



# ADVANCING WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

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*Full Length Research Paper*

## **Women of Color in Community Colleges: Leadership Development**

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**This quantitative study assessed the impact of the Kaleidoscope Leadership Institute (KLI) model of professional development on KLI on 140 participants' personal and professional lives. The model was designed for community college women of color and led by female presidents/chancellors. Participants report gains in career and educational advancements, new networks, and mentorships across races/ethnicities and higher education positions. Researchers conclude that cross-cultural networking, mentoring, and identity development are beneficial and recommend that professional associations and institutions expand the KLI model to increase institutional leadership diversity.**

**Keywords: Community college, leadership development, women of color, identity-based leadership development, female college presidents, female leaders, mentoring, networking, identity development, institutional racism**

In U.S. community colleges, there is a lack of racial diversity in top leadership positions, and advancement for women of color has been slow. The American Council on Education (ACE, 2019) reported that 83.2% of college presidents surveyed in 2016 were White. In comparison, 7.9% were Black, 3.9% were Latina/o/x, 2.3% were Asian American, individuals of more than one race comprised 1.4%, 0.7% were American Indian or Alaska Native, and .6% were Middle Eastern or Arab American. Gender and racial and ethnic inequalities are conventional in academia's male-dominated fields (Jones et al., 2015). The ACE (2019) study showed gradual increases over time, yet inequities remain. Women held 30.1% of presidencies in 2- and 4- year institutions in 2016; of that number, 5.1% were women of color (ACE, 2019). Women held a larger share of community college presidencies relative to their share at 4-year institutions (ACE, 2019). The percentage of college and university presidents of color was 16.8%, less than one-third of whom were women (ACE, 2019).

Most female presidents of color come from within the community colleges (ACE, 2019). At 7.9%, Black college presidents represented the highest percentage of presidents of color overall, yet the pipeline is thin. In Fall 2015, the California Community College Chancellor's Office staffing reports showed White administrators in the California Community College system outnumbered Black administrators by 80% on the academic side and 89% on the support services side (Kirkwood, 2018). Kirkwood (2018) asserted that underrepresentation conflicts with stated goals of diversifying leadership.

Underrepresentation perpetuates institutional racism and inhibits creating equitable and inclusive environments. To increase the pipeline of future women of color leaders in higher education, we must examine their experiences.

In higher education, women of color experience high levels of racial, gender, and class discrimination and oppression (Howard-Vital, 1989; Jones et al., 2015; Lee, 2015; Mena, 2016; Vaccaro, 2010). To mitigate inequities, women and people of color report fighting pressures to reinforce stereotypical gender characteristics and expectations to navigate institutional leadership (Brue & Brue, 2018; Lee, 2015). Some women have described feeling pushed to behave in ways that validate cultural and gender stereotypes and roles (Liang & Hawkins, 2017). Organizational impediments may hinder opportunities for women of color to develop authentic leadership identities. There is value in networking, mentoring, and approaching leadership development in ways that authentically support and develop the multiple identities of women of color.

To diversify postsecondary education, women of color leaders have developed programs to inspire and mentor women leaders of education for advancement. This study evaluates the effectiveness and impact of a leadership development program designed for women of color to determine if identity-based leadership development programs have the potential to increase the pipeline of women of color leaders in U.S. community colleges.

## Literature Review

Literature on the growth of women-only leadership development programs in the United States is presented in this section, including benefits of networking for and between women of color, mentoring experiences of women of color in higher education, and connecting women's identity development and leadership development. Women-only leadership development programs started in the late 1970s and were designed primarily for women in U.S. corporations and business schools (Ely et al., 2011). To support increases for women in enrollment, advanced degree attainment, and employment rates in higher education, women created resources to foster authentic identities and leadership growth. Higher Education Resource Services (HERS), an early leadership program for women in higher education, was initiated in 1972 (White, 2012). In 1977, the ACE launched the ACE National Identification Program, now the ACE Women's Network, which focuses on the advancement of women in higher education. In the 1980s, community college leadership development programs for women, such as the National Institute of Leadership Development (NILD), began to support women's networking in senior leadership positions (Pettersen, 2003).

### Networking for Women of Color

Networking refers to maintaining relationships with others to advance one's career, work, or academic development (Forret & Dougherty, 2001). Networking with individuals with power may lead to job opportunities (Burke & Carter, 2015). People who engage in networking behaviors, such as joining professional organizations and engaging in social activities with other professionals, are more likely to experience positive career outcomes, such as promotions and financial gains (Forret & Dougherty, 2001).

Scholars have indicated that women of color experience barriers related to race (Howard-Vital, 1989; Mena, 2016) and gender (Jones et al., 2015; Lee, 2015). For women of color, discrimination and other barriers may hinder access to professional positions and networking resources (Crenshaw, 1991; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Somer, 2007). Women of color benefit from professional development programs that connect women of color, mitigating the impact of inequity (Moorosi, 2014). In programs that promote connections between women of color, aspiring leaders could access unique knowledge shared by women of color leaders and executives. Women of color need mentoring opportunities to connect with other women who have similar interests and experiences, informing their career decisions. Mentoring programs foster networking and mentoring relationships between women of color (Moorosi, 2014).

### Mentoring Experiences of Women of Color

Mathews (2003) identified two common characteristics of mentoring definitions: (a) influential status and (b) willingness to share time and information. Mentors often have ample experience, occupy influential positions, and desire opportunities

to share experiences to support novices. Mentorship can support growth for women of color who experience unequal access to higher education employment opportunities (Holmes et al., 2007; Somer, 2007; Vaughan, 1989). Mentees can learn effective leadership skills and how to develop strong networks and support systems (Davis, 2009; Vongalis-Macrow, 2016).

Women of color faculty have reported feeling excluded by other faculty because of gender and race discrimination (A. T. Davis, 2009; Gibson, 2006; Holmes et al., 2007; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Tran, 2014). Such experiences have contributed to working environments that do not adequately support women of color. Work climate and culture may negatively impact access to mentors in higher education (Gibson, 2006). The feelings of exclusion and inadequate support, coupled with negative work environments, make it difficult for women of color to find and benefit from mentors.

Women of color who receive support through mentorship report more positive experiences than women of color who do not have mentors, even when mentors are peers (Agosto et al., 2016; A. T. Davis, 2009; Muñoz, 2009). Women mentees of color report that mentors have positively influenced them to seek opportunities for professional development (Davis, 2009; Muñoz, 2009; Searby et al., 2015). Mentors provide a space for mentees to join in professional circles (Crawford & Smith, 2005). Beyond development in work environments, mentors help mentees develop personally (Muñoz, 2009; Searby et al., 2015).

### Women's Leadership Development as Identity Work

Researchers have argued that personal identity precedes leader identity (Moorosi, 2014). Women's awareness of their cultural traits and personal values plays a role in leadership development. The development of leadership skills is closely related to women's identity development (Guillen et al., 2017; Ibarra et al., 2010; Moorosi, 2014; Turner, 2007). Therefore, women leaders benefit from opportunities to develop through initiatives such as professional development programs.

Beneficial programs allow women to address their multiple identities while focusing on issues related to working environments (Debebe, 2011; Mena, 2016). As leaders acquire self-awareness of their identities and leadership skills, individuals around the leader also benefit from the leader's increased understanding of the importance of intersectionality, confidence in the face of oppression, and commitment to mentoring (Crenshaw, 1991; Ely et al., 2011; Jones, 2016; Moorosi, 2014; Muñoz, 2009). Programs that address the experiences of women of color can empower participants and encourage them to pursue higher levels of leadership.

One program model, in particular, the Kaleidoscope Leadership Institute (KLI), was developed for and led by women of color executives in postsecondary education. In 1991, Carolyn Desjardins and Jacquelyn M. Belcher created the KLI, a leadership development program designed to meet the unique needs of women of color in community colleges and address the uniqueness intersections of gender and race/ethnicity. The

inaugural KLI began in Minnesota, and its goals were to inspire and support women of color to be strong and influential leaders in organizations.

The core faculty of the KLI (n.d.) have included presidents, chancellors, and superintendents from educational institutions across the United States. What differentiated the KLI model from other programs was executive women of color creating a space in participants' lives for the development of (a) new networks and enhanced leadership skills, (b) cross-cultural relationships that may lead to lifelong mentorships, and (c) personal identity development. Through gatherings, mentoring relationships, and support structures, the KLI brought women of color who are presidents, CEOs, and in similar positions to share personal and professional experiences related to leadership with other women educators who aspire to higher-level positions in the community colleges. The KLI provided an environment to prepare participants for higher-level positions by analyzing societal and institutional barriers and offering guidance on setting and achieving personal and professional goals.

The need for identity-based leadership development programs like the KLI model is evident, considering the growth of women-only leadership development programs in the United States and the need for more women of color leaders in community colleges (Ely et al., 2011; KLI, n.d.; Petterson, 2003; White, 2012). Networking benefits women in general and women of color specifically (Burke & Carter, 2015; Crawford & Smith, 2005; A. T. Davis, 2009; D. Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Forret & Dougherty, 2001; Muñoz, 2009). Literature on experiences of women of color in higher education often lacks descriptions of programs where senior leaders serve in mentoring roles (Brue & Brue, 2018; Howard-Vital, 1989; Vaccaro, 2010) and where connections are made between women's identity development and leadership development, both of which are critically important (Debebe, 2011; Ely et al., 2011; Ibarra et al., 2010; Mena, 2016; Moorosi, 2014; Turner, 2007).

### Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the KLI and determine the impact of networking, mentoring, and identity development on women of color in higher education through participation in an identity-based leadership development program for women of color in the community colleges. The following questions drove the study:

- 1) What was the overall impact of the KLI on participants?
- 2) What was the overall effectiveness of the KLI and its faculty through measures of participants' personal and professional attitudinal and behavioral changes?
- 3) What personal and professional impact, if any, did the KLI have on participants?
- 4) What impact, if any, did the KLI have on participants' networking, mentoring, and identity development?
- 5) Are there differences in impact or perceptions of effectiveness and impact among participants based on

the women's race/ethnicity, position in higher education, or years of participation in the KLI?

### Methods

This study included a quantitative, nonexperimental design methodology (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A sample of 140 past attendees of the KLI completed surveys with open- and closed-ended items.

### Sample

We sent invitation emails to 300 individuals who had attended the KLI between 1992 and 2012, and 140 women (46.67%) agreed to participate. Participants provided race/ethnicity, age, current position in higher education, and years they attended the KLI (see Table 1). We grouped participants into four age categories: 25-34 years, 35-44 years, 45-54 years, and 55-65 years. Most participants were 45 to 54 years of age (36%, n = 50), while few were 25 to 34 years of age (5%, n = 7). More than half of the participants (65.5%, n = 91) identified as African American, and 18.7% identified as Latinas. Administrators made up 54.7% (n = 75) of the study sample, and 45.3% (n = 62) of participants were in faculty or staff positions. Over half of participants (53.6%, n = 75) had participated in KLI events in the 5 years prior to data collection: 27.9% (n = 39) attended between 6 and 10 years prior, 11.4% (n = 16) attended between 11 and 15 years before the study, and 7.1% (n = 10) attended between 16 and 20 years prior to data collection.

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Information of Participants (N = 152)*

| Participant characteristic | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| <b>Age</b>                 |           |         |
| 25-34 years                | 7         | 5%      |
| 35-44 years                | 34        | 24.5%   |
| 45-54 years                | 48        | 34.5%   |
| 55-65 years                | 50        | 36%     |
| <b>Ethnicity</b>           |           |         |
| African American           | 91        | 65.5%   |
| Asian                      | 9         | 6.5%    |
| Pacific Islander           | 1         | .7%     |
| Latina                     | 26        | 18.7%   |
| Native American            | 4         | 2.9%    |
| Multiracial                | 8         | 5.8%    |
| <b>Current Position</b>    |           |         |
| Administration             | 75        | 54.7%   |
| Faculty                    | 34        | 24.8%   |
| Staff                      | 28        | 20.4%   |

### Data Collection and Analysis

We developed a novel survey, which included open- and closed-ended items, to explore impressions of the effectiveness of the KLI and its faculty mentors, KLI's impact on networking,

mentoring, and identity development, and changes to participants' personal and professional lives. Closed-ended survey items, which assessed the program's effectiveness, included items with a 6-point Likert-type rating scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). Each item also had a not applicable response. The survey was validated using Cronbach's alpha and face validity. The newly constructed questions were developed based on literature to address this study's research questions. Through face evaluation of the novel survey, items appeared to assess the four research questions, suggesting the survey was valid. We used Cronbach's alpha to determine the internal consistency of the survey, suggesting the measure is consistent. The survey demonstrated high internal consistency and levels of reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of .90.

The survey began with 47 closed-ended items to capture quantitative data on three constructs: impression of effectiveness, impact on professional and personal lives, and behavior (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The survey included six items about impressions of the effectiveness of the KLI, 22 items related to the impact of the KLI on participants' personal and professional lives, and 12 questions about the effectiveness of KLI faculty and their specific contributions. Seven items focused on participant actions taken after participation in the KLI.

Impressions of the effectiveness of KLI and its faculty were assessed with items such as, "Through KLI, I gained new understanding of the leadership challenges facing women of color," "Through KLI, I gained new understanding of other women of color in leadership roles," and "KLI faculty provided opportunities for personal insights." Impact of the KLI experience on participants' personal and professional lives were assessed by items including, "KLI increased my capacity to confront challenges I faced as a woman of color," and "The KLI experience helped me have a stronger connection with other women of color." Examples of items intended to assess the behavioral actions taken after KLI included, "I am or have been a mentor for other women of color since I attended Kaleidoscope Institute," "I had a promotion since I attended Kaleidoscope Institute," and "I advanced my educational level since I attended Kaleidoscope Institute."

Next, four open-ended items were used to enrich the understanding of their quantitative scores related to perceptions around participants' experiences with the KLI. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained that one limitation of attitudinal measures is that there is often no evidence of behavior; yet open-ended items were appropriate because they enhanced insights from data collected from closed-ended items. Participants were asked to provide opinions on the impact of the KLI through four open-ended, qualitative items: impressions of the program, program's impact on participants' personal and professional lives, faculty and their contributions, and the impact of the KLI on participants' actions.

Statistical analyses consisted of *t*-tests, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and descriptive statistics through SPSS (Version 24)

were conducted to determine if differences existed between participants. Independent variables in the study included race/ethnicity, age, professional position, and years of attendance at KLI. Dependent variables included an impression of effectiveness, impact on professional and personal lives, and impact on behavior. An ANOVA was used to determine if the perceived efficacy of the KLI differed by participants' races/ethnicities, professional positions in higher education, or numbers of years of attendance. Visual inspection of histograms, normality plots, and box-and-whisker plots indicated data were normally distributed. The data met the homogeneity of variance assumption.

For the open-ended questions, data were coded and grouped into themes and subcategories using a lean coding method, which involves assigning a few codes the first time a transcript is reviewed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Exemplar quotes were identified for each theme. Lastly, participant quotes were reviewed and recoded to reveal alignment with quantitative findings.

## Results

Participants had positive impressions of the KLI model and gave the women of color faculty high ratings. Participants cited numerous examples of how the KLI contributed to their personal and professional development, noting their influence on networking, mentoring, and identity development. Participants of all ages, job positions, and ethnicities had positive experiences in the program. Based on years of participation, results suggest the positive outcomes may be stable over time.

### Impact and Actions Taken After the KLI

Responses revealed KLI participants pursued professional changes following the institute. One hundred twenty-seven participants (91.4%) had been mentors to women of color, and 111 (80.0%) indicated they had been mentors to women of other races/ethnicities since participating in the KLI. Seventy-one participants (51.1%) had changed jobs, and 66 (47.5%) had earned promotions since attending the KLI. Fifty-nine participants (42.4%) increased their education levels, and 22 (15.8%) received doctorates since attending the KLI. Fifty-eight participants (41.7%) indicated others had attended the KLI because of their encouragement.

### Program and Faculty Effectiveness of the KLI model

Participants across all subgroups rated the KLI as effective based on measures of participants' personal and professional attitudinal and behavioral changes. The average score on the six items in the program effectiveness scale was 5.1 out of 6 (SD = 0.9). Survey items that helped explain the overall program ratings included participant responses to questions about the degree to which they gained a new understanding of the leadership challenges women of color face, understanding more about other women of color in leadership roles, and understanding the leaders from their institution in new ways. Participants also rated the degree to which they gained a new understanding of

women of other races/ethnicities and new cross-cultural communication skills working with women from other cultural backgrounds. High ratings were standard for participants who had mentored women of other races/ethnicities since attending ( $t = 2.61^*$ ) and changed jobs since attending ( $t = 2.07^*$ ).

Participants who rated the program as most effective were more likely to have mentored women of other races/ethnicities. There were no differences across ages, positions, and races/ethnicities in rating the KLI as effective. Significantly, no matter when participants attended, they rated the program as useful.

Participants rated faculty as highly effective across all subgroups, with a mean rating of 5.0 out of 6. Examples of elements from the survey that measured faculty effectiveness included participants' responses to questions about the degree to which the KLI faculty taught them things they never knew were relevant to women of color, helped them understand the leadership journey and challenges for women of color, and made it possible for them to see themselves as leaders in a new role. High ratings were standard for participants who had mentored women of color since attending ( $t = 2.65^{**}$ ), who had mentored women of other races/ethnicities since attending ( $t = 2.88^{**}$ ), and who indicated others had attended the KLI because of their encouragement ( $t = 1.78^*$ ). Participants who felt faculty were effective may have been more likely to serve as mentors and encourage others to attend. We found no differences across participant subgroups ( $p > .05$ ); thus, the  $p$ -value was insignificant between the subgroups. Participants of all ages, job positions, races/ethnicities, and years of participation rated KLI faculty as effective.

### **Personal and Professional Impact of KLI model**

Across all subgroups, participants rated the KLI as having positive personal and professional impacts. On average, participants rated the program's impact on their personal lives as 4.7 out of 6 ( $SD = 1.1$ ), indicating participants perceived the KLI positively impacted their personal lives. Several survey items measured the program's impact on participants' personal lives, including the degree to which KLI helped participants increase their capacity to confront challenges they faced as a woman of color, grow in personal confidence, anchor their spiritual focus, and gain internal strength to deal with challenges. High ratings were standard for participants who had mentored women of color since attending ( $t = 2.19^*$ ) and mentored women of other races/ethnicities since attending ( $t = 3.34^{**}$ ). Participants who felt the program had personal impacts may have been more likely to become mentors after attending. There were no differences across participant subgroups—ages, job levels, races/ethnicities, and year of participation—in rating the KLI as having personal impacts.

On average, participants rated the program's impact on their professional lives as a 5.0 out of 6 ( $SD = 0.8$ ), showing that participants viewed the KLI as having positive impacts on their professional lives. Elements from the survey that measured the program's impact on participants' professional lives included questions about the degree to which KLI helped prepare them to

contribute more effectively towards their institution and president's vision and goals, whether KLI helped increase their understanding of job search processes, and improved their ability to perform well in job interviews.

High ratings were standard for participants who had mentored women of other races/ethnicities since attending ( $t = 2.02^*$ ), who had changed jobs since attending ( $t = 2.10^*$ ), who had increased their education level since attending ( $t = 2.14^*$ ), and who indicated others had attended the KLI because of their encouragement ( $t = 2.08^*$ ). Participants who felt the KLI had professional impacts may have been more likely to mentor women of other races/ethnicities and encourage others to attend. Individuals of all ages, job levels, races/ethnicities, and years of participation rated the KLI as having a personal impact.

### **KLI Impact on Networking, Mentoring, and Identity Development**

The KLI model provides networking, mentoring, and identity development experiences to inspire and support women of color to rise in higher education as strong and effective leaders. Each woman provided perceptions of the impact of the KLI on networking, mentoring, and identity development.

#### ***Impact on Networking***

Irrespective of race/ethnicity, position in higher education, and year of participation in a program, when asked if the KLI "provided valuable networking experiences with other women of color," participants agreed,  $F(4,133) = .935, p > .05$ . A one-way ANOVA revealed no significant differences between women of different races/ethnicities in networking at the conference. The results help demonstrate the impact KLI had with efforts to counter isolation at community colleges, where there are few women of color available for networking. Participants networked across racial/ethnic groups, and this may increase opportunities for cross-racial and cross-ethnic mentorships.

On average, women who identified as African American ( $M = 5.18, SD = .93$ ), Asian ( $M = 5.40, SD = .69$ ), Latina ( $M = 4.73, SD = 1.45$ ), Native American ( $M = 5.50, SD = 1.00$ ), and multiracial ( $M = 4.75, SD = 1.03$ ) reported the KLI helped them create stronger connections with women of color. When asked if the KLI "helped me have a stronger connection with other women of color," women in staff, faculty, and administrator positions equally agreed the program was helpful,  $F(5,133) = 1.41, p > .05$ . On average, women administrators ( $M = 5.05, SD = 1.03$ ), faculty ( $M = 4.97, SD = 1.19$ ), and staff ( $M = 5.39, SD = .92$ ) agreed the conference helped them foster relationships with women of color.

We found no differences between women who attended the KLI at different points in time,  $F(3,136) = .251, p > .05$ . Women who attended within the previous 5 years ( $M = 5.20, SD = .95$ ), 6-10 years ago ( $M = 4.92, SD = 1.14$ ), 11-15 years ago ( $M = 5.00, SD = .89$ ), and 16-20 years ago ( $M = 5.00, SD = 1.56$ ) perceived the conference promoted networking opportunities. Therefore, quantitative results confirmed that KLI helped participants foster

networking relationships with women of color from different racial/ethnic groups and higher education positions. Cross-group networking is critical for women of color who have difficulty finding mentors who share their specific identities. We asked several open-ended questions about how networking at KLI helped participants advance their higher education careers to explore the specific networking benefits gained across the different years of participation. Responses from the open-ended questions revealed that participants used networking relationships to enhance career development skills, improve resumes and interview skills, and consult with other women of color on difficult personal and professional situations.

We analyzed the data from open-ended questions and found that networking assisted participants with career development skills. One woman said, “The workshops on goal setting and personal mission statement development were impactful for me. The mission statement I created is central to what I have done in my various roles in higher education.” Another participant wrote that she received help to “restructure my resume and prepare for interviews differently.” A third participant appreciated practicing her interview skills: “The mock interviews with a room of presidents was a very valuable experience.” A fourth participant received help to identify and apply transferable skills. She commented, “I didn’t know how to take my current leadership skills and apply them for advanced positions.”

Participants also learned to use networking skills to consult on difficult situations. A participant revealed they learned to trust other women of color:

This incredible leadership experience opened to me a network of professionals that have over the years been willing to help with HR situations, professional development, personal development, and the like. These women have become lifelong friends and confidantes. [It was an] invaluable experience.

Another participant stated, “I was more confident professionally when I returned to work, and I knew I could call or email any of my new sisters for guidance and support. We connect with each other by Facebook.”

### **Impact on Mentoring**

When asked if the KLI faculty mentors “taught me leadership skills that are uniquely necessary for women of color,” results from closed- and open-ended questions demonstrated that participants strongly agreed that the KLI fostered skill development. We detected no differences in African American, Asian, Latina, Native American, and multiracial women’s perspectives on the unique mentoring skills KLI faculty provided,  $F(4,136) = .626, p > .05$ . The results mean that despite ethnic/racial differences between faculty and participants, the KLI faculty could articulate meaningful similarities across identity groups for all participants. Participants from different identity groups appreciated the mentoring offered in one-to-one conversations, executive-leader panels, and topic-specific sessions on goal-setting, interviewing skills, and job searching.

Similar findings were evident when comparing women in staff, faculty, and administrator positions in higher education,  $F(2,136) = 2.14, p > .05$ . Participants’ agreement on the program’s impact on skills development through KLI mentorships did not differ across time,  $F(3,135) = 2.19, p > .05$ .

When asked if KLI faculty “empowered me to feel and think more in-depth about important issues,” all participants strongly agreed. Women who identified as African American, Asian, Latina, and multiracial had similar perspectives on the program’s impact on provoking reflection on important issues related to women of color,  $F(4,137) = .262, p > .05$ . Similarly, women in various positions in higher education agreed that the KLI empowered them to think deeply about issues related to women of color,  $F(2,134) = 1.26, p > .05$ . Time of participation and time since participation did not impact participants’ perspectives on the empowerment cultivated,  $F(3,137) = 1.93, p > .05$ .

Findings from open-ended items supported quantitative results, showing that women of color benefitted from mentorship through the KLI. Two themes emerged from data on mentorship: (a) participants learned skills and knowledge unique to women of color, and (b) participants thought in greater depth about important issues related to women of color.

Mentoring assisted participants with developing leadership skills unique to women of color, including promoting themselves and other women of color and dealing with discrimination in the workplace. When asked to share qualitative feedback about the skills and knowledge they learned at the KLI, one participant shared:

Importantly, the workshop focused on “real-life” business, government, or school decision-making challenges that face today’s working women of color. One particular concern for many women of color in management positions is the issue of competitiveness and jealousy, not only for the majority of White leadership but from other minority women.

Another woman wrote:

As women of color, we sometimes personalize our own issues and do not realize or acknowledge that other women of color are having the same issues. We tend to put on the face and show up looking and acting like we’ve got it together, all the time hiding our own insecurities. [It was valuable] to have other women of color open up about their own struggles as well as teach us ways to overcome them.

We asked participants if they “gained new understanding of the leadership challenges facing women of color.” Faculty had a strong impact on participants: “I felt as if there were secrets to become a professional woman of color that were now revealed. I appreciate the honesty and ability to hear the truth.” The truth to which participants referred included mentoring discussions about discrimination. For example, one participant wrote:

The conference opened my eyes to barriers women of color face and why . . . and what we need to do to promote ourselves and each other. There is a chain of command in

any job. There are politics that we must deal with, and this conference provided us with tools, skills, and rules of engagement to succeed.

Participants revealed that mentoring helped them think deeply about important issues related to women of color, specifically the lack of representation of women of color at higher levels of leadership and the need to seek opportunities through obtaining advanced degrees. One participant highlighted the power of mentorship at the KLI: "I grasped a huge concept of keeping the spirit to hold on to my morale as a woman of color that is facing opposition. I found I am not alone."

One participant wrote about the lack of women of color in high-level positions. She stated, "I was made to feel I was not alone in my struggles as a woman of color. I really appreciate the training put forth by the leadership." Several participants echoed this sentiment: "It was wonderful having faculty who have faced bureaucracy of higher education as women of color, but [who also have] been supremely successful." Another participant stated, "The faculty were amazing. It was wonderful to see women of color in professional leadership positions. I was finally able to see myself in someone else."

Participants thought in new ways about issues related to their advancement. One woman shared, "It was very inspirational to be in a room with so many women of color who are in professional careers and are seeking to continue advancing or improving themselves." KLI faculty encouraged participants to continue their education. One participant stated, "The biggest turning point was when we were all encouraged to pursue our doctorate degree because as women of color, we have to be credentialed to be promoted."

Discussion about educational attainment and encouragement from mentors led participants to act. One woman disclosed, "I gained confidence and self-esteem to pursue my educational goal...I just completed my MBA...Now it's accomplished." At least two participants enrolled in college after returning home from the KLI. One wrote she would be graduating in weeks, and another said, "Immediately upon my return home, I applied to the University of Maryland for the Doctor [of] Management in Community College Policy and Administration [and] I will be finishing this year."

### **Impact on Identity Development**

We asked participants to consider their identities as women of color; when asked if the KLI "increased my capacity to confront challenges I faced as a woman of color," across all ethnicities, women agreed,  $F(4, 137) = .566, p > .05$ . Participants at all levels of positions also agreed that the KLI increased their capacity to confront challenges,  $F(2, 135) = 1.41, p > .05$ . Results were consistent regardless of when women participated,  $F(3, 138) = .613, p > .05$ .

Participants in various positions and years of participation in the program agreed that the KLI assisted their development as women of color. Women in staff, faculty, and administrator

positions strongly agreed the KLI "helped me understand the leadership journey and challenges for women of color,"  $F(2, 136) = .937, p > .05$ . Differences were not detected between women who participated in various years,  $F(3, 139) = .732, p > .05$ .

We detected a difference among women of various races/ethnicities related to KLI's assistance with their leadership journeys and challenges,  $F(4, 138) = 2.897, p < .05$ . The pairwise post hoc analysis using Bonferroni post hoc criterion for significance indicated agreement was significantly lower for Latinas ( $M = 4.56, SD = 1.36$ ) than for women who identified as African American ( $M = 5.31, SD = 1.36$ ). Latinas' reports also differed from Asian American, Native American, and multiracial women's reports. It appears Latinas have unique challenges with which they would like more assistance, which may include experiences of isolation, marginalization, and the perpetuation of racial/ethnic stereotypes experienced by Latina community college presidents (Muñoz, 2009). It may be beneficial to qualitatively explore this difference further and include more content specific to Latinas.

Findings from open-ended responses supported the quantitative results that the KLI enhanced women's identity development by emphasizing race/ethnicity and leadership roles. One theme emerged from the open-ended questions around awareness of women of color in leadership positions. One participant wrote, "Women of color had similarities, and so I am able to use that lens when interacting with women of color." Another participant stated, "[The KLI] program opened my eyes that women of color all face the same prejudice. It was an eye-opening experience for me."

Participants enhanced their identity development when they gained knowledge about themselves as women of color and leaders. A participant explained, "My personal life was enhanced . . . [and] I grew in my knowledge as an African American female leader." Another participant described sharing the experience with women of color in leadership roles: "This was a very empowering experience for me to share experiences, first of all with other professional women, and more specifically with women of color."

Overall, the KLI positively impacted participants' personal and professional lives. Participants identified many ways in which the KLI influenced their networking, mentoring, and identity development.

### **Discussion**

In this study, we measured perceptions and behaviors of women of color through analysis of responses to closed- and open-ended survey items. The results suggest women had positive experiences while participating in the KLI model over its 20 years. The results illuminate similar programs' effect for women of color's personal and professional lives throughout the higher education pipeline. Notably, participants of all ages, job levels, races/ethnicities, and years of participation identified the personal benefits of KLI. This across-the-board benefit occurred because the KLI model has cultivated practices, such as

relationship building across racial/ethnic groups through honest dialogue and connecting participants with other women of color in higher education through truth-telling and discussing shared pressures and stereotypes (Brue & Brue, 2018; Lee, 2015). Women indicated their appreciation for the professional development exercises that helped them refine their leadership skills. The opportunity for personal benefits is built directly into KLI and came from opportunities to create deep connections with other participants of color and the distinguished faculty from various ethnic backgrounds who developed and facilitated the program using a consistent curriculum that honored their intersecting identities.

Leadership development programs for women of color that encourage networking are highly beneficial (Moorosi, 2014). This study demonstrated that participating in programs tailored to women of color networking can help women build meaningful networks. Women of different races and ethnicities, holding different positions of authority, and varying years of participation built networks while participating in KLI. This benefit may be explained by how KLI structured connections among and between groups based on participant comments. Participants said they valued how KLI offered them the much-needed opportunity to connect with others in identity-specific settings so that they could dialogue with people like themselves. Participants also benefited from cross-identity group exercises, where faculty, administrators, and staff members shared how they might support each other across organizational lines. Participants mentioned the limited opportunities they had to connect with other women of color executives at their home campus because of limited numbers (ACE, 2019). The KLI exercises also helped women find common needs despite differences. Participants said connecting across ethnic and racial groups helped them develop skills for countering barriers related to racism in career advancement (Mena, 2016). Through networking, women said they could operationalize and organize career goals, connect with other women of color, and foster career advancement actions.

Mentors provide career guidance and skill development, and the KLI model offered women opportunities to be mentored by executives of color with extensive expertise who have been committed to growth and development. The results correspond with previous research findings showing that mentoring is crucial for developing and advancing women of color (A. T. Davis, 2009; Muñoz, 2009; Searby et al., 2015). The results of this study suggest that the KLI model helped women across ethnic groups and higher education positions build mentor-mentee relationships with faculty and their peers. These results illustrate the power of building cross-ethnic/racial coalitions with mentors to fight tokenism and build a collaborative spirit across diverse groups to uplift all women of color. Women of color do not have to advocate for change alone. When women of color build cross-ethnic/racial mentorships, they push back against those who may want to keep groups divided by design to maintain the status quo. They can be peer-mentors to each other and support each other. Agosto et al. (2016) found peer-mentors

to be impactful for women. The peer-mentor-mentee relationships extended beyond the institute. KLI participants and faculty influenced participants in meaningful ways; some noted they were more motivated to be proactive in pursuing leadership positions in higher education, despite inequities in higher education. Notably, several women re-enrolled in academic programs after participating in KLI, increasing their opportunities for professional advancement.

KLI faculty mentors encouraged women to reflect on issues related to women of color in higher education. The faculty participated in panel discussions where they openly shared examples of the challenges they faced as executive leaders of color and commented on the commonalities they experienced as women. Following the panel discussions, the faculty mentors would lead small group discussions with groups from various racial/ethnic groups to discuss how women of color could serve as allies to one another. Given the limited number of women executives of color available to serve as mentors at community colleges, this learning proved invaluable to the participants and may have contributed to the finding that, when assessing the unique mentoring skills provided by the KLI faculty, there were no differences detected in African American, Asian, Latina, Native American, and multiracial women's perspectives.

The results suggest that organizations such as the KLI promote insights for women of color because the faculty were willing to discuss the leadership challenges they face as women of color, regardless of their role on campus. Women learned leadership skills that were uniquely necessary for women of color, including understanding the importance of intersectionality and multiple identities and building confidence in the face of oppression to mitigate the impact of inequities (Crenshaw, 1991; Jones, 2016; Moorosi, 2014). By building an environment advantageous for women of color, participants can share experiences and express their challenges in higher education.

There were no differences across ages, positions, and ethnicities in rating the effectiveness of the KLI program and faculty. Significantly, no matter when participants attended KLI, they rated the program as effective. In addition to the KLI model's focus on leadership and career development, the curriculum emphasizes aspects unique to women's identities. In response to research recommendations (Debebe, 2011; Mena, 2016), the KLI model has addressed the complex interaction between roles women hold and contexts women navigate. The KLI model promotes leadership development and gives attention to unique issues related to the leader's gender and race/ethnicity. Data from open-ended items demonstrated that as one identity grows, other identities also develop. The quantitative results highlight the importance of identity development in leadership programming for women of color. The results suggest the importance of creating leadership development programs that address multiple identities.

## Recommendations

This study confirms that programs such as the KLI can provide meaningful networking, mentoring, and identity development opportunities for women of color in higher education. Participant experiences are positively impacted by the 4-day residential program's intensity, where college and university presidents and CEOs serve as faculty in residence. Drawing from participant experiences and research documenting the inequities perpetuated by the "gap in the pipeline" for female leaders of color (ACE, 2019; Muñoz, 2009, p. 168), we developed the following recommendations for organizations. Each recommendation is designed to increase the leadership pipeline for women of color at various points in the higher education pipeline and emphasizes institutionalized organizations and campus resources as partners. Enacting these recommendations offers opportunities to further research into the efficacy of leadership development programs for women of color that honor multiple and intersecting identities.

We believe organizations with three key characteristics will be most successful in implementing identity-based leadership development programs, like KLI, that offer women of color the opportunity to learn from women executives and peers of color. First, the organization recognizes that systematic obstacles impact the underrepresentation of women of color in leadership positions (Kirkwood, 2018). Second, the organization acknowledges that women with more than one marginalized identity have compounding challenges (Crenshaw, 1991). Third, the organization commits to closing leadership gaps across gender, race, and other marginalized identities to create more equitable and inclusive environments in higher education.

### **Recommendation 1: Replicate Identity-Based Leadership Development Institutes for Women of Color**

Many higher education professional associations offer professional development opportunities as part of their mission. Women of color and their allies might encourage professional associations to consult with past and current KLI faculty and participants to create a nationally implemented curriculum design. A consistent curriculum design is necessary to maintain the positive benefits identified by KLI's 20 years of experience. Individual campuses may not have enough executive women of color to sustain a 4-day residential program over time. In order to avoid cultural taxation, it would be beneficial to identify a professional association to provide the infrastructure to support the 4-day residential program. The professional association would recruit high-level administrators to serve as faculty, assist with program logistics, and conduct ongoing assessments to measure program effectiveness.

### **Recommendation 2: Offer Identity-Based Regional Preconference Workshops for Women of Color**

Higher educational professional associations often sponsor regionally based initiatives, such as conferences. Leaders in national organizations might sponsor regional 1- to 2-day pre-conference workshops for women of color. Such programs

would be led by college and university women executives of color and could occur before the regional event, requiring less professional development travel funds and traveling time. One benefit of offering a 1- to 2-day regional experience is that it might create a pipeline of senior women leaders of color willing to serve as faculty for national 4-day programs.

One successful example is the A2MEND Women's Leadership Institute, which is offered as part of the African American Male Education Network Development (A2MEND) annual meeting. The A2MEND organization "consists of community college faculty and administrators dedicated to the promotion and advancement of institutional change within the community college system" (African American Male Education Network Development, 2020, para. 1). The A2MEND Women's Leadership Institute focuses on essential leadership development for women participants' internal strengths and external contextual intelligence in higher education that are necessary for leadership success. Women of color with significant leadership experience facilitate the workshop, drawing 40-50 participants each year.

### **Recommendation 3: Develop Institutional-Level Women of Color Professional Development Activities**

Professional development and travel funds are often cut during difficult fiscal times. Nevertheless, there is still a need to examine and address equity gaps for women of color staff and faculty at all leadership levels. Districts and campuses have human resource departments and faculty development initiatives where professional development work is often a stated priority. Finding ways to provide a unique leadership development curriculum for women of color on local campuses is needed. Institutionalization of such professional development activities may be the most efficient and cost-effective way for women of color leaders to contribute to future leaders' development at their institution, both at the college and district levels. Developing institutional-level activities may grow the existing pipeline of emerging leaders serving in entry- to mid-level leadership capacities.

### **Recommendation 4: Offer Identity-Based Leadership Development for Female Students of Color**

Student leadership development programs are offered through student government, identity-based resource centers, or student affairs on many campuses. Leadership development programs for students of color should be institutionalized at colleges and universities to increase access to the pipeline for future executive leaders of color. Offering identity-based leadership development programs would normalize that women of color have unique needs and experiences that deserve focused attention and support. Entry-, mid-, and senior-level women administrators could participate in on-campus workshops as student mentors. Institution-driven leadership development programs would yield opportunities to study the impact of identity-based leadership development programs on undergraduate and graduate students.

## Limitations of the Study and Future Research

This study included perspectives of women who participated in the KLI over its 20 years. We did not specifically evaluate the structure and contents of the KLI program, focusing instead on participants' assessment of the program and its impacts.

Although we focused this study on networking, mentorship, and identity development, future researchers should consider other factors, such as resilience, that benefit the leadership development of women of color.

We found that Latina participants rated the KLI's assistance with their leadership journey and challenges lower than women from other racial/ethnic groups. Further research could determine the reasons for this difference and compare results of race/ethnicity-specific professional development opportunities for women of color. Researchers may determine which program components offered the most significant benefits for women of color from various identity groups. Further research could establish curricular guidelines for leadership development programs that honor participants' individual and intersecting identities.

A. T. Davis (2009) highlighted the advantages of women of color mentees, similar to KLI participants, and noted that mentors also benefit from mentoring relationships. Many KLI participants went on to become mentors and it would be enlightening to explore further how they have benefitted from mentoring women of color. Investigating the perspectives of executive-level mentors could highlight features of productive mentorship within and across racial/ethnic groups.

We need more research on additional identity development variables of leaders who are women of color. This study focused on the intersection of visible identities (e.g., gender and race/ethnicity). Women of color also have invisible social identities to assess, such as religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status, that inform their perspectives. Future studies may also consider using this study's novel instrument to assist in the measure's validation.

### Conclusion

There is value in offering identity-based leadership development programs designed for, and facilitated by, women of color. Benefits exist when women of color can experience mentoring, spaces to connect, and tools for networking, mentoring, and identity development. The findings indicate that participants have had positive experiences based on responses to survey items on the KLI's personal and professional impact, effectiveness, and faculty. Participants have benefited from workshops, engaging in conversations with women of color in higher education, and building relationships.

KLI has encouraged women to seek opportunities and establish career objectives. Participants described life-changing impacts. Mentorship, leadership skills, and networks developed through KLI programming have empowered women of color to advance their careers. This valuable learning helps women of color navigate various contexts while honoring their multiple identities and their colleagues' identities. Programs such as KLI can uplift women of color in higher education and increase the pipeline of

women of color advancing to executive-level positions in community colleges.

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