-up tests using Fisher's Least Significant Difference (LSD) were conducted to evaluate pairwise differences among the means. The alpha was set as  $\alpha = .05$ . Values coding was utilized to conduct an analysis of the qualitative data, responses to the open-ended questions, that reflected participants' values, attitudes, and belief. According to Saldaña (2013), "a belief is part of a system that includes our values and attitudes, plus our personal knowledge, experiences, opinions, prejudices, morals, and other interpretive perceptions



of the social world (p. 111). Therefore, this application was fitting for examining the perceptions and experiences of Black, female, higher education professionals. Data was categorized under the value coding premise and themes were identified. Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed in tandem to determine commonalities and provide a richer picture of lived experiences.

### Limitations

Potential limitations included a lack of external incentives from the researcher to encourage individuals to participate, and the absence of repercussions for partial or no participation. Also, the study's findings were dependent on the participants' choices to answer the survey items honestly and in compliance with the instructions. Some participants may have chosen to respond to all of the items, while others may have responded to some or none of the items. Those who responded to none were not counted in the submission count and very few skipped items, possibly by choice or in error. It is possible that a number of participants acted under participant bias, providing answers that they believe the researcher desires or will find favorable, while others may have hidden their true answers for fear of being judged or providing unfavorable responses. Some participants may have also intentionally or unintentionally not followed the given instructions for the questionnaire. All of these scenarios presented potential limitations.

### Findings

This analysis confirmed findings that have already been reported in academic literature and introduces new ideas for further research. Data findings were as follows:

*RQ 1: What are the perceptions of career advancement among Black, female professionals who are employed at colleges and universities?*

Lower scores (scores close to one in numerical value) in response to the survey's scaled items reflected more agreement with the statement. With regard to degree attainment and experience, participants agreed ( $M = 1.33$ ) most strongly with the following statement: Experience, in addition to a master's degree, is necessary for African American, female, college/university employees to advance their careers.

They were less agreeable to the statements that referred to a Master's without experience or a doctorate with experience as a necessity for career advancement. Participants also strongly agreed ( $M = 1.33$ ), signified by low scorings, that networking opportunities for Black, female, higher education professionals are lacking in higher education settings.

Participants agreed ( $M = 1.67$ ) that they must work twice as hard as others to be considered competent. With regard to the standards that Black, college professionals are held to, participants strongly agreed ( $M = 1.67$ ) that they are held to a higher standard than White, male employees, but even more so than White, female employees ( $M = 1.33$ ). Participants disagreed ( $M = 3.33$ ), denoted by fairly high scorings, that they

are often held to a higher performance standard than African American, male employees. The only other item with a mean of 3.33, the highest level disagreement reported on this scale, involved organizational culture. For this item, participants strongly disagreed ( $M = 3.33$ ) with the following statement: As an African American, female, college/university employee, I think that on the whole, I have an unclear understanding of the organizational culture in which I work.

These data suggest the perception of racial discrimination is greater than that of gender-based discrimination, which is part of an understood organizational culture. In such a culture, Black women must work harder to be considered competent and are held to a higher standard than White men and an even higher standard in comparison to White women, but not in comparison to Black men. One participant reported the following:

I do not believe African American women are well represented in senior level administration. I believe based on experiences I have had that we are often ignored in respect to our professional work ethic due to either being [B]lack or female or both. We are often however the 'go to' for all things work.

This participant's beliefs encompass a perceived unfair standard, bias, and lack of representation that she attributes to her race and gender.

1a: How do the perceptions differ between respondent groups?

The researcher found no statistically significant differences among participant mean career advancement perception scores based on Professional Classification,  $F(3, 81) = .234, p = .872$ , see Table 1; Highest Level of Education,  $F(8, 101) = .290, p = .968$ , see Table 2; or Years of Professional Experience,  $F(6, 78) = 1.311, p = .262$ , see Table 3. The lack of differences across demographics suggested that Black, female, higher education professionals have similar perceptions of career advancement, regardless of professional classification, education achieved, or years of professional experience.

*RQ 2: What are the career-advancement-related experiences among Black, female, higher education professionals?*

Participants revealed career-advancement-related experiences that supported the presence of inequality/inequity and a lack of opportunities to grow and advance in the field of higher education (see Table 4). Ultimately, the themes that appeared in all of the inquiries under the second research question suggested discrimination.

Table 4

*Research Questions and Emerging Themes in the Research Data*

Research Questions	Themes
RQ2: What are the career-advancement-related experiences among Black, female, higher education professionals?	Limited opportunities for advancement Inequality/Inequity
2a: What barriers are Black women currently experiencing as employees at colleges and universities?	Lack of promotion opportunities Identity taxation Unfair/Unequal pay Lack of professional development Exclusion/Dismissal
2b: What aspirations or professional growth plans do Black women have as employees at institutions of higher education?	Self-improvement Self-promotion Influence/Impact for the next generation
RQ3: What perceptions do Black women have regarding the representation of Black women in senior-level administrative roles at colleges and universities?	Representation in diversity roles only Underrepresentation in other roles due to: lack of mentorship or sponsorship, biased networks and discrimination, and lack of value for Black women/diversity

*2a: What barriers are Black women currently experiencing as employees at colleges and universities?*

Barriers to career advancement reported by respondents included, but were not limited to, the following: passed over or overlooked for promotion and lack of advancement opportunities, identity taxation, unfair or unequal pay, lack of professional development, and exclusion or dismissal (see Table 4). Participants reported cases wherein Black women were suitable candidates for jobs that were awarded to White women or men who were less suitable, and cases wherein the participants' environments were not inclusive. One participant stated, "Several times my White male supervisors have told me that there wasn't an opportunity for me to advance and then opportunities were given to underqualified white men." This scenario shared by the participant suggests that Black women have been denied opportunities for promotion and advancement opportunities, which have instead been offered to White men who are less qualified. Other participants referenced identity taxation as they recalled being the "go-to" person and receiving "all of the students of color assignments."

*2b: What aspirations or professional growth plans do Black women have as employees at institutions of higher education?*

Themes that surfaced during this study regarding the aspirations of advancement in higher education were self-improvement, self-promotion, and influence/impact for the next generation (see Table 4). One participant stated, "Yes, I'd like to be a role model for others and break barriers for other black females that come after me." Other participants reported the need to better themselves, prove themselves, and be role models for others. Those who reported no interest in advancing in higher education, which accounted for approximately one fourth of the total respondents, identified politics and family as reasons to maintain or change current positions. Another participant stated, "I do not feel there is space for me at my current PWI to fully be seen, valued, included, and heard." These negative experiences can adversely affect the future of diversity and the representation of Black women in higher education.

*RQ3: What perceptions do Black women have regarding the representation of Black women in senior-level administrative roles at colleges and universities?*

Qualitative data revealed that over 90% of the respondents disagreed with the belief that African American women are well-represented in senior-level administration at PWIs in the United States. Reasons included, but were not limited to, lack of mentorship or sponsorship, biased networks and discrimination, and lack of value with regard to African American women and/or diversity (see Table 4). Several participants mentioned that care-taking roles, family, values, inability to relocate, and other reasons might keep women, and specifically Black women, from applying or being hired for senior-level leadership roles. However, the overwhelming majority pointed to bias as the reason for their perceived underrepresentation in senior-level leadership. Participants' responses included words and phrases such as discrimination, subject to the bias of those above us, stereotypes, inequalities, unfair, and systematic prejudices. Additionally, some participants explained that there are token or symbolic roles for which African American, female, higher education professionals are often hired in senior-level positions; these include being leaders of diversity, inclusion, or multicultural offices, or they have leadership titles but no real power or influence (see Table 4).

**Discussion**

Research findings revealed that the data presented is in alignment with the literature relevant to this research study and lends itself to follow-up research to obtain a deeper understanding of the Black, female experience and perception as a higher education professional and aspiring leader.

**Research Question 1**

RQ1 addressed the career-advancement perceptions of participants per their scaled responses to various items within the survey. Responses were primarily negative, as evident by the low means indicating strong agreement for statements that suggest a presence of inequity and discrimination, which aligns with reports in current literature. There was no statistical significance between groups as related to RQ1.

Respondents strongly agreed that experience and education, specifically a Master's degree, is vital to career ascension and that opportunities for Black, female, college professionals to network are lacking. Another noteworthy finding presented in the data is that participants agreed (M = 1.67) that they must work twice as hard as others to be considered competent. Heilman et al. (2015) discussed lack of fit and gender bias in their article about career recruitment and selection, wherein they stated that female job applicants and candidates who benefit from affirmative-action initiatives—Black women are members of these populations—are presumed to be incompetent. This belief alludes to bias and discrimination and is supported by data. With regard to the standards that Black college professionals are held to, participants strongly agreed (M = 1.67) that they are held to a higher standard than White, male

employees and agreed more strongly with the idea when compared to White, female employees ( $M = 1.33$ ). The researcher found that White employees are considered prototypical leaders and, therefore, are evaluated more favourably in comparison to African American employees (Rosette et al., 2008).

These findings support the participants' belief that a higher, and possibly exclusionary, standard exists. Finally, participants disagreed ( $M = 3.33$ ) that they are often held to a higher performance standard than the African American male employee. These findings suggest that the perception of racial discrimination is greater than that of gender-based discrimination and reveal evidence of intersectionality's effect—the impact of an individual's lived experience as a minority by gender and race concurrently—on Black, female, higher education professionals. This effect postulates that Black individuals are held to a higher standard or must outperform than their White peers, and that Black women may also feel subject to superfluous standards because they are women and, therefore, must perform better than White women if they want to advance their careers.

### **Research Question 2**

RQ2 addressed barriers to career advancement and aspirations or growth plans. Data collected for RQ2a supported the data collected for RQ1. Respondents reported concerns that included being passed over or overlooked for promotion, lack of advancement opportunities, experiencing identity taxation, unfair or unequal pay, a lack of professional development opportunities, and exclusion or dismissal within their organizations. The aforementioned concerns, glass ceiling and occupational barriers due to gender or racial bias issues, were addressed in various works by scholars such as Davis and Maldonado (2015), Hill et al. (2016), Johnson (2017), Hirshfield and Joseph (2012), and Yoshino and Smith (2013). The barriers' presence in the data supports current literature's claims, which sets Black, female, higher education professionals at a disadvantage due to stereotypes, bias, and discrimination. The frequency at which these barriers appear in the data also suggests that this group shares commonalities within and between their differences and that their work environments are not perceived as places where equality, growth, advancement, and inclusion are present for them.

Influence or impact for the next generation was a theme that emerged from the responses of the open-ended questions related to the aspirations of advancement in higher education. These findings support authors who have made similar claims, such as Hannum et al. (2015), whose minority participants placed value on the presence of role models. Research participants have stated that it is important that the next generation of learners, particularly Black students or students of color, have the support they need or a role model that looks like them. This idea is the driving force for some Black higher education professionals to remain in the field and advance therein.

### **Research Question 3**

RQ3 addressed the representation of Black, female, senior-level administrators in PWIs as perceived by Black, female, higher education professionals. Like Beckwith et al. (2016), participants overwhelmingly agreed that Black, female professionals are not well-represented in top-tier leadership at PWIs for various reasons. Primary explanations included the lack of mentorship/sponsorship as discussed by Hill et al. (2016); biased networks and discrimination within organizations as discussed by Gardner et al. (2014), Davis and Maldonado (2015), Perrault (2015), and McDonald (2011); and a lack of value placed on diversity in general and the Black, female professional specifically.

### **Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

The findings of this study are critical in supporting recommendations for policy and practice that eliminate higher education's discriminatory systems and develop procedures that will facilitate equity and career advancement for Black women. Networks such as the "good ol' boys" should be replaced with mentorship and sponsorship programs that are inclusive of Black, female professionals as suggested by Grant and Ghee (2015). Hill et al. (2016) asserted sponsorship, not just mentoring, is most beneficial, while Davis and Maldonado (2015) stated that Black women in their study who had sponsors reported professional advancement and development which they attribute to their sponsors. Also, attention should be placed on practices involving the recruitment and retention of Black, female, higher education professionals as recommended by Edwards et al. (2008); additionally, pipelines to leadership and diversity training could aid in such endeavors as suggested by Johnson (2017) and Gasman et al. (2015).

### **Conclusion**

This study aimed to examine the career advancement perceptions and professional experiences of Black, female higher education professionals. A mixed methods embedded design was utilized in an effort to obtain rich data that would inform leadership and address issues related to the underrepresentation of Black women in post-secondary, senior-level roles. The study's initial research question sought to identify the perceptions of Black, female professionals in higher education by soliciting responses to items on a survey. Responses were primarily negative, as evident by the low means indicating strong agreement for statements that suggest a presence of inequity and discrimination, which aligns with reports that can be found in current literature. The research study's second question aimed to more deeply explore the survey responses from RQ1 with open-ended questions that focused on career advancement experiences and perceptions, primarily barriers, aspirations, and development. There was no statistical significance between groups as related to RQ1.

Data collected for RQ2a supported the data collected for RQ1 with reasoning such as lack of opportunities and exclusion, as

reported by participants. RQ2b sought to identify participants' career goals and steps for growth in higher education, if any. Those who reported aspirations of growth in higher education referenced various reasons why they wanted to ascend as higher education professionals, and named steps to achieving their goals. One primary reason was influence for students. Primary steps included networking and relationship building, professional development, and additional experience.

The final research question aimed to explore the perceptions of representation by Black women regarding Black, female, higher education professionals in senior-level administration in PWIs. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that the representation of Black women in top-tier leadership is inadequate and stated reasons such as lack of mentorship and sponsorship as discussed by Hill et al. (2016), biased networks and organizational discrimination, and lack of value for diversity and/or Black women.

To address the negative perceptions and experiences revealed by participants in this study, policy and practice must be reconsidered in most cases. Institutions would benefit from efforts by leadership and professionals in higher education to identify and assess programs that intend to facilitate networking, match aspiring leaders with mentors/sponsors, and develop leadership pipelines in higher education for Black, female professionals. Numerous participant responses referenced such needs, which suggests that there are still opportunities for improvement in the area of diversifying leadership.

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