

*Full Length Research Paper*

## **Glass Ceilings and Catfights: Career Barriers for Professional Women in Academia**

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**Women continue to struggle to reach parity in the workplace, constantly hitting their heads on the glass ceiling. The inability to break through this barrier may lead women to develop covert actions to create an advantage over their competition. The existing literature on the relationships of women and men in the workplace provides some insight to the struggles that occur when one gender could be considered a professional minority. In addition, some researchers have studied the working relationships of women in the business environment, but there is a deficiency in the literature of the working relationships among women in academic organizations. The purpose of our study was to explore the challenges of female relationships in the community college workplace, as women continue to dominate these institutions as both employees and students.**

**A psychodynamic perspective was used as the theoretical framework for the study. We sought to assess the perceptions of female professional staff in public community colleges of how women supported the career advancement of their female peers, as well as how their supervisors and departments supported the professional development of potential female leaders. The results of the mixed method study identified two areas of limitations for women within community college environments: interpersonal and institutional cultural. The results of the quantitative analysis identified that a majority of females felt their peers were supportive of the career advancement of their female colleagues. The qualitative results of the study painted a different picture, indicating that women may use covert actions to compete with and hold back their female colleagues.**

**Keywords:** women, community colleges, interpersonal relationships, career advancement

### **Introduction**

The first convention on women's rights was held in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848. Centuries later, the literature and national media continues to explore women's lack of parity in the top levels of corporate and academic management. With many movements in place and national attention on equal rights, the question of why women continue to struggle against a *glass ceiling*, limiting upward mobility, continues to intrigue researchers. As women fight for equal rights in the workplace, one has to wonder what keeps them from reaching the equality that they have so long desired. The literature is rich with discussion and speculations as to why women do not reach the upper rungs of their professions. Clark, Caffarella, and Ingram (1999) described an environment in which women must

sacrifice their gender and adopt masculine perspectives, choosing between their personal and professional identities. Additionally, researchers have suggested that women do not know how to compete and negotiate for the top positions of leadership. Along with these professional struggles, "stereotypically feminine qualities are generally not the qualities that come to mind when people think of successful leaders," resulting in the portrayal of them as "relatively ill-suited to leadership" (Prime, Carter, & Welbourne, 2009, p. 28).

Researchers have posited at length the ongoing struggles for balance between the role of women as caregivers and homemakers, and that of women as professionals (Clarke et al.,

2007; Mooney, 2005; Rhode, 1997). The necessity to balance these dual identities creates complex challenges for women, as they also try to advance in their careers, while maintaining social relationships with their colleagues. Women trying to balance both their careers and families as equal priorities are losing the battle. "The majority of working women are trying to stuff a twelve-foot-long scarf into a two-inch-square pocket, and even Houdini had an assistant" (Mooney, 2005, p. 92). It is often assumed by managers and coworkers that work matters less once women have children (Mooney). Such an assumption and other stereotypes continue to affect women in professional settings. Not surprisingly, women with children now earn 2.5% less than women without children (Mooney). Additionally, women also struggle to find their voices and positions within male-dominated professional cultures. Besides these most commonly cited theories of why women are struggling to reach the top positions within their organizations, it is also perceived that women may be their own barriers to progress due to how they treat one another in the workplace.

### **Interpersonal Relationships Among Female Colleagues**

Though exploration of interpersonal relationships among women in the workplace is not a new topic (Mooney, 2005; Rhode, 1997; Rosen, 1999; Tanenbaum, 2002), a majority of the research occurs within the business sectors of corporate America. There is limited research on women and workplace relationships in the postsecondary environment, a sector that today has a majority female student population, and where a majority of mid-level professional staff positions are filled by women. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that in the fall of 2007, women made up 53.7% of all employees at postsecondary institutions. Within public two-year institutions, they made up 54.5% of professional staff, which included non-instructional and instructional positions. Professional female staff classified as administrative and managerial made up 53.9% of employees in this classification (NCES, 2010). With a majority of professional staff in two-year institutions being female, in our study we sought to explore the working relationships of women at community colleges, to determine if they are supportive of their female colleagues in their career advancement.

The perceptions of the researchers of this study is that community colleges are supportive and nurturing, and portray themselves as having democratic values (Eddy & Cox, 2008), based on their purpose of serving and educating students through their open access missions. Community colleges are unique organizations in that a majority of their employees and students are female, but their top executive administrations are predominately male. Eddy and Cox (2008) found evidence that these institutions continue to rely on hierarchy and positional power. They support their case by drawing attention to the fact that more females are attending community colleges, but less than a third of them are led by women.

In their study of the literature on community college leadership, Amey and Twombly (1992) found that scholars typically used "strong, often militaristic" language that "perpetuated the 'great man' style of leadership" (p. 145). This language suggested that it would be difficult for women to fit in as leaders in these institutions since it is stereotypical of male leadership. The slight increases in the number of women that hold community college presidencies do not solve the issue that community college structures are and continue to be established based on male norms (Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002). The one or two women that do find themselves at the top also find themselves holding the position of the *token* female on administrative teams.

### **The Female as Token**

The position of *tokens* confines women to a predetermined number of professional positions within organizations. A review of the literature on management conducted by Giscombe (2007) reported that women still perceive cultural barriers within organizations that exclude them from the social groups affiliated with their administrative teams. Ultimately, women are in token positions and are still expected to "take care" of others while their male counterparts "take charge" (Giscombe, 2007, p. 391).

Because female administrators continue to struggle to find their professional values within their organizations, they oftentimes react to situations defensively, continually looking for recognition and confirmation from male and female coworkers (Tanenbaum, 2002). Consequently, the professional, academic, and intellectual resources of women are often wasted in the field of higher education, where "men are overrepresented in executive positions...[and] women are most highly represented in positions described as entry-level (sometimes referred to as professional)," (Cooper et al., 2007, p. 642). Women also tend to carry heavier teaching and advising loads than men, and oftentimes expected to act as unofficial mentors to most of the minority and female students (Christman, 2003). When in leadership roles, women are seen as serving in positions outside the realm of acceptance among their peers, and often face many obstacles. Researchers have identified four categories of these obstacles. First, many women continually battle to prove their abilities to maintain and operate within their positions of leadership (Carli & Eagly, 2007; Sandler, 1986). Second, they constantly work to earn the trust and establish a positive rapport with their male colleagues (Heifetz, 2007; Sandler, 1986). Third, these women fight against isolation, typically working without female peers within their levels of administration (Reinarz, 2002; Sandler, 1986). This isolation often leads to fewer opportunities to receive feedback regarding institutional issues. Finally, female supervisors struggle with the ongoing balancing act between their roles as token female administrators and their responsibilities to build relationships among their professional peers (Chesler, 2001). They struggle to truly earn a position among the elite (Sandler, 1986).

Heifetz (2007) described a common misconception between the reality of leadership and the culture of authority within a professional environment. Women, historically, have successfully held positions of leadership; their vision and gender traits providing them with unique insights into motivating and supporting others for change. Authority represents the power and tools necessary to carry out effective leadership strategies. Heifetz declared that most positions of authority are held by men. Society does not typically trust women with this authoritative power. Therefore, women hold informal leadership positions, but do not have the authority to support their efforts (Heifetz).

It is assumed that such struggles as described above would serve to bond professional women to one another. However, such camaraderie is not identified in the literature. Women who earn opportunities for advancement are oftentimes viewed as threats to coworkers (Heifetz, 2007; Mooney, 2005; Sandler, 1986; Tanenbaum, 2002). For women, it seems friendships and ambition may not be able to coexist within a work-based relationship (Chesler, 2001; Mooney, 2005).

### **Workplace Relationships**

Ambitious women are concerned they will be viewed negatively by coworkers and may perceive it necessary to camouflage their ambitions so as not to feel ashamed of their desires for power (Heifetz, 2007). Heifetz further supported this by stating, "keeping these desires under wraps generates a self-defeating dynamic in which many women remain inhibited in trying to get the power they want (2007, p. 316). He also acknowledged that even if women earned positions of authority in professional settings, it would not remedy the issues surrounding the achievement of women in the workplace and, more specifically, the development of beneficial relationships between women (Heifetz).

Relationships among women do not appear to be supportive. Heim and Murphy (2003) found that, "women consistently failed to support other women and even actively undermined their authority and credibility" and "actively sabotaged" each other (p. 2). Women are the first to attack other women who are promoted (Heim & Murphy, 2003). "Competition...is caused by feelings of inadequacy" which "is fostered by a very real societal situation: woman's restrictive roles" (Tanenbaum, 2002, p. 39). Women will limit other's access to "important meetings and committees; withhold information, assignments and promotions," or will block interactions with mentors and other people of influence (Klaus, 2009, para. 5), in order to maintain their token positions and hold back their competition: their female colleagues.

Older women can resent those younger than them, especially when the older women perceive they are not being given the respect they are due (Mooney, 2005). This perception of disrespect could be caused by these female supervisors' lack of successful relationships in their formative years, particularly

because their mentors were male and gender propriety was paramount (Sandler, 1986). Another reason could be that they perceive that the younger women have not paid their dues (Gordon, 2006). Cultural stereotypes such as these continue to limit the positions of women in administration, as well as affect their relationships among female colleagues.

The traditional nature of women and their relationships with each other presents limitations to their career advancements. It is expected that women should and do value interpersonal relationships. The absence of these relationships and the lack of women in positions of power, however, create feelings of inequality for professional women within organizations, minimizing their abilities to create associations (Giscombe, 2007).

Work consumes many hours of each day. Because it is perceived that women have such strong needs for relationships and intercommunications, they try to create meaningful relationships at work (Mooney, 2005). These are considered lateral relationships within the workplace (Giscombe, 2007). Women then perceive they must remain supportive and generous with one another, even when doing so contradicts the organization's goals (Mooney, 2005). Worrying about these tertiary professional relationships can result in an inability to trust professional judgments and/or decisions of working women, creating an ineffective professional environment (Mooney).

When women do not nurture social relationships with one another, honest communication is often difficult. Mooney (2005) found that women sometimes experienced difficulties in confronting other women. Women often quietly sabotage one another if they feel threatened, rather than choosing to communicate openly and honestly about an issue. Mooney suggested such behavior stems from the desire of most women to appear nice to coworkers, but still be successful in their careers at the same time, seemingly determining that both cannot be attained in conjunction with the other. For women, outward competition is deemed inappropriate. Therefore, in response to societal expectations, women try to do battle without engaging directly with one another. In order to be professionally demanding without alienating others, women sometimes resort to covert acts like lying and sabotage in order to reach their desired outcomes (Mooney). The term *catfight* has historically been used in a "derogatory way to describe a viscous clash between women" and dates back to the early 1900's (Tanenbaum, 2002, p. 29). Men use the term *catfight* to describe the indirect aggressive behaviors of women in the workplace, viewing the behaviors displayed that are purposefully used to sabotage female colleagues to be inappropriate and irrational (Heim & Murphy, 2003). In addition to sabotaging each other, other behaviors used include gossiping, spreading rumors, divulging secrets, making public insinuations and insulting comments, and withdrawing friendships (Heim & Murphy).

In direct contrast to women supporting and mentoring one another within a professional setting, Tanenbaum (2002) found that women did not want to work for other women. Both male and female subordinates viewed female supervisors as competitive, and perceived they would withhold information, as well as take the credit and resulting power from any professional effort, in order to advance. Additionally, female administrators are viewed as less capable in authoritative areas such as problem-solving (Giscombe, 2007). Ultimately, this lack of trust and respect can damage the impact of female superiors within an institution. Moss Kanter (1942) provided examples of these feelings:

In *Men and Women of the Corporation*, Rosabeth Moss Kanter reprinted a 1942 management survey that questioned 521 young working women about whether they would prefer a male or female boss: 99.81 percent picked a man. Among the reasons listed: Women were too controlling, too focused on petty details, too critical, too jealous, and too unwilling to delegate. Though the list echoed stereotypical characteristics often attributed to women bosses, Moss Kanter pointed out that such qualities are also representative of another group: People with limited power. (p. 113)

A study conducted of 2,000 women by Onepoll.com found that 32% of women preferred to work for male bosses because they were better managers and less emotional (The Telegraph, 2010). Other findings concluded women preferred having men in charge because they were more authoritative and straight-talking than female colleagues. They were tougher, better delegators, more likely to praise accomplishments, were better decisions makers, and were more knowledgeable about the business. Another interesting result of this study was that 40% of women who had female supervisors perceived they could do a better job than their bosses (The Telegraph, 2010).

### **Theoretical Framework**

A psychodynamic perspective, based on psychoanalytical theory, supports that behaviors are motivated by conscious and unconscious influences (White, 2004). Gabriel (1999) discussed what motivates people to act and react to situations:

Our perceptions and ideas about our social reality are not neutral. They are shaped by feelings, such as pride, anxiety, and pain, as well as by earlier experiences in our lives, which, unknown to us, have left deep marks on our mental personality. ( 270)

Supported by the work of Gabriel, we perceive that women's behaviors in the workplace are guided by their life and prior workplace experiences, as well as stereotypical expectations of women as a gender, which entails both conscious and unconscious influences. This perspective was utilized to frame our research.

### **Purpose of Study**

This study was developed to explore the working relationships among female professional staff in public community colleges. Women continue to dominate these institutions both as employees and as students. Of interest to the researchers was whether females in professional staff positions were supportive of their female colleagues in relationship to career advancement, the types of behaviors expressed in the workplace between supervisors and subordinates, and the degree to which the working environments of community colleges supported conflict among female professional staff. This research will expand the literature on this topic by utilizing a psychodynamic perspective to analyze the perceptions of the women in the study concerning the above stated purposes of this research.

### **Research Questions**

Three research questions guided this study:

1. Do female professional staff in public community colleges support the career advancement of their female colleagues?
2. What are the behaviors demonstrated by female supervisors and subordinates within their working relationships?
3. Do the working environments of public community colleges nurture conflict among female professional staff?

### **Research Design and Methods**

The study used a mixed methodology design that combined both quantitative and qualitative analysis for better understanding of the issue. Greene, Caracelli, and Graham (1989) identified five reasons for conducting mixed methods studies: triangulation, complementarity, development, initiation, and expansion. In this study, the aim of triangulation provided the justification for the mixed methods approach, in order to improve the validity and reliability of the findings (Golafshani, 2003).

The study used an embedded concurrent design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), in which "both quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously" (Creswell, 2009, p. 214). The embedded design was chosen because the researchers did not perceive the quantitative data alone to be sufficient to establish an understanding of the experiences of the participants without allowing them avenues to express their experiences. Data were collected concurrently due to the sensitivity of the information gathered.

### **Survey Instrument**

The data for this study was gathered from a 52-question, researcher-developed web-based survey that was constructed to capture the perceptions of female professional staff at public community colleges of their working environments. The survey contained five sections with multiple-choice, multiple-response, and open-ended questions that pertained to participant

demographics, institution culture, institution climate, department climate, and open-ended questions. This study utilized a subset of the data collected that specifically addressed the perceptions of how females supported the career advancement of other females within their institutions, the behaviors that were demonstrated by female supervisors and subordinates, as well as the degree to which the working environments of the institutions supported conflict among female professional staff. To support the discussion of the working environment of institutions, participants were asked to identify the gender of their colleges. A foundational definition of gendered institutions was provided to the participants: a gendered institution is one that makes decisions regarding processes, practices, images, ideologies, and distributions of power decisions based on a particular gender bias. The study asked the participants to identify their colleges as gender neutral, male gendered, or female gendered. Face validity of the survey instrument was established through analysis and critiques by university researchers.

### Participants

A total of 3,726 female professional staff from 988 public community colleges were invited to participate in the study. The 988 institutions were identified through the membership list of the American Association of Community Colleges. All members were invited to participate. The *2010 Higher Education Directory* and institutional websites were used to identify females currently holding professional staff positions within these institutions. The study focused on those in the positions of all levels of deans, directors, coordinators, counselors, advisors, librarian and other library positions, specialists, and other.

The majority of participants were from small rural-serving community colleges at 26% ( $n = 246$ ), 21% ( $n = 192$ ) from medium rural-serving, and 14% ( $n = 132$ ) from medium suburban-serving. A majority of the participants held permanent full-time positions (90%,  $n = 838$ ). The largest percentage of participants identified their institutions as gender neutral (47%,  $n = 441$ ), 29% ( $n = 275$ ) reported male gendered, 5% ( $n = 48$ ) female gendered, and 18% ( $n = 170$ ) chose not to identify. The positions of dean, associate dean, or assistant dean were held by 10% ( $n = 87$ ) of the participants; 33% ( $n = 262$ ) were directors, associate directors, or assistant directors; 19% ( $n = 136$ ) were coordinators or assistant coordinators; 20% ( $n = 153$ ) held the positions of counselor, advisor or specialist; 3% ( $n = 17$ ) were librarians or other professional library positions; and 15% ( $n = 105$ ) identified their positions as other. Most that responded were in the age range of 45 – 54 (30%,  $n = 279$ ), with 55 and over being a close second (29%,  $n = 270$ ). The majority of the participants were Caucasian/White (83%,  $n = 765$ ), 8% ( $n = 75$ ) were African American/Black, and 5% ( $n = 47$ ) were Hispanic/Latina. In addition, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Native American/ American Indian, and Other were represented by 1% of participants, respectively. The majority of

the participants reported to female supervisors (59%,  $n = 447$ ), with 41% reporting to males ( $n = 310$ ).

### Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the quantitative data, specifically the effects between the independent variables position held (dean, associate dean, assistant dean; director, associate director and assistant director; coordinator and assistant coordinator; counselor, advisor and specialist; librarian and other profession library positions; and other), age range (18 – 24, 25 – 34, 35 – 44, 45 – 54, and 55 and over), ethnicity (African American/Black, Caucasian/White, Hispanic American/Latina, Native American/American Indian, and Other), and gender of immediate supervisor on the dependent variables of whether females supported the career advancement of other females. The Tukey HSD post hoc was used to determine if the differences between the groups were statistically significant. Significance was established at the  $p = .05$  level. Harmonic means were used due to unequal sample sizes. Effect sizes were identified to understand the strengths of the relationships among the groups.

The qualitative data were analyzed through content analysis. Our intent was to systematically work through each transcript, identifying responses that could qualify the results of the quantitative analysis of the study, to provide an “overall composite assessment” (Creswell, 2009, p. 214) of the research problem. In addition to the quantitative questions addressed, participants responded to three open-ended questions that provided them opportunities to further discuss examples and experiences of female support of other females, supervisor and subordinate relationships, as well as any other discussion the participants wanted to provide. Through the grounded theory approach to qualitative data, and the use of open coding (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993), two main themes emerged that the researchers identified as: interpersonal limitations and institutional cultural limitations. Within these two main themes, eight subcategories were identified (see Table 1).

### Findings

Our study was developed to explore the working relationships among female professional staff in public community colleges. A total of 934 responses were received, with 172 of those incomplete. None of the responses were eliminated from the analysis. This resulted in a 25.1% response rate.

### Female Support of Career Advancement of Female Colleagues

To address research question 1, the participants were asked about their perceptions of whether females supported other females in their career advancement within their institutions. A majority of the participants, 84.7% ( $n = 644$  out of 760), perceived that females were supportive of their female colleagues' career advancements.

The majority of the participants, analyzed based on their perceived genderedness of their institutions, perceived that females were supportive of the career advancement of other females. Close to 100% ( $n = 47$  out of 48) of those at female-gendered institutions perceived women to be supportive of each other. Those at male-gendered institutions acknowledged high levels of support at 97% ( $n = 266$  out of 275), and 98% ( $n = 431$  out of 441) of those at gender-neutral institutions perceived that females were supportive of the career advancements of their female colleagues. Those participants that did not identify the gender of their institutions reported slightly less support at 93% ( $n = 150$  of 170).

To determine if there were statistically significant differences between the gender of institutions, age ranges (18 – 24, 25 – 34, 35 – 44, 45 – 54, and 55 and over), positions held (dean, associate dean, assistant dean; director, associate director and assistant director; coordinator and assistant coordinator; counselor, advisor and specialist; librarian and other profession library positions; and other), gender of immediate supervisor, and ethnicity and the perceptions of female support of the career advancement of other females, one-way analyses of variances (ANOVAs) were conducted. The results of the analysis indicated statistically significant differences between the groups based on the gender of the institutions in regard to female support of other females,  $F(3, 759) = 98.295, p = .000$ . The effect size was  $\eta^2 = 0.06$ , which is a medium effect. Participants at gender-neutral institutions ( $M = 1.08, SD = .273$ ) had higher perceptions that females were supportive of other females than those at female-gendered ( $M = 1.28, SD = .452$ ) and male-gendered ( $M = 1.25, SD = .433$ ) institutions. The analysis of age ranges, positions held, gender of immediate supervisor, and ethnicity did not result in significant differences among the groups.

Through content analysis of the comments provided by those same participants that perceived that females were supportive of their female colleagues' career advancements, discussions of competition between female co-workers, as well as the inability of women to view one another as team members were revealed. As one woman commented, "In general, on our campus women try to put and keep each other down. They rarely celebrate the successes of one another because they are too busy trying to get ahead of each other."

Additionally, a significant number of women identified jealousy and competition as reasons why they did not support one another. As one participant commented, "In order to advance, someone else has to fail." This underscores the either/or mentality of these professional women. One woman stressed, it is not only the lack of cooperation among coworkers, but also the lack of cooperation among female supervisors and female supervisees:

I've asked for mentoring from all of the female executive leaders who told me, "your time will come...just stick around and see what happens." None were willing to help me develop networks or become a protégé of theirs. Women are going it alone- they're all uber competitive for CEO/VP positions themselves. Since they broke the glass ceiling, I can't help but think it's in their interest not to have more women at that bottleneck with them.

The participants reflected on the perceptions that many women would rather damage the progress of the entire gender than allow another woman to succeed. Some acknowledged suspicions as to how some females earned positions of power, insinuating inappropriate relationships with supervisors. One of the women commented, "There are a limited number of females in higher level positions. Other females seem suspicious as to how they obtained their positions." Another common trend seemed to insinuate that there were some preferences to work for male managers simply because they "are not petty."

Though there were no statistically significant results found between the groups through quantitative analysis based on ethnicity, participants did discuss cultural and racial obstacles to their professional successes. Some expressed that they did not feel women conveyed outward support of one another in the professional setting, and that many were reluctant to speak out to support another female co-worker, or even against discriminatory practices. As one woman stated, "[It] seems no one is outraged when discrimination happens. All quietly support each other, but we do nothing to speak up."

### Behaviors Among Female Colleagues

To address research question 2, the researchers relied on content analysis of the participants' responses to the open-ended questions in the survey. Participants discussed jealousy among professional women regarding career advancement. Some of the women viewed their female colleagues to be more inclined to damage another's opportunities for career advancement within an institution because of jealousies, rather than sharing in the celebrations of their advancements. As one of the women stated, "My boss feels threatened in her job if too many females are equal or higher than her."

The women in executive positions are of the first and second waves of feminism. The comments analyzed appear to showcase a conflict between generations of older women who do not accept the younger generations of females within the workplace. These younger women do not feel they have to be as "male," but can be feminine, openly sexualized and powerful, in their dealings with others on the job. As one participant commented concerning the perception of the "old guard" that young women should adopt traditional practices of dressing in power suits and be openly more masculine in their "assertive" communication styles, "words like 'bitch and biotch, chick, etc.' are okay with my generation, but not with the older

ones." Additionally, some stated that generational differences among female professionals limited women's abilities to support one another. There appears to be a generational influence on the dynamics between women and within their gendered roles.

### **Working Environments of Community Colleges**

The quantitative figures above demonstrated positive support for career advancement among females. Through content analysis, the researchers identified recurring statements regarding the high level of institutional cultural barriers apparent within institutions, which were used to address research question 3. As one participant commented:

I believe decisions have, at times, been made with gender being one factor that is considered; however, I don't believe these decisions are entirely "based on gender." In many instances, a female is preferred [when hiring], but only if she is unlikely to become pregnant. Females who are likely to become pregnant, are currently pregnant, or have been pregnant recently, are very unlikely to be considered for promotions or administrative positions.

Another of the women reflected on a conversation that had been overheard of administrators discussing appointments to committees, "I've heard directors state that they need 'empty-nesters' to chair a committee because of their dedication. I've also heard people refer to women as being on the 'mommy track'."

Other participants commented on the lack of support by their institutions of talented women, "There is no positive reinforcement for talented capable professional women. They appear to be seen as aggressive and are not encouraged. No positive feedback is given for high performance." As another commented, "Women are perceived as less efficient and more emotional despite education and employment background." Some of the participants discussed the impact of the dominant (white male) culture within their institutions, "...there is a constant push and pull going on between the 'white male boys camp' and 'white female girls camp.' Only one minority is allowed in the group." Many participants stated that those women in positions of authority demonstrated traits of this primary culture, exhibiting more aggressive male traits than their female subordinates.

The participants also acknowledged that there were few opportunities for the advancement of women within their institutions, and "those that are available are seldom given to women." As one commented, "...our leadership has been here for so long, and the men hold the majority of the power at the top levels of administration, they simply aren't going anywhere. There are no opportunities for women to move up; they just leave."

## **Discussion**

### **Female Support of Career Advancement of Female Colleagues**

The women of the study reflected (as part of their quantitative survey responses) perceptions of substantial support of female career advancement among their colleagues. In contrast to this positive support were comments made that highlighted the jealousies and competition that underlie a significant number of the female-to-female relationships in the workplace. In fact, the researchers of the study identified that 77% (99 of 129) of the responses received by the participants mentioned competition and/or jealousy as part of the female relationships in their current professional positions in public community colleges.

Continuing to address the reasons behind why some women are promoted in language that is derogatory, such as insinuating a woman has an inappropriate relationship with a superior or that she is promoted because she is *pretty* or *cute*, is simply reinforcing the barriers that women are not as intelligent and capable as their male counterparts. Men do not persist in sabotaging their competition in such a manner. They appear to welcome healthy competition. The behaviors demonstrated by women in support of other women are disadvantageous to the gender.

The results of our study indicated that a majority of the participants perceived their working environments to be supportive of the professional development of potential female leaders. Participants with male immediate supervisors showed a higher level of dissatisfaction with the support of female career opportunities. We found this interesting and perhaps supportive of the literature that claims that men are more overt and transparent in their management versus women. If men are not supportive, they will display this publically by their actions. Women perhaps may portray a public image of support, but their actions and behaviors prove otherwise. This was further supported by the discussions of the participants who reported that their female supervisors were unsupportive and withheld important information that was necessary for the subordinates to be successful in their jobs.

### **Behaviors among Female Colleagues**

In addition to the sabotaging of others, it also appears that women undermine their gender by utilizing undercutting and back-biting techniques within the professional culture (Heifetz, 2007; Mooney, 2005; Tanenbaum, 2002), often referred to as *catfights*. As some of the participants noted, they experienced competition and lack of support from their female supervisors. Comments from participants in this study indicated that female supervisors did not develop support systems for upcoming female subordinates. It appears that some women perceived relationships with female superiors as more competitive than supportive. The question remains as to why some superiors view the up and coming female professionals within their colleges as threats rather than as protégées. This issue could be grounded in generational differences among supervisors and

subordinates. Many times older women perceive that their younger counterparts must pay the same dues as their predecessors, whether beneficial to the subordinates or not. Others perceive that organizations will only allow a certain number of women in positions of authority. Supporting a subordinate's growth could be detrimental to the career of the *token* woman. Supervisors may perceive that grooming subordinates for future leadership positions will ultimately cost them their positions of power. Women seem to innately feel that the successes of one devalue the successes of others.

### Working Environments of Community Colleges

The contradiction between the indication of female-to-female support, and the identified covert actions among female relationships, leaves the researchers to evaluate why some females deem it necessary to adopt these defensive behaviors when interacting with other women. Both of the researchers of the study have been exposed to the behaviors of women in various working environments, and perceive that the actions demonstrated within the comments of the participants who work within community colleges are supported in part by their institutions' "hierarchical bureaucracies ...based on traditional structures that favor men," which limit career advancement opportunities for women (Mitchell & Eddy, 2008; Twombly, 1995). This would support the psychodynamic perspective, which states that behaviors are influenced by conscious and unconscious influences. With limited positions of power and influence within many community colleges and many of these held by men, competition will ensue.

Historically, women have competed for men's attention, and today researchers have noted that this continues. Women are accustomed to fighting for equality and parity within an environment of limited positions of power for women at the top, which results in tokenism. This further exacerbates the problem. It is difficult to understand why once a woman is promoted, her female peers do not always support her. If women do not see themselves as equals, but they want to reach parity, they must be supportive of those that do reach the top rungs of career ladders. If they continue to sabotage those that come before them, they will continue to nurture the reputations of women being too emotional and petty to serve in top leadership positions.

### Implications

The number of comments from the study participants that identified perceived competition among women, if not realistic, appears to be a perceived reality among some professional relationships. While other minority groups work to create organized support systems in efforts to expand their influences within a variety of organizations, policies, and social efforts, women have not figured out how to do so, thereby diminishing the power and progress of the women's movements throughout the centuries. Historically, women fought for the right to vote and to work outside of the home (Solomon, 1985). Today they continue to bond together under efforts not associated

specifically with gender, such as breast cancer research and Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Even with these small efforts at organizing as groups, women are not joining together to help move the gender into greater positions of authority in professional environments, including the world of higher education. Instead, some women prefer to tear down their statuses as a whole rather than allow any one woman to surpass another. If the results of our study could be generalized across the gender, women convey a desire for their gender to be "at the top." Their inner turmoil, however, is actually "why am I not at the top?" Until women can join together instead of fighting with and among one another, the gender as a whole will struggle to move forward.

The literature on female professional staff in community colleges is limited. These individuals make up the largest sector of professional employees and are an important part of the operations of these institutions. Further research needs to be conducted to explore the working environments of these individuals as they continue to be affected by barriers to career advancement and work and life balance issues. If females are not supportive of their own gender, it will be difficult for others to see them as capable to serve in all levels of community college leadership. Further research needs to be conducted that continues to explore the female working relationship and how women can support one another in their career advancements.

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Table 1

*Frequencies and Percentages of Female Support Comments*

| Theme                                     | <i>f</i>  | %         |
|---|-----------|-----------|
| <b>Interpersonal Limitations</b>          | <b>68</b> | <b>55</b> |
| Competition Between Females               | 62        | 50        |
| Rather Work with Men                      | 14        | 11        |
| Jealousy/Threat of other Women            | 68        | 55        |
| Lack of Trust of other Women              | 65        | 53        |
| <b>Institutional Cultural Limitations</b> | <b>61</b> | <b>50</b> |
| Must Adopt Masculine Traits               | 16        | 13        |
| Must Fit into Traditional Male Culture    | 33        | 27        |
| Tokenism                                  | 17        | 14        |
| No Positions of Power                     | 28        | 23        |

*n* = 129