ADVANCING AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN INTO LEADERSHIP POSITIONS WITHIN STUDENT AFFAIRS

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ABSTRACT

African American women Student Affairs practitioners experience professional journeys different from other educators in the field because of their race and gender. Although African American women have made a significant impact in the field for nearly a century, published research surrounding their experiences is limited. To fill the gap in literature, this study provides narratives of five African American women Student Affairs practitioners who shared stories about their career trajectories and professional ambitions from a mid-level and senior-level perspective. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how lived-experiences were perceived and interpreted and what meaning was given to the experiences.

Participants were selected from a personal network of women who have worked in the field full-time for at least three years and earned a master’s degree. Using Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought, data collected from resumes and semi-structured interviews were analyzed to identify job duties, responsibilities, and qualifications; trainings and professional development opportunities; and challenges along the way. Open and thematic coding resulted in eight themes: (1) an educator’s desire to teach; (2) meaningful undergraduate experiences; (3) intentional efforts (4) love for the job and a passion for students; (5) feeling blessed, inspired, and privileged; (6) intersectionality; (7) mentors, mentoring, and giving back; and (8) strategies for advancement. Three implications for practice that are discussed are the sharing of counter-narratives by African American women, an increase in programmatic efforts on campus, and an undergraduate degree program that prepares future practitioners for a career in Student Affairs.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated solely to my mother Mrs. Sybil Elise Pink - Downing. Since I was three years old your commitment to my education was evident. Thank you for always making sure that I had the best education and experience that I could have. Thank you for being the mom that made three different types of spaghetti in one night for her family. That one meal showed me your willingness to do anything and everything to make sure that your family had the best of what you had to give. Although you will not see the end of my doctoral program and the completed dissertation process, you supported my every step of the way and I am forever grateful for all that you poured into me and your four grandsons. Rest peacefully in heaven, “Granny”.

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Your “only daughter and middle child”, Kima/ Lil’ Mamma
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

American colleges and universities have few educational leaders who identify as African American women (American Council on Education [ACE], 2014a; Gagliardi, Espinosa, Turk, & Taylor, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], n.d.; Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014). Literature regarding leadership in higher education of both people of color and women tends to focus on experiences, challenges, and strategies for the advancing of a career (Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015; Jarnagin, 2010; Klotz, 2014; Marquez, 2014; Moore, 2017; Pagan, 2018; Schoenfeld, 2014; West, 2011, 2015). In a 2018 study titled *The Career Trajectory and Ambitions of Women Chief Student Affairs Officers*, Pagan addresses these three areas. Of Pagan’s (2018) ten participants, three were women of color; one a Latina and two who identified as African American. Pagan’s (2018) research provided an incentive to conduct a study to examine the career paths of African American women who are in mid-level and senior-level/assistant vice president positions. This study identified the unique experiences of African American women and their Student Affairs’ professional journey in higher education.

**Problem Statement**

Within higher education and Student Affairs, African American women are underrepresented in leadership positions (ACE, 2014a; Gagliardi et al., 2017; NCES, n.d.; Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014). The lack of a critical mass causes the few African American women who are leaders within the field to feel isolated and unsupported (Alexander-Lee, 2014; Bartman, 2015; Henry & Glenn, 2009; San Antonio, 2015). The limited diversity found within other leadership positions on campus may hinder the
number of African American women who advance in Student Affairs even if they aspire to become a vice president or campus president. With trends showing that most educational leaders are traditionally White or male, there is a small possibility that African American women in Student Affairs can advance into higher leadership positions on campus.

**Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative study examined narratives of African American women in Higher Education’s Student Affairs profession who navigated through mid-level and senior-level/assistant vice president positions (as defined by NASPA, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators). This study addressed underrepresentation by investigating career paths and personal experiences. In addition, this study described successful advancement strategies and allowed African American women to tell their own stories in the form of a counter-narrative.

**Background of the Problem**

There is a lack of African American women in leadership roles in both higher education and Student Affairs as most leadership positions are held by men or by Whites (Gagliardi et al., 2017; Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014). Within the last five years, studies found that men account for 69.9% of presidents (Gagliardi et al., 2017), 56% of Chief Academic Officers (CAO) (ACE, 2014a), 51% of Chief Student Affairs Officers (CSAO) (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014), and 53% of faculty members (NCES, n.d.). Whites (both men and women) account for 83.2% of presidents (Gagliardi et al., 2017), 86% of Chief Academic Officers (ACE, 2014a), 76.5% of Chief Student Affairs Officers (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014a), and 76% of faculty (NCES, n.d.). African Americans (both men and
women) account for 7.9% of presidents (Gagliardi et al., 2017), 4.0% of Chief Academic Officers (ACE, 2014a), 13.7% of Chief Student Affairs Officers (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014), and 6% of faculty (NCES, n.d.).

Understanding the past experiences of African American women in Student Affairs can help to explain the lack of representation that exists today. The problem of underrepresentation is discussed in literature focusing on people of color working in colleges and universities, women in leadership positions in education, women of color in leadership, and career paths traveled in higher education. The background of the problem is explained in literature that addresses the demographics of leaders in American Higher Education and its students, including the American College President Study, the Chief Academic Officer Survey, the Chief Student Affairs Officer Report, and college faculty racial and gender distribution as reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

**Research Questions**

This study built on the work of Pagan (2018). Inspired by the American Council on Education’s 2017 American College President Study, Pagan (2018), in her dissertation titled *The Career Trajectory and Ambitions of Women Chief Student Affairs Officers*, sought to understand “why there are so few women leaders at the highest levels of higher education” (Pagan, 2018, p. iv). Using a qualitative approach, Pagan provided the narratives of ten women who are CSAO within the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions. Pagan’s main research question was, “What are the professional trajectories and professional ambitions of women chief student affairs officers?” (p. 37). This study asked
the same question specific to African American women who have a career trajectory in Student Affairs. The study’s research questions and sub-questions were:

1. How do African American women leaders in Student Affairs describe and perceive their professional journey?

2. What are the professional trajectories and professional ambitions of African American women leaders in Student Affairs?
   a. How do African American women leaders within Student Affairs explain their career advancement?
   b. To what extent are African American women leaders within Student Affairs interested in moving up to another level?
   c. What strategies have African American women leaders within Student Affairs implemented for their career advancement?
   d. What role, if any, have mentors played in the professional advancement of women chief Student Affairs officers?

This study used the same research focus as Pagan (2018), applied a critical lens, and examined African American women who are in mid-level to senior-level/assistant vice president positions.

**Methods**

This study used a qualitative phenomenological method to examine the career paths of five African American women. The small number of participants is consistent with other qualitative studies regarding the topic (Sobers, 2014). A phenomenological design served as the best approach in this study for the following reasons:
1. Considering the low number of African American women leaders within Student Affairs, the population is a true phenomenon (both impressive and extraordinary).

2. Participants were encouraged (through open-ended questions) to fully describe their personal and professional experience.

3. The research focuses on the understanding of the experience and is rooted in the meaning and essence.

4. The researcher began the study by reflecting on personal experiences to identify and describe important events. This process allowed for the use of bracketing biases about the phenomenon.

The participants completed semi-structured interviews that focused on the meaning of a career path and future aspirations. Building on the research of Pagan (2018), the study provides a counter narrative to negative stories typically shared when discussing people of color working in higher education.

**Relevance and Significance of this Study**

Over the last two decades, “the number of Black women in the academy has increased” (Benjamin, 1997, p. 9) but this population continues to remain largely “invisible” (Benjamin, 1997, p. 9) especially within leadership (Peck, 2016; McKinsey & Company, 2017). The underrepresentation of African American women leaders, specifically within Student Affairs, is part of several larger issues. This study adds to the limited recent literature available on the topic, and it introduces recommendations for future research. The lived experiences of current African American women leaders within Student Affairs contribute to a set of recommendations that can provide career guidance to younger and entry-level African American women within Student Affairs.
This study is significant for three main reasons. Most importantly, the underrepresentation of African American women in leadership positions within higher education requires attention that can transform the current situation. From an academic perspective, as discussed earlier, there is limited recent literature on the specific topic of advancing mid-level to senior-level/assistant vice president African American women into leadership positions within Student Affairs and the positive portrayal of that experience. In addition, the college student population is becoming increasingly more diverse, and African American women leaders are needed in Student Affairs to support the diverse student body.

Guiding Theories

To research the advancement of African American women into leadership positions within Student Affairs, two theoretical frameworks, when combined, make for a critical lens. These theoretical frameworks, Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought, support and guide the study. Several components, when synthesized, provide a conceptual framework for analysis of literature and support for the research. The conceptual framework focuses on “uncovering what is relevant” (Schram, 2006, p. 63) to this unique topic. Relevant elements were pulled from “personal interest, topical research, and theoretical frameworks” (Ravitch & Riggins, 2012, p. 10), respectively, to formulate “an established arena of ideas” (Schram, 2006, p. 62). Systemic racism paired with intersectionality and “story-telling” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 9) are consistent themes within the Critical Race Theory. Black Feminist Thought offers the African American women’s experience as it relates to her race and her gender regarding
opportunities in the workplace. This theory also encourages empowerment of oneself and others and focuses heavily on the transformational process.

**Critical race theory.** To thoroughly examine race and ethnicity when discussing the advancement of African American women into leadership positions within Student Affairs, it is important to use an approach that can (a) critique society and culture and (b) seek "to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Bouwel, 2009, p. 1). In sociology and literary criticism, such an approach is found through such critical theories as Critical Race Theory (CRT). Critical Race Theory is a school of thought that addresses society and culture and considers how the two factors impact race, racism, and power among people of color. Similar to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s, CRT examines issues of discrimination and equality. From a broader perspective, CRT also analyzes how these issues relate to the history, economy, context, interest in self, the processing of feelings and the unconscious (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Often used in Social Sciences, Critical Race Theory is more than just a second generation of a critical theory paired with a visit to the Civil Rights Movement. The CRT genealogy, in fact, traces back to “cultural nationalism, Freirean Critical Pedagogy, [and] Internal Colonial Models” (Aguilar-Hernandez, 2017, slide 2). Born out of legal scholarship, the theory is committed to an agenda of social justice, the elimination of oppression, and activism by way of its many tenets.

Delgado and Stefancic (2001) state that racism in America is an ordinary and common occurrence. This first pivotal statement connects Critical Race Theory to this study because it examines African American women who experience and witness the white-over-color preference daily. This daily experience engrains racism into their
psyche, making it a difficult subject to challenge and eradicate. Only through the acknowledgment of the systemic racism, can the second tenet be introduced. Interest convergence as a second tenet suggests that Whites encourage and support racism because they often benefit from racial injustice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The third tenet is based on a biological and scientific view. The social construction of race thesis holds that there is no real genetic difference between the races that society socially constructed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Another tenet within the theory focuses on differential racialization. The concept of changing racism for different groups over time is connected to that of “conflicting, overlapping identities” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 9). Intersectionality, the fifth tenet, recognizes that many individuals have more than one identity that continues to be marginalized (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). African American women fit into at least two marginalized groups: (1) African American and (2) women. Their state of oppression can be magnified if they are, for example, a member of a low-income family, formally uneducated, or a single mother. The last tenet of CRT expresses the importance of the “unique voice of color” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 9). Through story-telling, African American women have the opportunity to narrate their experiences, both personal and professional.

The CRT framework is an ideal lens to use when interpreting literature concerning the advancement of African American women into leadership positions in Student Affairs because its tenets are relevant to the unique experiences of the participants. Applicable to understanding the process of advancing African American women into leadership positions within Student Affairs is CRT’s fifth tenet, intersectionality. Intersectionality, a term coined by feminist and legal scholar Kimberlé
Williams Crenshaw, is the point where one identity crosses another identity and compounds the amount of racism and oppression experienced, resulting in “multiple levels of social injustice” (Crenshaw, 2016, 5:07). Crenshaw, best known for her 1989 article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” understands the struggle of African American women in a very male-dominant White American system as she herself was a student of anti-discrimination law. During law school she discovered through a “chance encounter” (Crenshaw, 2016, 5:19) with Emma DeGraffenreid that courts do not recognize that African American women experience discrimination differently from that of African American men and differently from White women. In the Title VII case of DeGraffenreid v. General Motors, the plaintiff was denied the ability to put two causes of action (race discrimination and gender discrimination) together in her discrimination suit. After studying two other major cases (Moore v Hughes Helicopter and Payne v Travenol) in the American legal system, Crenshaw publicly coined the term intersectionality.

Although Crenshaw popularized the term “intersectionality” (Crenshaw, 2016, 5:17), in May 1851 during an address to the Women’s Right Convention in Akron, Ohio, Sojourner Truth (born Isabella Baumfree), explicitly stated examples of norms for women at that time and what were considered norms for Blacks at that time. Truth eloquently demonstrated that she was not expected to follow the lady-like norms of women as that behavior was reserved only for White women, so she asked “Ain’t I a Woman?” (Shiflett, 2017). Truth continued to explain how she could validate her physical strength by working just as hard as a Black man and even was whipped as hard
as a man. Truth stated that she also endured more mental anguish than any white woman and any Black man because her children (like so many other slaves) were “sold off to slavery” (Shiflett, 2017). The “Ain’t I a Woman” speech explicitly distinguished between “women’s rights” and “negro’s rights,” thereby announcing the reality of multiple identities uniquely found in the Black or African American woman.

The concept of intersectionality further explains the experience of the African American woman as it examines both the macro-level and micro-level of the situation (Seabrook & Wyatt-Nichol, 2016). Gopaldas (2013) believes that “at a macro-level of analysis, the concept of intersectionality refers to the multiplicity and interactivity” (p. 91) in society while “at a micro-level of analysis, the implication of intersectionality is that every person in society is positioned at the intersection of multiple social identity structures and is thus subject to multiple social advantages and disadvantages” (p. 91).

While Gopaldas (2013) is correct in stating that each individual has multiple identities, his statement minimizes the fact that (1) African American women are the only group to have historically experienced prolonged severe oppression due to the disadvantages associated with their multiple identities, and (2) intersectionality was coined specifically for the African American woman. Although Gopaldas’ work attempts to shift the focus of intersectionality from African American women to everyone, it is this explanation that links the micro-macro levels. The “identities at the micro-level…intersect with macro-level structural factors…to illustrate or produce disparate” (Bowleg, 2012, p. 1268) conditions and outcomes.
Black feminist thought. Patricia Hill Collins brought life to the voice of women of color, specifically African American women, when she published her 1990 book titled *Black Feminist Thought*. Similar to the idea of Crenshaw’s intersectionality, Black Feminist Thought (BFT) considers the overlapping identities of African American women. Black Feminist Thought is “a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community” (Collins, 1990, p. 39). In her introduction of the new theoretical construct, Collins identified four themes. First she discussed how African American women empower themselves regardless of negative images they are fed through culture and media. Through their self-empowerment, these women are able to confront structures of control and dominance. Collins’ (1990) second theme is recognizing and understanding gender, race, and class oppression. The third theme speaks to political activism while the fourth recognizes the need to both resist and transform daily discrimination (Collins, 1990). The definition and four declarations of Black Feminist Thought is applicable to this study as it involves (1) empowering of oneself and others; (2) recognizing gender, race, and class and understanding how those factors impact opportunity; (3) activism; and (4) a transformation process (Collins, 1990).

Summary and Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 began by asserting the problem statement: Few leaders within the American higher education system identify as African American women. Within the background of the problem, statistics and demographics were provided about educational leaders who are mostly white or men. The introduction of the study further discussed the purpose, research questions, methods and relevance/significance. This chapter also introduced the guiding theories of Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought. The
next chapter provides a literature review that supports the need to examine the Advancing of African American women into leadership positions within Student Affairs. Chapter 2 discusses history as it relates to leadership in American colleges, Student Affairs, and African American women as transformational leaders in society, in the community and in education. The chapter then provides the main themes found in the literature. Chapter 3 provides the methodology of the study. Chapter 4 discusses research findings. Chapter 5 outlines the conclusion, discussion, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 1 provided the problem statement, background of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, methods, and relevance and significance of the study. Guiding theories and an organization of the study close the chapter. Chapter 2 provides an overview of literature. The chapter has three sections; demographics of leaders found within higher education, the field of Student Affairs, and African American women. Section I discusses studies that report race and gender of the highest positions on a college campus. Section II gives historical context of the field and Section III describes African American women in the 21st century and the issues related to their careers.

Limited Research Discussing African American Women in Student Affairs

Advancing African American women into leadership positions within Student Affairs is a relatively new phenomenon with limited literature (West, 2011). Research concerning the broad subject of women in leadership dates back to the 1980’s (Nixdorff & Rosen, 2010). Prior to this date, most of the leadership literature focused on men. Adding the extra factors of (1) African American women and (2) higher education, more specifically Student Affairs, greatly reduces the amount of literature that is published and available. To determine the quantity and quality of literature available that discusses advancing African American women in leadership positions within Student Affairs, a search was conducted in October 2018 using a public state university’s library website and the Academic Search Premier database. The search for literature began by using “leadership” as a keyword and 960,442 results were found. To narrow the search, the following keywords were added:
1. Women or females or woman or female
2. African Americans or Black Americans or Blacks or negro
3. Higher Education or college or university or tertiary or community college
4. Student Affairs or student personnel or student services

The new search yielded only 90 results. The results of this search show the shortage of current relevant research and literature that examines the leadership experience of African American women. The lack of literature of “women in Student Affairs Administration is one way that this population continues to be marginalized and pushed to the periphery within the higher education community” (Yakaboski & Donahoo, 2010, p. 3), especially for those who are African American.

A large amount of the available research that focuses on African American women in Student Affairs portrays “negative experiences as they seek to move along their career paths, including discrimination based on race and gender, tokenism, and microaggressive behavior” (Mitchell, 2018, p. 3). To present research that pertains to the topic of advancing African American women into leadership positions within Student Affairs, a review of literature was completed as a critical synthesis. Although the review of literature included studies published within the last decade, literature prior to 2009 was included to establish a strong background considering the limited amount of information on this specific topic. The review of literature is presented in three sections. Section I focuses on the demographics found in higher education and then transitions to Section II, which gives a historical account and current overview of Student Affairs. Section III provides the emerging themes from literature regarding African American.
Section I: Demographics found in Higher Education

Demographics of Historical and Influential American Educational Leaders

More than a century before the United States became an independent country (Boston Latin School, n.d.; Glaeser, 2005; Nation’s oldest, 2010; USA.gov, 2018), an institution of education was established. Boston Latin School, the nation’s oldest school, created in 1635, grew under the influence of Reverend John Cotton, Master Philemon Pormot, Daniel Maude, and John Woodbridge (Boston Latin School, n.d.; Glaeser, 2005). These four historical leaders were all white males. Shortly after Boston Latin School (BLS) was created, just a few miles away, the country’s first institution of higher learning was founded (Boston Latin School, n.d.; Harvard University, n.d.-b). Harvard University began operating in 1638 under the leadership of Master Nathaniel Eaton (Harvard University, n.d.-a). Both the university’s namesake and its first leaders were also white males (Harvard University, n.d.-a; n.d.-b). The first president of Harvard, Henry Dunster, also a white male, started his presidential appointment during the 1639-1640 academic year (Harvard University, n.d.-a; n.d.-c). Since its first educational leader, Harvard continued under the exclusive leadership of 27 white males in various capacities until it announced a long-awaited drastic organizational change. (Harvard University, n.d.–b; n.d.-c). In July 2007, Catharine Drew Gilpin Faust became Harvard University’s 28th president (Harvard University. (n.d.-c). Making history, Gilpin Faust was the first woman to hold the title of president at this prestigious institution (Harvard University. (n.d.-c).
The Importance of Presidency on a College Campus

As the campus’ “chief executive officer” (Ross, Green, & Henderson, 1993, p. 1), the president holds the highest leadership position and often the most influential within a single college or university in America (Lane, 2017). This position drives the success of the institution as well as plays a role in determining the demographics of other campus leaders (Gagliardi et al., 2017). The average demographics of American college presidents in 2019 have a pattern similar to that of Boston Latin School and Harvard University: white males (Gagliardi et al., 2017; Harvard University, n.d.-c; Lane, 2017; Ross et al., 1993). Although the demographics of today’s educational leaders include more than white males, the overall demographic is slow to change (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Diversifying the profile of presidents and all other educational leaders is vital to the success of higher education (Gagliardi et al., 2017).

Leadership within Higher Education--The American College President Study

As the only higher education association to “represent all types of U.S. accredited, degree-granting institutions: two-year and four-year, public and private” (ACE, n.d.-a) with 100 years of service, the American Council on Education is considered the unified voice of colleges and universities (ACE, n.d.-c). A pioneer in the industry, with headquarters in Washington, District of Columbia, the American Council on Education (ACE) has a network that reaches to hundreds of thousands of professionals in higher education (ACE, n.d.-a). In 1986 ACE’s Center for Leadership Development started a unique program to research the presidents of American colleges and universities (Gagliardi et al., 2017). In 1988, ACE released its first publication associated with this research titled, “The American College President: A Contemporary Profile” (Gagliardi et
The original 37-page document was followed by subsequent reports that were released in 1993, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2007, and 2012. Now in its eighth edition, the most recent publication, titled “American College President Study 2017,” thoroughly discusses the demographical findings of a 2016 national survey administered by ACE’s Center for Policy Research and Strategy (Gagliardi et al., 2017).

The Center for Policy Research and Strategy (CPRS) focuses its research on three main themes: Re-imagining Diversity and Equity in Higher Education in the 21st Century; Public Finance and Higher Education Systems; and Transformational Leadership. Under the leadership of Louis Soares, MPA, Vice President, Strategy, Research, and Advancement, CPRS regularly publishes papers and issues briefs (ACE, n.d.-b). With the support of the Teacher’s Insurance and Annuity Association (TIAA), CPRS released a comprehensive study about the college presidency and the pipeline to leadership (ACE, 2017) to date. Unlike its predecessors, this wide-range report discussed three areas crucial to presidents. These three areas are diversity and inclusion, state funding and political climate, and areas of importance for the future (ACE, 2017). In addition, the report provided analyzed data as it pertains to women presidents and minority presidents (ACE, 2017).

**Demographics of College Presidents-The American College President Study**

The initial American College President Study (ACPS) in 1986 found that the “typical campus leader was a white male in his 50s. He was married with children, Protestant, held a doctorate, and had served in his current position for six years” (Cook, 2012, p. 3). Thirty years later, the same study found that the demographics of the American president were slow to change. The seat of a college president, across
various types of higher education institutions, is still held mostly by white males (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Of the 3,615 accredited, degree-granting, U.S. higher education institutions asked to participate in a 2016 survey, 1,546 responded. Where 83% of college presidents surveyed identified as white, less than 8% identified as African American (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Of the remaining participants in the study, 3.9% identified as Hispanic, 2.3% Asian, 1.4% multiple races, 0.7% American Indian, and 0.6% Middle Eastern (Gagliardi et al., 2017). This study also reported 70% of presidents were men compared to 30% that were women (Gagliardi et al., 2017).

The above-mentioned comprehensive study delved deeper into demographics, diversity, pipelines of higher education leadership, duties, and career paths (Gagliardi et al., 2017). The 2016 study conducted by the American Council on Education’s Center for Policy Research and Strategy found that the most popular immediate position prior to presidency is “Chief Academic Officer or provost” (Gagliardi et al., 2017, p. 7). This finding has remained consistent since the original study was conducted in 1986 (Gagliardi et al., 2017; Ross et al., 1993). The current American college president is now a 62-year old white male with a Ph.D. (more than likely in Education), who has served in his current roles for 6 ½ years, and took the “traditional route of Academic Affairs” (Ezarik, 2010; Gagliardi et al., 2017, p. 60) to gain professional work experience (Gagliardi et al., 2017). As higher education attempts to diversify the president’s seat, it is vital to examine how the profile and traditional career trajectory of the average American college president impacts professional aspirations of leaders in the academy who do not share those same characteristics (Ezarik, 2010; Stripling, 2012).
Reports and Demographics of Educational Leaders

Research regarding the demographics of leaders within American higher education has been conducted primarily by government agencies, nonprofit organizations, national professional associations, research firms, and individual college students (Gagliardi et al., 2017; NCES, n.d.). The data presented by these sources help shape the understanding of the formation of a higher education system with a low percentage of African American women leaders in student affairs (Gagliardi et al., 2017; NCES, n.d).

The Chief Academic Officer Survey

Noted as the “stepping stone” (Appiah-Padi, 2014, p. 1) and most popular position prior to presidency (Gagliardi et al., 2017), a Chief Academic Officer is “second-in-command on most campuses” (Berliner, Lorden, Palm, Smyer, & Yakoboski, 2009, para. 1). In addition to “setting the academic vision” (ACE, 2014c), this position is “responsible for the teaching, research and service functions” (Berliner et al., 2009, para. 1). A 2013 study on Chief Academic Officers was conducted by the American Council of Education. Of the 1,396 Chief Academic Officers (CAO) surveyed 86% were white, 4% were Black, another 4% identified as Hispanic, 3% Asian, and 3% were considered other (ACE, 2014a). The CAO survey (2014), unlike the ACPS study, did not provide information on participants that were American Indian, Middle Eastern, or multiple races (ACE, 2014a). In total, 56% of the CAO were men and 44% were women (ACE, 2014a). When disaggregated by type of institution (4-year as opposed to 2-year), the gender composition changes. At 4-year institutions, 62% of CAO are men and 38% are women (ACE, 2014a). In contrast, at 2-year institutions, more women (57%) are CAO than men.
Although CAO is traditionally known as a pipeline to the president’s seat, few are interested in advancing (Appiah-Padi, 2014). Only about one-third of all the participants in the study aspire to the presidency (ACE, 2014b; ACE, 2014d). While 35% of men plan to seek the presidency, only 27% of women reported the same (ACE, 2014b; ACE, 2014d). The CAO of color (35%) were more likely to report an interest in the president’s seat than White CAO (31%) (ACE, 2014b).

**Student Affairs as a Field and as a Division**

Academic Affairs, although historically operated separately and culturally different from Student Affairs, now shares with their counterparts the responsibility of educating and being “committed to supporting the success of the whole student” (American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, n.d.; para. 1; Boyd, Robinson & Cawthon, 2015; LePeau, 2015; North Carolina State University, n.d.; Peltier, 2014). Student Affairs is a “critical component of . . . higher education” (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA], n.d.-b, para. 1) that helps students have a positive college experience as they develop. The field of Student Affairs “promotes and advocates for the academic and personal growth” (Murray State, n.d., para. 23) of all students. Through programs, individual sessions, workshops, meaningful group facilitated discussions, and community events, Student Affairs provides students with a space to develop emotionally, physically, academically, and professionally (ACE, 1937). Professionals who work in Student Affairs are committed to serving all students through the use of various educational concepts (campus involvement, engagement, and health & wellness), theories (Student Development, Identity Development, and Critical Race), principles (culture, diversity, leadership, community, equity, and equality), and
models (psychology and change) (American College Personnel Association [ACPA], 2017). These concepts, theories, principles, and models are guides that influence the work of Student Affairs practitioners. Student Affairs practitioners also look to professional organizations for guidance on contemporary issues that affect students. These organizations include the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), which was formerly known as Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education), American Council on Education (ACE), American College Personnel Association (ACPA), Association of Colleges and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I), and National Association for Campus Activities (NACA) (Professional organizations, n.d.; Student Affairs.com, n.d.). In addition, the career field of Student Affairs adheres to standards implemented by the Council for the Advancement Standards in Higher Education (CAS), a consortium of professional associations that promotes “student learning, development, and achievement” (Council for the Advancement Standards in Higher Education [CAS], n.d.).

The Chief Student Affairs Officer Report

As the divisional head, the Vice President for Student Affairs (VPSA) both leads the organizational unit “during . . . period[s] of transformational change” (NASPA, n.d.-d, para. 1) and influences the professionals within the field. Reporting to the college president is the VPSA who is colloquially known as the Chief Student Affairs Officers (CSAO) (ACE, 2014a). Counterpart to other presidential cabinet members, such as the Provost and Chief Academic Officer, the CSAO position is growing in importance as well as popularity as colleges start to understand how the services provided by Student Affairs support academic achievement and student success. Mirroring the American
college president profile is the demographics of the average CSAO (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014). Professional organization, NASPA (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators), found in a study that most Chief Student Affairs Officers also identify as White, non-Hispanic (Gagliardi et al., 2017; Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014). Seventy-six percent of the Vice Presidents of Student Affairs surveyed identified as White and 14% identified as African American. Hispanics made of 6.8% of the participants, Asians 1.4%, those with two or more races 0.96%, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander 0.24%, and American Indian or Alaska Native 0.12%. In addition, the Chief Student Affairs Officer (CSAO) is likely to also hold a doctorate in Education and is 50-years old (Gagliardi et al., 2017; Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014).

In regard to gender, 51% of the CSAO respondents were men and 49% were women (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014). The issue of gender equity in the CSAO seat has made significant strides considering that studies during the 1970’s reported that only 7% of these leaders were women (Myers & Sandeen, 1973). Data collected between 1980 and 1984 from the College and University Personnel Association survey revealed that of 1,111 CSAO, 75% were White men, 14% were White women, 9% were a minority male, and only 2% were a minority female (Richard, 1985). The large number of women representing CSAO today shows “progress toward gender equity” (Rickard, 1985, p.5).

Considered the most influential educational leaders on campus (Connolly, 2015; Flaherty, 2016; Freeland, 2017), the demographics of the current presidents and vice presidents resemble the two groups that have maintained power throughout American history: Whites and men. This demographic profile of power has been slow to change
over time and does not accurately represent the student population that it intends to serve at most institutions of higher education in America (Lane, 2017).

**College Faculty Racial and Gender Distribution**

Among faculty members (including professors, associate professors, assistant professors, instructors, lecturers, assisting professors, adjuncts, and interims), Whites accounted for 76%, African Americans 6%, Hispanics 5%, Asian/Pacific Islander 10%, American Indian/Alaska Native less than 1%, and two or more races 1%. Of the 1.52 million faculty 53% were men, and 44% were women (McFarland et al., 2018; NCES, n.d.). African American women hold the same percentage of faculty positions as African American men and Hispanic men, 3%. Although African American women represent a small percentage of the faculty, they are a larger group than the Hispanic women who make up 2% of the overall population, the American Indian/Alaska Native (both men and women) who account for less than 1%, and the 1% of faculty (both men and women) that report two or more races. In addition, 3% of African American women faculty members are in total one-half the size of the Asian men in faculty and are three-fourths the number of Asian women. While the ratio of African American women faculty to White women faculty is 1:11.6, the faculty ratio of African American women to White men is 1:13.6. Overall White males make up 41% of faculty and African American women make up 3% of faculty. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics confirm that there is a lack of representation of faculty of color within higher educational leadership (Becks-Moody, 2004; Clayborne, 2006; San Antonio, 2015; West, 2011).
Student Populations

The presence of a diversified leadership team in higher education is a necessity in today’s college experience. America now presents a very diverse college population of nearly 20 million students (NCES, 2016, 2016b, 2017). More than just a difference in race, the college student population demonstrates two-dimensional diversity (Hewlett, Marshall, & Sherbin, 2013; Hirsch, 2017). The students’ “inherent diversity” (Hewlett et al., 2013, p. 3; Hirsch, 2017) is marked in ethnicity, nationality, gender, religious and spiritual beliefs, socioeconomic status, age, class, and (dis)ability. The “acquired diversity” (Hewlett et al., 2013, p. 3) includes a variety of factors such as academic need, educational interest, and personal experiences, including military exposure. Acquired diversity takes form through global mindset, political views, cultural fluency, professional skills, cross-functional knowledge, sexual orientation, human capital, social capital, cultural capital, and path to graduation (Carter, 2003; Coleman, 1988; DiMaggio, 1982; Hewlett et al., 2013; Hirsch, 2017; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Society for Human Resources Management, 2017; Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

The diverse student population that attends post-secondary schooling continues to be fluid. Of the 19.9 million undergraduate and post-baccalaureate students attending degree-granting institutions in fall 2016, 43.2% were male and 56.7% were female (NCES, 2017). Whites accounted for 54.7% of the students, 16.3% were Hispanic, 13.4% were African American, 6.5% were Asian, and 0.7% Native American (NCES, 2017). The National College Health Assessment (NCHA), a study conducted by the American College Health Association, found that nearly 20% of the 33,512 respondents identified as asexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian, pansexual, queer, questioning, same gender loving, or
an identity other than traditional straight/heterosexual (American College Health Association, 2017).

The NCHA also found that medical conditions, finances, drug and alcohol use, and violence significantly affect the academic needs of students. Other conditions that further diversify college students are access to food and food securities, homelessness, and the ability to secure permanent housing (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018). A 2016 study conducted by the California State University System found that 41.6% of 24,324 students surveyed reported food insecurity and 10.9% reported homelessness within the last year (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018). Although considered basic needs, food and housing are two factors that determine academic need and additional resources for students. The concern of basic needs is relevant for both former foster youth and non-traditional college students (Au & Hyatt, 2017; Wheeler & Schoonmaker, 2018). Characterized by “being independent for financial aid purposes, having one or more dependent, being a single caregiver, not having a traditional high school diploma, delaying postsecondary enrollment, attending school part time and being employed full time” (NCES, 2015, para. 1), the population of non-traditional students is rising. Of all undergraduate students, 74% percent have at least one nontraditional characteristic (NCES, 2015).

As colleges continue to promote the growth of a diverse student population, it will become increasingly vital to recognize that when considering the plethora of identities, many students belong to at least one group that was historically disenfranchised or currently marginalized. For these students, there is an urgency to promote and practice of diversity within leadership teams.
The underrepresentation of African American women leaders in Student Affairs is one part of a larger systemic issue. Within American higher education, the highest campus position is still held mostly by a White male. The largest demographic in other senior positions and faculty are also White males.

Section II: Student Affairs

History of Student Affairs: 1890 - 1960

While Academic Affairs is often seen as the spearhead of the college where administrators “make final decisions [to] move the institution in a particular way” (Patton McEwen & Howard-Hamilton, 2007, p. 46), Student Affairs is the division or unit strategically positioned that “focuses on students’ social and emotional development” (Arcelus, 2001, p. 63) and promotes co-curricular activities. Student Affairs is also a professional field that dates back to the earliest colleges in America (Cowley, 1937; Schwartz, 2010). Under the doctrine of in loco parentis (translated from Latin to mean “in place of the parent”) and upholding the metaphor of an alma mater (translated from Latin to mean “nourishing/kind mother”), college faculty supported and supervised young students who were studying away from home (Introduction to student life, 2011; Nuss, 2003). As faculty’s research interests started to peak and more students arrived on campus, the presence of the positive relationship between faculty and students dwindled (Long, 2012). Colleges recognized the importance of having an administrator dedicate time to students and address their individual needs (ACE, 1937). The rise of extracurricular activities, especially student clubs, Greek-letter organizations, and fraternities brought about a greater need for more guidance from professional staff on the college campus (Nuss, 2003).
In 1890, Harvard University President Charles William Elliott appointed LeBaron Russell Briggs as the Dean of Men (Mann, 2010). A highly educated man, Briggs did not support co-education, instead, he fought to keep genders separate so that “women were not taught to compete with men” (Harvard University, n.d.-d, para. 11). Despite his views, Briggs was known as an effective Dean. His appointment was monumental because he was the first Dean of Men for the university as well as the nation (Cowley, 1937; Mann, 2010). The Dean of Men later appointed to this position (at Harvard and other colleges) historically was a White male.

The primary role of the Dean of Men was to provide academic advisement, oversee conduct, and “relieve administrators and faculties of problems of discipline” (ACE, 1937, p. 2). Over the next few decades, more deans (Dean of Men, Dean of Women, and Dean of Students) were added to the structure of other colleges and staff members assisted in many of the related processes. Several terms were used interchangeably by colleges to describe the early work, among them are “guidance,” “counseling,” “advisory,” and “personnel” (ACE, 1937, p. 2).

The 1919 publication of The Cardinal Principles of Education by the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education (CRSE) of the National Education Association (NEA) in the United States brought attention to two main objectives: health and worthy use of leisure. The two objectives encouraged colleges to allow students to increase the amount of time spent on athletics and physical education (Nuss, 2003). Since these extracurricular activities are “beneficial” (Marsh, 2002) to students but were performed in addition to their study, conversations started to address the need to increase
the number of staff members on campus to supervise and support students during these activities.

In 1937, the American Council on Education published a report titled The Student Personnel Point of View that expanded on the original responsibilities of the Dean of Men and recognized the value of all educators by promoting more comprehensive terms such as “student personnel” and “student personnel services” (ACE, 1937, p. 2). At the time of publication, Student Personnel Services were expected to be responsible for 23 different services (ACE, 1937, p. 4). Some of these services included admitting students, orientation, clarifying occupational aims, determining physical and mental health, and providing housing and food programs (ACE, 1937, p. 4).

With the Student Personnel Point of View (SPPV) of 1937 and the second edition of 1949, along with “changing religious, economic, social, and political forces” (Nuss, 2003, p. 65), the field of Student Affairs began to emerge and grow tremendously on campuses. More staff members were added to the field as the need to have Student Affairs professionals increased. In these times in American higher education, the leaders found within the field and Division of Student Affairs and in other student services were still predominantly both White and male (Cowley, 1937; Schwartz, 2010).

**The Current State of Student Affairs: 1961 and Beyond**

The case of Dixon v. Alabama State Board of Education in 1961 affected post-secondary education and the work of Student Affairs. This case ended the 300-year-old college culture of in loco parentis. After the expulsion without a hearing of six African American students for participating in a lunch counter sit-in, the case was presented in court and the college’s decision was upheld. In an appeal, the United States Courts of
Appeal for the Fifth Circuit determined that students could not, in fact, be expelled
without the required due process as the 14th Amendment’s clause stated. The new ruling
allowed students the opportunity to be heard publicly and give their perspective to
authorities. With new student freedom being exercised, and the Civil Rights Movements
underway, and growing attention to women’s liberation, the role of Student Personnel
were called to guide and influence students in their decision-making process inside and
outside of the classroom and on campus as well as off campus.

**Careers in Student Affairs**

The same job expectations from 1961 exist today in Student Affairs. Student
Affairs practitioners guide, counsel, advise, mentor, provide services, host programs that
create experiences for students to grow both intellectually and emotionally, expose
students to opportunities that teach responsibility, acknowledge diversity, assist in the
development of identities, encourage students to increase communication skills and
explore moral and spiritual values, teach ethics, show students how to seek career goals
and vocational skills, and provide a space for students to practice wellness (NASPA, n.d.-
b; The California State University, 2013; Long, 2012). As the contemporary initiatives of
student engagement and student success continue to spread across the nation,
administrators are looking to the professionals and leaders in Student Affairs to connect
with students, build community, and encourage campus involvement so that students are
learning and developing outside of the classroom (Academic Impressions, 2016;
California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, n.d.; California State University,
Northridge, n.d.). Student Affairs practitioners work in one of seven professional levels:
undergraduate, graduate, new professional, mid-level, senior level, Associate Vice President, and Vice President.

The National Association for Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) is the largest professional association for all Student Affairs professionals. This organization reported in 2008 that its general membership consisted of more men (53%) than women (47%). The same organization found that of the CSAO, 79% are Caucasian, 13% are African American, 4% are Hispanic, and 2% are Asian (Spurlock, 2009). The 2014 CSAO study found that the 13% of African American VPSA remained constant. In addition, 47% of them identified as women. These two surveys confirm the uniqueness of African American women within Student Affairs and those holding a position as a CSAO.

Research pertaining to African American women in higher education and Student Affairs is found less often than that of research pertaining to all women as a whole or White women compared to women of color. An interest in women in Student Affairs emerged in the 1980’s. At that time there was a focus on a few major topics: equity in salary, attrition, and barriers (Blackhurst, 2000a; Blackhurst, 2000b). It was not until much later that research started to focus on African American women in Student Affairs.

**The Concerns of the Current State of Leadership within Student Affairs**

The senior-most leadership position within Student Affairs, typically the Vice President, also known as the Chief Student Affairs Officer. The CSAO is responsible for both management and oversight of the division and the development of cross-divisional professional relationships. Competencies for this position varies (Wade, 1993), but are similar to those set by ACPA and NASPA. The joint efforts of these two organizations
produced a list of ten professional competencies: (1) Personal and Ethical Foundations (PPF); (2) Values, Philosophy, and History (VPH); (3) Assessment, Evaluation, and Research (AER); (4) Law, Policy, and Governance (LPG); (5) Organizational and Human Resource (OHR); (6) Leadership (LEAD); (7) Social Justice and Inclusion (SJI); (8) Student Learning and Development (SLD); (9) Technology (TECH); and (10) Advising and Supporting (A/S) (Joint Task Force, 2010).

The demographics of the leadership within Student Affairs appear to resemble that of the average American college president. The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) found in a study that 76% of the participants identified as White, while only 13% identified as African American or Black (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014). In NASPA’s Chief Student Affairs Officers (CSAO) study, 22% of the participants stated that they aspire to move up the leadership ladder to college president (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014, p.5). Interestingly, African American or Black respondents were “more than twice as likely to aspire to become a college or university president as were their White colleagues” (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014, p. 5). Fifty-nine percent of the women in the study aspired to become presidents, while only fifty percent of the male stated an interest in the position. The overwhelming number of both African Americans and women who desired to move into a higher leadership position gives scholars more reason to believe that other African American women have an interest in advancing into leadership positions within higher education and Student Affairs. This finding also provides another reason to focus on successful methods that advance these two populations when considering the demographics of most college presidents and the traditionally-travelled career path.
Both African Americans and women who work in Student Affairs experience a career path that is nontraditional and, at times, uncomfortable. Studies (Belk, 2006; Hammonds, 2012; Scott, 2003) found that African Americans have a longer journey (in number of years) to the Chief Student Affairs Officer seat. Women also face challenges within their Student Affairs career. In a phenomenological study of mid-career Student Affairs Administrators, Starzyk (2013) found that career mobility within an institution was an obstacle for 11 of the 15 women participants (p. 87). Mobility for these women “was also hampered by the lack of experience individuals were able to have” (p. 89). Pagan (2018) studied ten women Chief Student Affairs Officers to examine their career advancement and identify strategies that support their future goals. Pagan (2018) found that the women in the study identified three main strategies: (1) “advancing within an institution vs. seeking advancement outside of an institution”; (2) “having a variety of roles and experience within Student Affairs”; and (3) “obtaining a terminal degree” (p. 58). There exists a contradiction for women who wish to advance into leadership positions. Whereas experience and job changes are strategies to advancement, exposure to a variety of tasks and mobility are obstacles. Obstacles that either delay or stop a woman’s ability to advance within her own institution are yet another roadblock to the seat of Chief Student Affairs Officer and, eventually, president.

The ACPS revealed that more than 42% of presidents were a Chief Academic Officer immediately prior to their presidency. Only 16% of presidents were in another senior campus executive position (unrelated to Academic Affairs). Considering that a senior campus executive position includes various divisions and fields, the number of presidents that came from Student Affairs is expected to be much lower than 16%. Some
literature states that only 4.5% of presidents stated that their path included a professional role within the division or field of Student Affairs (Gardner, 2015). The desire to move to presidency or the Chief Student Affairs Officer may bring about a challenge for diverse populations because of the norms set previously by other professionals.

Underrepresentation in American Higher Education

People of color who pursue a career in higher education face professional and personal obstacles within the academy (Moore, 2017; Scott, 2003; West, 2011). A professional career for people of color starts with the awareness of one’s identity and expands to a complete investigation of intersectionality (Pertuz, 2017; Surratt, 2014). When Calhoun (2010) studied 22 entry level men who work in Student Affairs, he found that men in the profession (without regard to race) are faced with conforming to gender roles and social norms of masculinity. Calhoun’s (2010) study suggested that more research should “be done to account for the impact that other identities have on the entry-level male experience” (p. 157). In a later study of 22 men working in Student Affairs, Surratt (2014) found that in addition to gender roles and social norms (as described by Calhoun), careers of men of color are impacted by race. Surratt’s (2014) African American participants explained that their identities contributed to performance pressures and inability to develop strong and solid working relationships. These obstacles derive from “a history of racial identity and a lack of historical precedence for employment and success in higher education” (Jenkins, 2015, p. 4), negative stereotypes attributed to Black men that impact career development, personal attitudes of others, and simply not fitting into the workspace (Cornileus, 2010; Surratt, 2014). Together the works of
Calhoun and Surratt recognize that African American men who work in Student Affairs are expected to be aware of their identity as, first, a man, and then a person of color.

In a 2017 study, titled *The Chosen Tokens*, conducted by Pertuz, 26 mid-level Latina Student Affairs Administrators were interviewed. Participants revealed a major theme in their careers was feeling like a “natural fit to misfit” (Pertuz, 2017, p. 135). Of the participants, 22 reported that the Student Affairs career started out positive and had a family feel. One participant shared that the decision to work in higher education “felt good with my spirit and soul” (Pertuz, 2017, p. 123). Despite these good feelings, the participants found that their gender, race, and ethnicity greatly impacted their experience, career path, and advancement opportunities. The same intersectionality of Latina and woman that made the participants a great candidate for entry-level positions also made them realize the difficulties of navigating a “predominantly White and male institutional culture” (Pertuz, 2017, p.136). The participants reported that their careers made a major shift from “natural fit to misfit” (Pertuz, 2017, p. 135). For the duration of their careers, participants “felt like an outsider” (Pertuz, 2017, p. 137) in “isolation” (Pertuz, 2017, p. 139).

Hannum et al. (2015) also found isolation as one of the barriers to leadership in their 35-participant all-women study. This study compared the perceived experiences of 20 White women and 15 women of color (nine African Americans, one Latina, two Native Americans, one Native American Latina, and two who identified as other). The participants, all senior-level administrators, discussed the negative aspects of the job including isolation, not fitting in, and not being heard. Women of color reported supports for leadership (such as formal leadership development) more than White women, but
were less likely to have a role model. Discouragement and sabotage were discussed by 55% of White women and by 66% of women of color. In terms of not fitting in/not being heard, considerably more women of color (40%) than White women (15%) reported this negative aspect. Women of color (33%) discussed isolation slightly more than White women (30%).

Isolation, exclusion, and lacking a sense of belonging are recurring themes among people of color who work in higher education (Chatman, 1991; Collins, 1986; Hannum et al., 2015; Pertuz, 2017; Scott, 2003; West, 2011). Described by West’s African American women participants as “physical seclusion” (West, 2011, p. 133), “physical reality of being separated” (West, 2011, p. 133), “segregated from the rest of the staff” (West, 2011, p. 133), or “inability to connect with . . . colleagues” (West, 2011, p. 133), isolation is a factor that impacts confidence and work performance. Documented in research and literature as early as 1991, African American women who participated in higher education studies stated that they felt “alienated” and “excluded from networks” (Chatman, 1991, p. 105). For African American women in higher education who are single, divorced, or lacking family support, dealing with isolation and loneliness is more difficult (Scott, 2003). Ultimately, it is the isolation within the workplace that causes an African American woman to feel a sense of not belonging. (Clayborne, 2006, p. 16).

Collins, Black Feminist Thought author, describes this type of experience as the “outsider within” (Collins, 1986, S14) for African American women.

As the “outsider within” (Collins, 1986) Student Affairs, African American women recognize, address, and embrace their multiple identities. The intersectionality of these identities is often a barrier and leads to a feeling of isolation. Oftentimes isolation is
reported more often in women of color than in White women (Hannum et al., 2015). Collectively, these negative aspects contribute to the type of experience African American women will have in their career as a Student Affairs practitioner.

The professional career of the African American woman leader within Student Affairs is complex and is often described as a negative experience (Mitchell, 2018). After interviews with 25 African American mid-level Student Affairs managers, Mitchell found that although their experience at a PWI included discrimination, disrespect, difficult choices regarding self-presentation and motherhood, isolation, and tokenism, the participants still wished to advance within the profession. The African American women in Mitchell’s study strategically planned to draw upon personal resources and strategies to advance (Research Question b). Advancement strategies include participating in mentoring and sponsorship and maintaining a prayer life that reinforced religion, spirituality, or faith. The findings of Mitchell’s (2018) research of African American women are parallel to a topic found in Pagan’s (2018) study. Pagan (2018) interviewed women Chief Student Affairs Officers to examine career trajectories and ambitions. Of Pagan’s ten participants, three were women of color; one a Latina and two who identified as African American woman. Pagan, like Mitchell, through interviews found that there are specific types of hard skills and soft skills needed to be an effective leader in Student Affairs.

Hylton’s (2012) study contributed to the literature regarding African American women in Student Affairs at PWIs by researching eight vice presidents. Aside of the ubiquitous challenge of racism, sexism, discrimination, and isolation, Hylton’s study identified other professional and personal challenges such as the sacrifices with one’s
personal life and family responsibilities. Several of the participants in Hylton’s study shared that having a husband and children of their own was a personal goal that was put on hold for the sake of a solid career. Similar to the participants in Mitchell’s (2018) study, Hylton’s participants expressed that motherhood (or lack thereof) was one of the most significant challenges.

When African American women decide to pursue the advancing of their career while raising a family, they tend to be labeled as “selfish” (Stewart, 2016, p. 84). Balancing family with work was also a theme found in Pagan’s study although she intentionally did not ask participants about family. Without being probed, Pagan’s participants naturally transitioned from careers to family roles and home responsibilities. For African American women, the “assumed split between the public sphere of paid employment and the private sphere of unpaid family responsibilities” (Collins, 2000, p. 47) has always been problematic. While some African American women are taught that “real women take care of families” (Collins, 2000, p. 47) and the home others struggle with being perceived as “less feminine” (Collins, 2000, p.47) by competing with their male counterparts in the workplace. Both views send a message to African American women that they are inseparable from their work and inferior to other sub-groups (McDole, 2017).

To help face the many challenges, professional African American women specifically in Student Affairs, have identified strategies for coping and career advancement. Until recently, “unfortunately, many of these success strategies [were] not empirically studied nor documented in scholarly literature” (Henry, 2010, p.3). Pagan’s study had two participants who identified as African American women; Giselle and
Evelyn. While Giselle spoke about the challenges of the vice president’s seat, Evelyn confidently stated that her next goal in her career was “a presidency” (Pagan, 2018, p. 72). The remaining participants (who are White and Latina) stated that they have no desire to advance into a higher position because (1) their current position is still challenging/interesting/able to provide a new learning experience, (2) there are too many changes to higher education and student affairs, (3) a higher level position may conflict with their motherhood/family responsibility, and/or (4) the role or skills needed in a higher position are unattractive. Pagan’s study is significant because it clearly lists future professional goals as well as lists reasons not to advance in Student Affairs. Career paths, next professional positions, and factors that contribute to both are an area of further exploration for other African American women currently in the field.

African American women who will either enter the field or advance in the future can benefit from advice given by a current Student Affairs practitioner. As part of a third research question in a 2014 study, Ford asked five participants three questions: (1) “What advice would you give to women in entry-level student affairs positions seeking to advance to SSAA roles?”; (2) “What advice would you give to women in mid-management student affairs positions seeking to advance to SSAA roles?”; and (3) “What advice would you give to women in masters’ level student affairs programs ultimately seeking to advance into SSAA roles?” (p. 107). Since Ford published only selected biographical information of her participants, there is no way to determine what advice the African American participants (if any) provided. Stewart asked her participants “based on your personal experience, share three pieces of advice you would offer to African American women who are considering and/or seeking leadership at a PWI?” (p. 134)
followed by “What advice, if any, was shared with you prior to starting a leadership role at a PWI or during your career at a PWI?” (p. 134).

The career path in Student Affairs for women and people of color is usually presented as a negative experience. Men of color are subjected to stereotypes and expected to understand cultural norms that they have little knowledge of. Women of color report that their multiple identities lead to exclusion, isolation and the feeling of being an outsider. In addition, African American women feel more isolated at work than White women are self-taught to exude only the skills that make them appear more pleasant as opposed to being an authentic leader. Some African American women who work in the field also find that their job causes challenges in their personal life. Motherhood and the responsibility of home come into question when career advancement is discussed.

**Unconscious Bias in Higher Education**

The lack of diversity found in the president and vice president positions impact the lack of diversity on campus within other influential positions of leadership. Theories found in psychology, sociology, and neuroscience discuss the behavior of the human brain. These disciplines explain that the brain of individuals is more likely than not to prefer another person that either (1) reminds one of themselves or (2) demonstrates compatibility (Jenkins, Macrae, & Mitchell, 2008; Jenkins & Mitchell, 2011; Rivera, 2012). After completing a case study involving elite professional service firms, Rivera (2012) concluded that the hiring process is based more on cultural fit and a candidate’s ability to create “an emotional spark of commonality” (p. 1017) with the evaluator. The decision-making process considered skills and abilities, but both were a secondary necessity. Rivera, Professor of Management and Organizations at Northwestern
University, Kellogg School of Management, researcher-writer and author, completed a 120-interview study on elite jobs and inequalities found in the hiring process prior to expanding her topic in her 2016 book titled *Pedigree* (Kadous, 2016; Rivera, 2016).

Rivera’s (2012) evidence, showing the recurring behavior of individuals, introduced the existence of unconscious bias (Hausman, 2012). Often referred to as subtle bias or implicit bias (American Bar Association, n.d.; Wesolowski, Luzadis, & Gerhardt, 2011), unconscious bias is the “platform upon which . . . unwitting discrimination rests” (Insight Education System, n.d., para. 1). Positions held “about others that are influenced by past experiences” (Insight Education System, n.d., para. 2) allow filters to form “that cause conclusions to be reached, about groups or ethnicities, by ways other than through active thought or reasoning” (Insight Education System, n.d., para. 2). The concept is significant because it first illustrates the ease of unintentional discrimination, stereotypes, and inequalities in organizations’ recruitment practices. The discrimination carries over to the interview process and makes “interactions awkward” (Hausman, 2012, p. 1349), which may cause candidates to perform poorly or below actual ability.

Considering the gender and race of the majority of college presidents and vice presidents, Rivera’s (2012) research may also explain how and why there are fewer “opportunities for candidates from traditionally underrepresented groups in the competition for elite jobs” (p. 1019). The presidents and vice president that identify as White and male are more likely to relate to, recruit, hire, and recommend for hire other Whites and other males that are similar to themselves (Jenkins & Mitchell, 2011; Jenkins et al., 2008; Rivera, 2012). These White males could potentially continue to hire other employees with whom they “connect” (Peterson, 2013). Collectively, because of personal
preference, this group of men could share an excessive amount of power on campus because they hold high positions of leadership (Jenkins et al., 2008; Jenkins & Mitchell, 2011; Rivera, 2012). Furthermore, this model of a leadership team supports and continues the notion of systemic racism, the influences held by White men that continue oppression, and, unequal power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Section III: African American Women

A Depiction of the 21st Century African American Woman

African American women account for 6% of the American population and 13% of all women in the country (United States Census Bureau, 2018b). African American women identify prominently with the Christian, Protestant faith and belong to several denominations (Labbe-Debose, 2012; Masci, Mohamed, & Smith, 2018). Holding a status of a “double minority” African American women experience life differently from African American men and extremely different from other, specifically White women (Burkley, 2010; Pettiford, 2012). Similar in experience to African American men is the reality that African American women were often historically overlooked. Like White women pre-feminist movements, African American women were unheard. Today, African American are nearly invisible in many social, professional, and educational settings (Burkley, 2010). As an “outsider within” (Collins, 1986) many organizations African American women develop a “special standpoint on self, family, and society” (Collins, 1986, S14) as well as education and careers.

There are more than 20 million African American females in the country, 10.7 million of whom work in the labor force (United States Census Bureau, 2017; United States Department of Labor, 2019). African American women are “increasingly multiple
job-holders and have the highest labor participation rates in comparison to other women” (Banks, 2019; Black Women’s Roundtable, 2019, p. 9; United States Department of Labor, 2019). Among their titles are business owner and entrepreneurs. Firms that are owned by African American women have grown significantly over the last two decades. Between 1997 and 2014 the number of firms grew 296% and their revenues increased 265% (Status of Women, n.d.).

Many African American women, although among the most educated group in the country, have not experienced advancement in their careers or income (Austin, 2018). Lagging other women, the African American woman who works full-time has a median annual salary of $34,000 (DuMonthier, Childers, & Milli, 2016). There continues to be a large wage and income gap between women and men; women earn only 80 cents to each dollar of a man (United States Census Bureau, 2018a). The gap between the earnings of African American women and White, non-Hispanic men is larger (Hinchliffe, 2019; United States Census Bureau, 2018a). Whereas a White man earns a dollar, an African American woman earns 61 cents (Hinchliffe, 2019; United States Census Bureau, 2018a). If the trends of the wage and income gap are to continue, African American women will wait 105 years for equal pay (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2016a, 2016b). With the slow progress in the gender wage and income gap, African American women can expect to be paid at the same rate of White men in the year 2124 (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2016a, 2016b).

Despite social challenges, financial barriers, and often being disciplined at rates higher than that of other girls, African American women continue to pursue an education beyond secondary school. Between 2004 and 2014, the number of African American
women who obtained a degree increased 24 percent (DuMonthier et al., 2016). African American women show a commitment to their education as they continue to obtain professional degrees, terminal degrees and doctorates (NCES, 2016). Since the beginning of collection of data in 1976, more than 125,000 African American women have obtained a doctorate degree (NCES, 2016b). In 2015, African American women accounted for nearly 4.93% of all doctorate degrees conferred (NCES, 2016b). When disaggregated by race/ethnicity and gender, Whites (male and female) ranked first and second earning 61% of all doctorate degrees, Non-Resident Alien males ranked third earning 7.6% of all doctorate degrees, and Asian Females earned 6.08% of all doctorate degrees ranking fourth (NCES, 2016b). African American women ranked fifth in number of degrees earned (NCES, 2016b). In addition, African American women make up 3% of the 1.6 million faculty members employed at degree-granting American universities (NCES, n.d.).

**African American Women as Transformational Leaders in American Education**

African American women have always served a vital role in American education both as students and as leaders. Among the most notable are pioneers Ruby Nell Bridges Hall (first African American girl to integrate into an all-white public elementary school during racial segregation), Lucy Ann Stanton (first African American women to earn a higher education certificate), Sarah Jane Woodson Early (first African American woman to become a college instructor), Mary Jane Patterson (first African American woman to earn a bachelor’s degree), Jane Matilda Bolin (first African American woman to earn a Yale Law Degree), Rebecca Lee (first African American woman to earn a medical degree), Mildred Fay Jefferson (first African American woman to graduate from Harvard
Medical School), and Lillian Lincoln Lambert (first African American woman to graduate from Harvard Business School).

Mary Jane McLeod Bethune is one of the most famous African American women leaders in education as she founded a school specifically for African American girls in 1904. The Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls later merged with Cookman Institution to become Bethune-Cookman, a co-ed high school and eventually grew into a community college. Bethune, a child of former slaves, started her tenure as an African American woman college president in 1923, an accomplishment unheard of at that time. Today Bethune-Cookman is recognized as a private historically Black university (HBCU). As a transformational leader Mary Jane McLeod Bethune continues to be an inspiration for 21st century African American women who work in education.

African American Women in American Education as Transformational Leaders from within Student Affairs

Following the trend of transformational leaders in higher education was the first known African American woman to work in Student Affairs. Lucy Diggs Slowe became Howard University’s first Dean of Women in 1922 (Hevel, 2016). Subsequently, she was the first African American member of the National Association of Deans of Women (NADW) and was influential in the creation of the National Association for College Women (NACW) and the National Association of Women’s Deans and Advisors of Colored Schools (NAWDACS). (Hevel, 2016). The works of Lucy Diggs Slowe and her philosophy of education shaped the present-day standard for African American women in Student Affairs (Herdlein, Cali, & Dina, 2008). As an advocate of equal rights and Black
Feminism, Slowe professed that “African American women needed experience in working for the common good, decision-making, citizenship on both the local and national political levels, leadership, and internationalism” (Herdlein et al., 2008, p. 295) along with “careful career guidance to alter the narrow choices provided in the past” (Herdlein et al., 2008, p. 296).

Today, African American women are working in Students Affairs as transformational leaders and making choices to excel. Wesaw and Sponsler (2014) found that overall 22% of vice presidents or Chief Student Affairs Officers aspire to advance to college president. The ACPS reported that only 5% of respondents stated that immediately prior to presidency, their position was a senior executive in Student Affairs (Gagliardi et al., 2017). For this reason, few African American women hold the title of college president, specifically earned by travelling a non-traditional path through Student Affairs (Gagliardi et al., 2017; Humphrey, 2012). To better understand the journey from Student Affairs to college president among African American women, Humphrey (2012) studied ten community college leaders using a phenomenological approach. In the study, Humphrey (2012) found that the participants felt their background in Student Affairs required them to “establish greater credibility” (p. 162). The women also reported challenges of balancing family, working in PWI, underpay, time constraints, and discrimination.

Considering the gender and racial composition of both VPSA (47% women, 13.7% African American) and college presidents (30.1% women, 7.9% African American), the ACPS and CSAO report calls attention to the desire and ability to advance to presidency despite traditional career pathway expectations of a solid
background in academic affairs. Humphrey’s participants beat the odds of success and overcame hurdles to maintain a position of influence. These phenomenal African American women in American higher education are unique transformational leaders who achieved the presidency by way of a senior position within Student Affairs.

**Intended career paths, progressions, and trajectory.** Student Affairs is known as the “hidden profession” (Richmond & Sherman, 1991, p. 8) which explains why so few students know of the field as a career option. Graduating high school students rarely set out to become a professional in Student Affairs (Fernell, 2010). In addition, there is not one absolute undergraduate degree or major that leads directly to graduate study or a permanent position within the field (Burgess, Corbett, Ford, Marshall, & Peters, 2018). Most Student Affairs practitioners enter the field by way of an undergraduate college experience that sparks a small fire within their soul or encouragement by another professional in the field (Burgess et al., 2018; Conneely, 2002; Gergely, 2014; Long, 2012). The undergraduate experience, either working in a department on-campus or participating in a student organization, introduces the student to careers in the field almost by accident (Hunter, 1992) and “happenstance” (Gergely, 2014, p. 16).

With a large number of professionals entering the field by accident and happenstance, research was conducted to examine the career paths of leaders in Student Affairs. Hammonds (2012) researched the career profiles of ten African American Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAO). In the mixed-method study, Hammond (2012) found that the participants averaged eight career moves before taking office as a SSAO. Hammonds’ average of eight career moves is 33% higher than that of Biddix’s (2011) findings. Biddix’s (2011) study examined the career paths of 250 SSAO, 151 men and 99
women, at 4-year institutions. Biddix’s participants, on average, completed 20 years of professional experience prior to becoming SSAO. Hammonds’ participants, on average, obtained the SSAO seat after 18 years of professional work. The journey to SSAO for one participant (participant G) in Hammond’s study was a shocking 31 years. Recognizing that many professionals in the field did not intend to enter a career in this field indicates that African American women are doing so at a disadvantage because there may be a clear career path that will result in a leadership position. Unfortunately, the information was not available to guide them accordingly.

**An issue of race and ethnicity.** Once in the field of Student Affairs, African American women face a never-ending challenge: their race and ethnicity. Identifying as African American while working in higher education automatically warrants the need to “work twice as hard [as others] to be accepted” (Scott, 2016, p. 110) in a professional setting to ever “be in a position of leadership” (Humphrey, 2012, p. 125). After completing a phenomenological study of ten Student Affairs administrators that became university presidents, Humphrey (2012) found that race was still very much a challenge for African American women. Although other burdens exist, race was described by one participant, as the “beast of burden” (Humphrey, 2012, p. 123) meaning that it will continue to be an unavoidable obstacle on the journey to leadership for African American women.

**An issue of gender equity: An added layer.** The average demographics found in the American College President Study of 2017 reiterated the 30-year pattern of inequality regarding gender. The continued disparity of the ACPS motivated several women to coordinate a meeting and have roundtable discussions about this pressing issue (ACE,
n.d.-c). By the end of the meeting, goals were set and a clear mission was stated: to advance women in higher education to leadership positions. ACE then announced the launching of “Move the Needle,” a national campaign led by ACE’s Women Network Executive Council, aimed to increase the number of women presidents on college campuses (ACE, n.d.-d). The ultimate goal was to have women become one-half of all the presidents in United States colleges and universities by the year 2030. Of the 1,546 presidents surveyed, about 30% were women, 7.9% were African American, and less than 3% were African American women.

**Personality and perception.** Personality types play a large role in any leader’s ability to perform effectively. For African American women leaders, personality type is found in (1) actual personality type, (2) one’s own perception of personality type, (3) stereotypes given to women through “descriptive gender bias” (Wesolowski et al., 2011, p. 37) and (4) the personality type automatically given by anyone that is not an African American woman (Wiggins, 2017). Like other women leaders, African American women first address the stereotype of being perceived as “bossy” when their male counterpart is “the boss” (Roy, 2014; Snyder, 2015; SocialVoice, 2013). These women must also address the fact that a strong woman may be perceived as a “pushy, selfish, vain, show off” while a man can be seen only as “persuasive, dedicated, neat, and smooth” (SocialVoice, 2013). These same labels that have attempted to define women leaders are amplified for African American women. In addition to the usual and customary strong-woman-personality claims, African American women leaders are perceived as “aggressive” (Collins, 1991, p. 74) and “unfeminine” (Collins, 1991, p. 74).
In addition to personality, women leaders are identified and evaluated by leadership style and awareness of self. In her 2009 writing, Stang (2009) argued that all leaders (with no regard to gender and race) must recognize their skills and level of emotional intelligence through the application of inventories and assessments as a mode of self-awareness, development, and improvement. When strong African American women leaders are already viewed in a negative light (once for gender, twice for race, and a third time because of an unbecoming personality), there is a greater need to understand how a leadership style, emotional intelligence, and self-awareness can impact the advancing of her career. An African American woman leader with a personality seen as unappealing regardless of her leadership style and level of emotional intelligence, is less likely to be able to advance into leadership positions. In addition, to advance in her career, there may be pressures to change her overall behavior, presence, performance, and expression of self by “shifting” (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p.1) toward a more White and inward leader (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Addressing “behavioral conformity imposed on African-American women” (Collins, 1991, p. 97) in all professional settings is a requirement to advancing them into leadership.

In a quantitative study using Collins’ Black Feminist Thought as a theoretical framework, Miles (2012) surveyed 671 Student Affairs professionals. Miles’ study (2012) sought to examine the status of African American women in higher education and compared that status to Student Affairs professionals of another race/ethnicity and a different gender. Miles’ research confirmed that African American women are less likely to hold a senior level position within Student Affairs regardless of their qualifications.
Family. Of the trends found in the literature, one is described as more of a barrier than others. An African American woman’s commitment and obligation to her family is likely to interfere with the progress of her career in higher education. Many African American women view family as a staple to life as the concept derives from two very influential sources: faith/religion and the plight of slavery. The slavery experience of her ancestors dramatically shapes the African American woman’s belief about self and family. Like many other groups that continue to be marginalized, African American women fully understand that “the high-level of importance attributed to family, defines the expectations placed” on them (Luna, 2015, p. 40).

As one of the most active religious groups in the nation, the faith and (mostly Abrahamic) religious beliefs drives the decisions of African American women (Labbe-DeBose, 2012; Pew Research, 2009). The African American woman has a faith and religion that is so “inextricably woven into her Black culture” (Labbe-DeBose, 2012, para. 13) because of her experience with “triple [oppression] of racism, sexism, and classism” (Labbe-DeBose, 2012, para. 15). It was the faith of the African American women that allowed them to persevere through the mistreatment and continue to hope for “relief, reprieve, resolution, and redemption” (Labbe-DeBose, 2012, para. 15). It is this type of faith and adherence to an Abrahamic religion that teaches that one of the most important (and oldest) commandments given to women was to “be fruitful and multiply… to fill” the Earth (Genesis 1:28).

Dyer (2004) found that some women in university settings hear from colleagues two bold warnings about careers and success. The first warning is “do not get married” and the second is “do not plan to have children because of the high demands of the job in
the academy.” The demands of an active Student Affairs professional usually calls for work to be done outside of “the routine nine to five” (Stimpson, 2009). Assuming an African American woman decides against having children in hopes of advancing her career, she has now “sacrificed children and family for her profession” (Dyer, 2004, p. 25) on one hand and on the other hand, does not have all the desires of her heart. In the social context, this woman could be seen as worthless because she is not living up to her cultural potential because she failed to fulfill her “traditional womanly duties” (Collins, 1991, p. 74).

For the African American woman that desires to start a family while working in Student Affairs, there is a decision-making process to address. First, a decision must be made and the woman asks herself, “Should I consider bearing children in my younger years? Or should I ‘play biological roulette’ (Dyer, 2004, p. 25) and wait until I am a well-established professional?” Regardless of the age of the mother during the pregnancy, the next decision to be made concerns the time of year to conceive and give birth. A woman must ask herself, “Do I allow the pregnancy to just happen naturally? Or should I consider the university’s normal “optimal and worst time to give birth?” (Dyer, 2004, p. 25)

As a working professional, the African American woman has a day of work that is fulfilling and satisfying yet emotionally draining at times. She may be forced to deal with discrimination or a hostile work environment in the workplace since pregnant women and working mothers are discouraged (Dyer, 2004). After the work day, the African American woman goes home to start her “second shift” (Hochschild & Machung, 2003; Settles, Pratt & Buchanan, 2008). Working, caring for a family, and attempting to
discover a “bogus balance” (Maloney, 2015) between work and home life while ignoring her own self-care, the African American woman often starts to have chronic guilt because she is “spending too much time away from home” (Collins, 1991, p. 74). The guilt that an active working African American mother harbors is a feeling that is not new to her. The issue of guilt derives heavily from slavery when African American women left their own children to be nanny and Mammy to the children of their white slave owners (Collins, 1991).

**Mentorship and support networks.** The mentoring relationship dates back to Homer’s “Odyssey” in the 8th century BC (Fagles, 1996; Greek Mythology, n.d.). In this epic piece of literature, Odysseus, the main character goes off to fight in the Trojan War and leaves his son, Telmachus, with a respected friend (Fagles, 1996; Greek Mythology, n.d.). The friend is a wiser, more experienced, and knowledgeable man named Mentor (Fagles, 1996; Greek Mythology, n.d.). From this character’s actions, the words “mentor” and “mentoring” are used today.

Mentoring relationships are beneficial to the career advancement of women, especially those in Student Affairs (Blackhurst, 2000b; Jarnagin, 2010). Mentoring, a relationship in which a mentor aids in the development of a protégé is found in both formal and informal settings (Blackhurst, 2000b; Jarnagin, 2010). The relationship is mutually beneficial for several reasons. In addition to professional development, a mentor offers psychosocial support (Jarnagin, 2010). While the protégé learns from the mentor, the mentor may experience a “boomerang effect” where he/she learns how to address another problem outside of this mentoring relationship (Dickinson, Jankot & Gracon, 2009). Although mentoring is growing in popularity, women in the last two decades
experienced trouble in identifying mentors who can assist them in developing professionally to move up the career ladder (Bhatta & Washington, 2003; Ragins & Cotton, 1999).

Mentors are part of a larger support network that African American women need to advance. Educator and administrator at Florida State College in Jacksonville, Dr. Marie Foster Gnage advocates for support networks and professes that such systems help women “achieve the leadership positions that they want to achieve” (ACE, 2012, 0:46). Gnage, an African American woman, who in the past served as chair of the ACE Network Executive Board, is experienced and well-versed on the topic. The presence of support networks for African American women, especially those that include other African American women, is vital to advancing into leadership. With a strong support network, African American women can “find a voice,” “affirm one another,” empower each other, pass along “knowledge essential to survival,” gain confidence, emote, and reflect on commonalities and shared experiences (Collins, 1991, 96-97). Unfortunately, many African American women administrators in higher education do not benefit from a mentoring relationship as they are almost non-existent (Miller & Vaughn, 1997; Woods, 2001; Patton & Harper, 2003; Wolfman, 1997).

Understanding the true impact of mentoring on African American women in Student Affairs is challenging as there is a small amount of published research on the topic. Blackhurst (2000b) completed a study that examined 307 women in Student Affairs. The study identified whether there was the presence of a mentor or not. The presence of a mentor (or absence of one) was the constant used to determine role conflict, role ambiguity, organizational commitment, career satisfaction, and sex discrimination.
Of the participants, 82% identified as White and only 13% identified as African American. In addition, Blackhurst presented findings of two groups: White women and women of color. Blackhurst’s aggregated data hinders the review of literature specifically for African American women but found that mentoring “may benefit White women to a greater extent” (p. 582) than it does for women of color because women of color without mentors experienced significantly more discrimination. Scott (2003), like Blackhurst, found that mentoring is an essential component of career success as a Student Affairs practitioner. Scott’s (2003) study also introduced the need for women to “build collegiality” (p. 94).

**Trends in the Field**

For thousands of years, leadership in any field has been associated with men. In American higher education, the number of men in high leadership positions outweighs the number of women. In addition, White men are more prevalent in senior leadership positions than both women and people of color. The history of Student Affairs starts with appointing a leadership role to a White male who did not support gender equity in education. Since that time, the profession of Student Affairs grew remarkably with the help of legal proceedings, educational initiatives, national professional organizations, and publications such as The Cardinal Principles of Education and The Student Personnel Point of View.

**New Directions for Research**

The qualitative method approach, specifically phenomenology, is used to study professional women in higher education (Brown, 2015). In a 2015 study, Brown used an explanatory sequential design to understand the selection process of women faculty. After
inviting 655 women to complete her survey, Brown collected data from 198 participants by conducting interviews to better understand the selection process. With a 30.23% response rate, Brown analyzed the data using a multinomial logistic regression. The qualitative portion of the research was found in the 18 semi-structured interviews that were conducted with six participants. Each participant completed a three-part interview sequence, each, on average, was an hour in length. Brown’s study is noteworthy for two main reasons. First, Brown’s study used a logistic regression as opposed to a multivariate analysis technique. This approach gave Brown “more flexibility as variables do not have to be normally distributed, linearly related or have equal variance but could be continuous or discrete” (p. 39). Second, Brown’s phenomenological process provides thorough and in-depth findings on a large sample size and complements that data with interviews of a purposeful sub-sample.

The lack of information available from various studies in recent years that specifically analyzes the emerging themes that affect the advancement of African American women in leadership positions within Student Affairs compels scholars to conduct research on this unique topic in a distinctive way. One approach would be for scholars to examine the topic and emerging themes by using a phenomenological design and multiple guiding theories, similar to that found in Brown’s (2015) study. The phenomenological approach allows for participants to reveal meaning of experiences and the researcher to find the essence of the experience.

**Career Paths Traveled by Women Leaders in Higher Education**

Investigating the theme of women’s careers in higher education, in a 2014 dissertation titled *The Journey to the Top: Women’s Paths to the University Presidency*
Klotz studied ten college presidents. In Klotz’ study one participant identified as a woman of color. Klotz (2014) found that participants believed that their careers were positively impacted by mentors, sponsors, and encouragement. Klotz’s (2014) findings are consistent with those of Blackhurst (2000b), Jarnagin (2010), and Tenney (2014). Klotz (2014) also identified the paths to presidency of these women listing the most common as the faculty route, the practitioner route, or the corporate route. In an earlier study, Latimore (2009) studied eight African American women presidents who ranged from 50 to 60 years old. Six of the eight participants ascended to presidency by way of teacher, instructor, or faculty member as well. According to Klotz (2014) “there are other areas of future research to consider, particularly as a younger generation begins to obtain senior-level leadership roles within higher education” (p.172). Klotz (2014) continued to say that leadership styles or expectations may change within the upcoming years and suggests “future studies on the career trajectory for women . . . one professional step below the president (i.e., provost, executive vice president) are needed as each new generation of leaders emerges” (p. 172).

Pagan (2018) followed Klotz’s (2014) suggestion and interviewed ten women Vice Presidents that are one-step below the president. In her study, Pagan used narratives inquiry to learn about career trajectories and professional aspirations. The participants’ stories provide four themes: mentorship, strategies for advancement, the role of the family, and being a woman in Student Affairs. Pagan’s (2018) study was influenced by the work of Klotz and the American Council on Education’s College President Study published in 2017. Literature regarding the underrepresentation of women in higher education is relatively new and limited. Research has yet to completely build on the
literature of Klotz’s and Pagan’s focus on careers of women in higher education, especially for African American women.

**Summary**

Chapter 2 provided a literature review in three sections that discussed the demographics of leaders in higher education, the field of Student Affairs, and African American women. Chapter 3 describes the methodology for this study. The chapter explains the study as a phenomenological qualitative design and provides research questions. The chapter continues with sections that discuss data collection through semi-structured interviews, participants’ selections, and role of the researcher.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Chapter 2 discussed literature and trends that emerged regarding African American women as leaders in higher education. This study was conducted to expand on the literature that addresses being an African American woman working in Student Affairs and the strategies for advancing into leadership positions. Chapter 3 describes the methodology for this phenomenological study that was used to research the advancing of African American women into leadership positions within Student Affairs. The chapter includes the research design, over-arching research questions, sub-research questions, rationale for the methodology, how participants were selected, an introduction of the participants, data sources, description of the setting, data analysis, as well as the role of the researcher, delimitations, and limitations. The role of the researcher includes a personal story of the researcher’s career path.

Theoretical Frameworks

The uniqueness of the experience of African American women in Student Affairs calls for two theoretical frameworks: Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Black Feminist Thought (BFT). From CRT the researcher acknowledges that there is systemic racism that impacts the career experience of an African American woman in higher education. In addition, CRT provides the intersectionality component that recognizes the experience of the participants (as a woman, as an African American, and most importantly as an African American woman). The intersectionality experience shapes the interview questions and provides analytical lenses when coding the interview responses. Linked to the intersection of African American and woman is the second theoretical framework, Black Feminist Thought (BFT). With BFT, the study considers the overlapping identities
of African American women and the stereotypes that are attached to them (Collins, 1990).

**Restatement of Research Questions**

The underrepresentation and advancing of African American women as leaders within Student Affairs was studied and guided by the following two overarching questions and sub-questions:

1. How do African American women leaders in Student Affairs describe and perceive their professional journey?

2. What are the professional trajectories and professional ambitions of African American women Student Affairs professionals?

   a. How do African American women leaders within Student Affairs explain their career advancement?

   b. To what extent are African American women leaders within Student Affairs interested in moving up to another level?

   c. What strategies have African American women leaders within Student Affairs implemented for their career advancement?

   d. What role, if any, have mentors played in the professional advancement of African American women leaders within Student Affairs?

**Rationale for Selection of the Qualitative Phenomenological Method**

The underrepresentation of African American women as leaders within Student Affairs is a new “phenomenon” (West, 2011, p. 48). Deriving from the Greek word *phainomenon* and *phainein* (meaning to show, shine, or appear), phenomenon is an impressive or extraordinary observable fact, event, or occurrence that manifests itself
(Phenomenon, 2018; Webster’s New World, 2003). To best understand the what and how of the “social phenomena” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 3) of the experience of African American women in leadership positions within Student Affairs, a qualitative research method was used for this study. In order to gather data that effectively “describe[s] the lived experiences of . . . several” (Creswell, 2014, p. 14) individual African American women leaders and “how they perceived” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 17) their experience, the researcher utilized a phenomenological approach. German philosopher and seminal author of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, emphasized the importance of connecting awareness, consciousness, and meanings (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Cousin to philosophy, the phenomenological approach allows African American women leaders who participate in the study to deliver “a complex account” (Phenomenology, 2013) of awareness while providing a first-hand story (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The phenomenological research study also provides the researcher the opportunity to explore in-depth the lived experience of African American women. When inquiring about the how and why of the Student Affairs career experience, having a clear (agreed upon) meaning of the experience gave the researcher data that is rich (in quality) and thick (in quantity) which makes for a more valid and trustworthy research study (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

**Participant Selection**

The African American women who met the criteria (based on education and experience) were mid-level professional. Although this criterion is specific, the study required a population broad enough to have viable participants for a phenomenological study. Positions identified as mid-level and senior-level vary between institutions.
This study also sought to include the AVPs. According to NASPA, professional members consist of four categories: (1) Chief Student Affairs Officers & AVP; (2) new, mid-level, and senior-level professionals; (3) students, and (4) faculty (NASPA, n.d.-e). Of the 15,000 members from 2,100 institutions within the association, 60% are in the second category, new, mid, or senior level professionals (NASPA, 2019). A portion of this category is the target of this study. The remaining members are Chief Student Affairs Officers and Assistant Vice Presidents (19%), students (19%), and faculty (2%) (NASPA, 2019). As part of the largest population in NASPA, five mid-level and senior-level women were participants in this study.

The desired number of participants in this phenomenological study was four to six, (Creswell, 1998; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Hagaman & Wutich, 2017; Starks & Trinidad, 2007) and sharing a number of participants that is similar in size to maintain consistency with qualitative studies listed in the review of literature (Starzyk, 2013). Utilizing a personal network of educated professional African American women, I solicited volunteers and nominations to participate in the study. The invitation was sent to African American women who hold mid-level and senior/AVP-level positions that include serving as “scholars and educators working within housing and residence life . . . student activities, counseling, career development . . . enrollment management, graduate preparation . . . and retention and assessment” (NASPA, n.d.-a, para. 3). Women at these levels and working within these functional areas were purposively selected because they have both substantial previous professional experience and future career possibilities (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007).
Participants were invited to this study after confirming that a set of criteria was met. The four criteria for inclusion were: (1) self-identify as a cisgender woman; (2) self-identify as Black or African American; (3) have at least three years of professional full-time experience as a Student Affairs practitioner at the mid-level or senior/AVP-level; and (4) have earned at least a master’s degree. Five participants were included in this study. All participants were assured that confidentiality would be maintained.

**Pseudonyms**

A list of pseudonyms was created to maintain the confidentiality of the study by protecting the identities of the participants and to pay homage and give dedication. The list contains the name of my mother and an additional 12 women (all my blood relatives) who were most influential in my own life at an early age. These 13 women poured into me love, support, hope, encouragement, sass and class, God, Jesus, a “lady-like” demeanor, confidence, recipes, Black history, and a little feminism. Of these thirteen women, two passed away within the same year of completing this dissertation. Additionally, only four of these women lived to see the completion of this dissertation. The 13 names of these inspirational women were combined to create five pseudonyms. I assigned each of the five pseudonyms to a participant. The participants of this study were given the pseudonyms of Jesyell, Lidess, Mardces, Shylara, and Locille.

1. Jesyell represents Jessie “Nanna” Rodgers Downing (my paternal grandmother), Sybil Elise Pink Downing (my mother who passed away seven months before the completion of this dissertation) and Elma McTeer (my paternal great-aunt).
2. Lidess represents Lilly Mae “Mamaw” Plummer (my maternal great-grandmother) and Odessa Brown Pink (my maternal grandmother).

3. Mardces represents Mammie Brown (my maternal great-aunt), Cordie Wilson (my maternal great-aunt), and Frances Marie “BB” Pink (my maternal aunt, the oldest of seven children).

4. Shylara represents Shirley “Stormy” Fox Crea (my maternal cousin), Charyl “Cheerio” Elizabeth Pink (my maternal cousin, the oldest granddaughter who passed away one month before the completion of this dissertation), and Barbara Etta “Babbs” Meeks (my paternal aunt who was like a grandmother to me).

5. Locille represents Lois Marie “Lolo” Pink-Chapple (my maternal aunt) and Lucille “Scoots” Price (my maternal cousin).

Vignettes of Phenomenal Women

Five phenomenal women participated in this study. To introduce the participants and give context to their journey, vignettes are provided. To keep anonymity, pseudonyms were given to each participant and identifying information has been removed. The participants ranged in age from 25 to 60 years and their professional years of experience span from three years to over 30 years.

Jesyell. Participant number one is Jesyell. Jesyell is between 30 and 35 years of age. Preferred pronouns for Jesyell are she/her/hers/herself. Jesyell was one of the Housing staff at a Hispanic serving institution with 25,000 students. She has six years of professional full-time service in the field, a Bachelor in Arts in English from a private research university and a Master in Counseling from a private university. Jesyell is one of
several team members in her unit that is (organizationally) three professional steps away from the highest position in the department. Currently, Jesyell is single and has no biological children, but supports and provides for several family members. She notes that her mother is her best friend, that she has a close-knit large blended-family, and is an active church-member. At the time of the interview Jesyell wore a natural hairstyle.

**Lidess.** Participant number two is Lidess. I was introduced to Lidess two years ago at a women’s leadership conference. After that first meeting we developed a professional friendship. Lidess works in the Career Center at a private Christian institution where she guides students and alumni in identifying majors, exploring careers, and completing personal assessments. She works at the same university where she earned her Master in Counseling and Student Development. Lidess received her Bachelor’s degree from a small, private liberal arts college that she describes as “prestigious” and one that sets “high expectations” for its students. Lidess identifies as a non-denominational Christian, is between 25 and 30 years of age, is married to her husband, and has no children.

**Mardces.** Participant number three is Mardces. Mardces “has been in the game [of education] for 30 years” and provided an extensive resume. She stated that the resume was shortened because she only included work experiences that occurred within the last ten years and significant information. Although her degrees were earned more than 10 years ago, Mardces included them on her resume. Mardces earned a terminal degree in education. Mardces’s work in Student Affairs has focused on career counseling and development. She works with other departments and committees on campus to offer her
professional expertise. She regards her professional networks of friends as her extended family. Mardce is between 55 and 60 years of age.

**Shylara.** Participant number four is Shylara. Shylara is between the ages of 35 and 40 years and serves as a director at a state college. This directorship supports the office of financial aid. In her role Shylara provides the college with oversight for the compliance and reporting of funded awards, federal drawdowns cash management, and Oracle PeopleSoft configuration and implementation. She also develops budgets for grants and contracts and provides technical assistance to grant staff. Her institution has more than 40,000 students across multiple campuses. One-quarter of the students at this institution identify as African American. In her position, she reports directly to an associate vice president and leads three staff members and two paraprofessionals. Second shift at home for Shylara includes mothering a pre-teen gifted and talented daughter, growing her marriage, serving at her church, and volunteering at several non-profits. Prior to becoming a director, Shylara earned two degrees: an Associate in Arts from a community college and a Bachelor of Science in Business Management and Marketing from a private nonprofit liberal arts and sciences college. Shylara completed a Master of Business Administration online from an accredited program while in her current position.

**Locille.** Participant number five is Locille. Locille is an assistant director in Student Financial Services at a very large state university. Of her 12 years of professional experience in higher education, 11 years focused on student Financial Aid and financial literacy across three universities. Additionally, Locille has experience in academic advising, student development, and program management. She is the only participant that has earned two masters. In addition, Locille completed her undergraduate degree in four
years, beating the odds of today’s traditional student. At the time of this study, Locille was unmarried and had no children. She is between 30 and 35 years of age.

**Previous Positions of Participants**

Table 1 provides a listing of positions held by the participants prior their current role. Pagan (2018) provided a listing of positions for her participants to show that there was not “a clear or direct path” (p. 62) to the CSAO seat, but instead a variety of experiences that led to their success. This study utilizes this table to show more about the profile of the participants. While the career paths of all the participants are different, it is noteworthy that three out of the five participants started in the field because of a student assistant position.

Table 1. Previous Positions of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Positions (reverse chronological order)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Jesyell</td>
<td>Housing Coordinator (current position)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Facilitated Group Dialog for African American women</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Residence Life Community Director</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Residence Life Advisor</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>NASPA Annual Conference Presentation</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate Assistant</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>NASPA Regional Conference Presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>NASPA Annual Conference Presentation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>NASPA Undergraduate Fellow</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lead Student Assistant, Black Students Resource Center</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Special Project Coordinator</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Student Assistant, Black Students Resource Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Positions</td>
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<td>---</td>
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<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Lidess</td>
<td>Career Counselor &amp; Diversity Ambassador (current position)&lt;br&gt;Completed master’s degree&lt;br&gt;Graduate Assistant&lt;br&gt;Career Counseling, Graduate Intern&lt;br&gt;Housing Activities Coordinator&lt;br&gt;Graduate Assistant, Student Success&lt;br&gt;Residential Counselor&lt;br&gt;International Journalist&lt;br&gt;Resident Life Community Leader&lt;br&gt;Student Caller, Annual Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mardces</td>
<td>Career Counselor (current position)&lt;br&gt;Employment Specialist&lt;br&gt;Program Coordinator/Instructor&lt;br&gt;Adjunct Faculty&lt;br&gt;Head Counselor&lt;br&gt;Coordinator, Counselor, College, &amp; Career Center&lt;br&gt;Counselor/Advisor, Teacher Credential Program&lt;br&gt;Assistant Director, Credential Program&lt;br&gt;Credential Advisor&lt;br&gt;Adjunct Faculty&lt;br&gt;Research Assistant&lt;br&gt;Program Coordinator, Academic Advance&lt;br&gt;Coordinator, Summer Bridge&lt;br&gt;Summer Resident Advisor&lt;br&gt;Summer Bridge Teaching Assistant&lt;br&gt;Tutor&lt;br&gt;Student Assistant, Learning Resource Center&lt;br&gt;Student Assistant, Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Shylara</td>
<td>Adjunct Faculty (current position)&lt;br&gt;Director (current position)&lt;br&gt;Project Accounting Officer&lt;br&gt;Resource Development Project Specialist&lt;br&gt;Fund Development Manager&lt;br&gt;Planning &amp; Development Coordinator&lt;br&gt;Business Manager&lt;br&gt;Account Technician&lt;br&gt;Administrative Assistant&lt;br&gt;Entered college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Locille</td>
<td>Instructor (current position)&lt;br&gt;Assistant Director (current position)&lt;br&gt;Assistant Director&lt;br&gt;Student Financial Services Counselor&lt;br&gt;Financial Aid Administrator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Sources

Using phenomenology as a guide, the study collected data from documents and semi-structured interviews. Participants provided their current resume prior to interviews. The resumes were used to understand their career paths and to start the interview conversation. The phenomenological method emphasizes the importance of interviews as the primary method of collecting data (Bevans, 2014). In this study, the structure of the interview provided “a backdrop of context” (Bevans, 2014, p. 139) and explored the many aspects of the experience in detail (p. 140). In addition, the interviews focused on the perspective of an African American woman as it relates to her individual career path and the meaning of her experience.

Career Interview Questions

The research in this study is an extension of the works of Pagan’s 2018 study titled The Career Trajectory and Ambitions of Women Chief Student Affairs Officers. As such, it utilized interview questions found in Pagan’s 2018 study. Pagan’s interviews strategically asked questions that addressed job duties, responsibilities, career paths, and skills. In the original study, Pagan’s participants varied in race and ethnicity. All of the women in Pagan’s study held the position of Chief Student Affairs Officer. This study focused on African American women who are in mid-level and senior-level/AVP positions. Pagan’s (2018) interview questions were modified to apply to the population of this study.

Prior to asking the first interview question, the researcher verbally encouraged participants to provide full and detailed answers that covered specific events, experiences, and information. This practice allowed the researcher to capture and record a
full story as opposed to relying on personal communications that occurred prior to interviews. Each participant was reminded that their personal story as an African American woman would be included in a published dissertation but their names would be kept confidential.

1. Can you walk me through your resume?
   a. Tell me about the jobs/experiences that have led you to your present position.
   b. Tell me about any formal training that has led you to your present position.
   c. Tell me about any informal training that has led you to your present position.
   d. How did you get started in this field?

2. Tell me about your duties/functions/responsibilities at your current institution (both positive and negative).
   a. Can you walk me through a typical day/week?

3. As an African American woman, what particular qualifications or hard and soft skills are important to be effective in university leadership within Students Affairs? Why?
   a. How did you come to develop these qualifications or skills?

4. Can you tell me about the biggest professional challenges you have faced along your career path (both positive and negative)?
a. How, if at all, has your race and gender (being an African American women) impacted your professional advancement (both positive and negative)?

5. What is next for you on your path (both personal and professional)? Why?

6. What advice would you give to another African American woman who is looking to become a leader within Student Affairs (both positive and negative)? Why?

7. What meaning do you give to your career (both positive and negative)? Why?

Setting

This study called for a private setting that allowed for a comfortable conversation considering the uniqueness of the participants and the sensitive nature of the interview questions. Since this study focused on the career paths, the researcher attempted to conduct interviews outside of professional workspaces. Local convention centers and conference centers that have a board/meeting room available for use were offered to participants. All of the participants declined the offer for an off-site interview.

Data Collection

As a qualitative study, data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were all audio-recorded. Two participants completed their interviews in person while the remaining three participants completed their interview by a phone conference. Additional information was collected from resumes submitted by participants.
Data Analysis

Once data was collected through interviews, the recorded audio was transcribed by an online transcription service. For clarity and better readability, filler words, pauses, and inaudible words were removed from transcriptions. The transcription and notes were first organized by participant and then reviewed. Merriam (2009) emphasizes that data must collected and analyzed simultaneously. The researcher coded the documents using both apriori coding and open coding. These apriori codes are a unique three-letter abbreviation. As a “cyclical act” (Saldana, 2015, p. 8), both the apriori codes and open codes were then analyzed a second time to determine if any codes were related to reduce the number of codes. The last set of codes was then used to determine themes that were discussed as findings in the study.

Trustworthiness and Validity

As with any qualitative method, the trustworthiness of data is of concern. For this reason, the researcher triangulated career path data using interviews and resumes. Findings were validated by participants during member checking in a follow-up interview (Creswell, 2014). Confirmation of main ideas served as a member checking process and allowed the researcher to “spend prolonged time in the field” to discuss data and themes with the participants (Creswell, 2014, p. 202). Prior to the study the researcher provided clarification of any researcher bias and defined the researcher’s positionality.

Researcher’s Positionality

When considering the researcher’s positionality, “social identities” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 73), rather owned or ascribed--“gender, race, class . . . sexual orientation” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 63) as well as education and background must
be addressed. The researcher has identities similar to that of the participants. Both the researcher and the participants identify as: (1) cisgender women; (2) Black or African American; (3) Student Affairs practitioner at the mid-level or senior/AVP-level because of current professional responsibilities within a college or university in the United States; (4) educated, as at least a Master degree was obtained; and (5) followers of Christianity. These five factors allowed the researcher to be an “insider” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 63), making for an easy entrance into the study.

Differences found in identities include: (1) class; (2) age; (3) religious denomination; (4) sexual orientation; and (5) color or shade of skin. When compared to participants, the researcher had a different experience in (6) family dynamics during childhood; (7) type of education (public or private); (8) classification of current position; (9) geographical location during childhood, college, early career, and current career; and (10) the Student Affairs journey. The differences between the researcher and the participants allowed this study to take the approach of “the etic or outsider’s view” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 16).

My role as the researcher in this study was shaped primarily by my personal experience as an African American woman working in Student Affairs. In the last 11 years, I have served in multiple roles at two universities. Within University Housing Services, I am the Assistant to the Executive Director at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. Recently, I earned my fourth degree, a terminal degree, from the same institution. Three degrees precede my doctorate in Education: a Master of Science, Organizational Leadership from Southern New Hampshire University (completed online); a Bachelor of Science, Business Administration, option accounting from
California State University, Los Angeles; and an Associate in Arts from Florida Community College at Jacksonville.

In my current role, I provide administrative and analytical direction to the department’s administration by coordinating personnel, payroll, and purchasing processes, analyzing fiscal activity, managing space use, and leading special projects. I also advise student organizations and clubs. I am 36-years old, divorced, and my personal responsibilities include being a single mother of four amazing and active African American young men. Reinaldo Vazquez, III is 16 years old, Regalo-Nascir Vazquez is 14 years old, Remaliah Vazquez is 12 years old, and Rehum-Rajah Vazquez is 9 years old.

In 2008, I was introduced to the field of Student Affairs. I transferred from Florida Community College at Jacksonville to California State University, Los Angeles. As a new student on campus, I needed an advisor’s signature for a scholarship. Several offices directed me to the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) for two reasons. The primary reason was because the scholarship was funded by an off-campus entity. Furthermore, I was not assigned to an advisor. Although I went to the EOP office for a signature, I walked out intending to apply for a student assistant position. Shortly thereafter, I was offered the research assistant position at EOP.

The research assistant position led to various other part-time positions, including Summer Bridge facilitator, Assistant to Counselors, and Administrative Support to the Former Foster Youth program. It was during this time that I came to understand what Student Affairs actually meant. Being the first point of contact for special-admit students that were invited to Summer Bridge taught me outreach and recruitment strategies, EOP
as a program, admission requirements such as eligibility indexes, SAT and ACT scores, A through G courses, Financial Aid’s Expected Family Contribution (EFC) and student housing. Working with counselors, I learned more about selecting a major, types of classes, lower division courses that satisfied the A though E requirement, and workshops and programs that led to student success. As we were in the early developmental stages of the former foster youth program, I started to learn more about the need to have good interpersonal skills.

After completing my bachelor’s degree, I accepted a full-time temporary position as the Information Unit Supervisor within the same department. When that temporary assignment ended, I was hired as a full-time permanent Conference Coordinator and Assistant to the Assignments Coordinator in Student Housing at Cal State LA in 2012. As my youngest son continued to battle asthma (at three years of age), I found a position closer to home within the same university system. I became an assistant in the Office of Vice President for Student Affairs at California Polytechnic State University, Pomona. The following year, I accepted a new position within the same division as the Assistant to the Executive Director in University Housing Services. I have been at the same desk for the last five and a half years. Immediately after starting this position, I enrolled in a master’s program. In July 2016, I completed that program and in September of the same year, I started the doctoral program.

**Delimitations of the Study**

The delimitation of the specificity of criteria used to recruit participants excluded several populations, including non-African Americans, men, entry-level and chief Student Affairs practitioners, and professionals without a master’s degree. The
experience of these populations is beyond the scope of this study but can be researched in the future. As a qualitative research study, the findings did not lead to generalizations but instead revealed the unique stories of the African American women participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

**Limitations of the Study**

Among the limitations that arose during the research study was the choice of words when framing the interview questions. During the first interview, Jesyell elaborated on training that occurred on-campus or in her department. Such training was not listed on Jesyell’s resume. Jesyell did not discuss attendance at professional conferences or presentations at national and regional conferences that were listed on her resume. As preparation for career advancement, a confidence-building accomplishment as well as a networking opportunity, attendance at conferences should be disclosed. For this reason, interview questions were modified during the first interview. The original interview questions asked about formal and informal training. The modified interview questions asked about formal and informal training and professional development. As a common phrase in the field of Student Affairs, professional development is a more accurate term to use with participants. The modified interview question was used through the remainder of interviews.

**Summary**

Chapter 3 outlined the methodology for this phenomenological study to research the advancement of African American women into leadership positions within Student Affairs. The chapter included the research design, the overarching research questions, sub-research questions, rationale for the methodology, the selection of participants, an
introduction of the participants, data sources, and description of the setting, data analysis as well as role of the researcher, delimitations, and limitations. The positionality of the researcher included the personal career path of the researcher. Chapter 4 will present the research findings.
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Chapter 3 outlined the methodology for this phenomenological study and provided a vignette for each participant. Chapter 4 presents data collected from resumes and semi-structured interviews with the five participants. The data analysis resulted in eight themes: (1) an educator's desire to teach; (2) a meaningful undergraduate experience; (3) intentionality; (4) love for the job and a passion for students; (5) feeling blessed, inspired, and privileged; (6) Intersectionality; (7) mentors, mentoring, and giving back; and (8) strategies for advancement.

An Educator’s Desire to Teach

The first theme that emerged through responses gathered from the interviews revealed that the participants described a desire to teach either before entering college or because of college experiences. Although resumes did not list an interest in teaching, they supported verbal statements made by participants. As participants described their journey, they explained that their reason for selecting an undergraduate major was to pursue teaching. The desire to teach ranged from elementary education to high school English and teaching English as a second language.

In hopes of being a high school teacher, Jesyell pursued her undergraduate degree in English. After working in the Black Students Resource Center, Jesyell discovered “Oh, I'm really good at this.” The small office environment also appealed to Jesyell. Shortly after, Jesyell realized, “I do not want to be an English teacher. I want to work with college students.” Immediately after completing her bachelor’s degree, she transitioned into a graduate program in college counseling. In a previous role, Jesyell had facilitated
cultural competency classes. In her current role, she develops curriculum and instructs two courses for student leaders who serve in residence life.

With her bachelor’s degree in International Relations, a semester abroad, completion of a language immersion program, and affinity for “global citizens,” teaching English as a second language seemed like a natural career progression for Lidess. Although she already has a master’s degree, she wants to get another master’s degree, this time in TESOL. She is proficient in two languages other than English. Lidess expressed an interest to “go to another country one day” and is considering working overseas in education.

Mardces shared that “even as a little child, I was playing teacher with my friends. I started out wanting to work in education.” She earned an undergraduate degree in liberal studies and obtained a multiple-subject teaching credential in the same year. After “training to be an elementary teacher [I] soon discovered that was a bit confining for me.” Since then Mardces has held two adjunct faculty positions. The first adjunct faculty position was for five years at the university level. In this position, Mardces taught counseling research principles and courses in educational psychology. The second adjunct faculty position lasted a year and a half within the community college system.

Upon starting college, Shylara desired to teach. She shared, “my original major, fresh out of high school was actually in elementary education with a specialization in behavior modification.” Shylara completed an internship, coincidentally, at the same elementary school she had attended as a child. She described the experience as “life changing” and added that “[I] quickly learned that in the classroom was not my place, advocacy and policy for K-12 education was.” After that experience, Shylara changed her
major. Her bachelor’s degree in business management and marketing and an MBA in management helped in becoming an adjunct faculty member in the School of Business at a state college last year. In addition to the adjunct faculty position, Shylara maintains her full-time director position in business services.

Locille recalls having “a passion for people [and] a passion for service.” This passion led to her bachelor’s degree in management. Shortly after graduating, Locille decided to pursue a “master’s in nonprofit management because I thought that I can serve my community and maybe, give back.” Locille asserted that she “loved education because of my experience as a student” and “always had a knack for instructing.” After gaining experience in financial aid and academic support services, Locille accepted an instructor’s position. The position allows Locille to work with first year students, one of her preferred populations.

Professional ambitions for all of the participants started with a desire to teach, and all would like more experiences in teaching. Of the five participants, three held an adjunct faculty position. Mardces held one adjunct faculty position at a community college and another at a public state university. Shylara currently has an adjunct faculty position at a state college. Locille’s adjunct faculty position is at a state research university. Two participants have had the opportunity to instruct a class and both plan to pursue a faculty position. One participant has no experience in instructing nor has held a faculty position but plans to teach after earning a second master’s degree.

All of the participants earned at minimum a master’s degree. Resumes of all of the participants revealed 12 degrees earned in total. Bachelor’s degrees are in English/literature, international relations, liberal studies, management, and business
management and marketing. One participant earned three credentials. Three of the five participants earned master’s degrees in counseling. Two participants earned an MBA. One participant earned two master’s degrees. Nonprofit management was the major of the sixth master’s degree. Education was the discipline of study for the doctoral degree. All of the participants have a desire to continue to learn in both a traditional and informal setting. One participant plans to pursue a second master’s degree in education. Three participants plan to pursue a doctoral degree within the next three years. One participant plans to complete trainings unrelated to higher education.

**Meaningful Undergraduate Experience**

Analysis of the professional trajectories of the participants in the study led to a second theme: a meaningful undergraduate experience. Four women in the study stated that their undergraduate experience contributed to their decision to either pursue or continue a career in Student Affairs. Student assistant work was the most common means of entry into the professional field. Three of the participants stated that their start in the field of Student Affairs was by way of a student assistant’s job.

Jesyell’s journey in the field began at the Black Students Resource Center. This four-year experience was not included on Jesyell’s resume, but she discussed it with great enthusiasm during the interview. Jesyell recalls that her experience in the student assistant position was the determining factor in her decision to continue in Student Affairs:

I was interested in working on campus and so I found something to keep me busy. And then I fell in love with it, the only thing I was really good at was my job. That’s when I realized that I did not want to be an English teacher. I wanted to
work with college students. That is what made me want to work more. And then I realized, “Oh, I'm really good at this.” And I [thought], “Well let me actually figure out how to do this as a career.”

As a student caller, Lidess’ first student assistant position required “talking to alumni, building rapport with them.” Her job was located in the Annual Fund. Although this two-year position was not under the Student Affairs umbrella, every subsequent job in higher education held by Lidess was. Lidess held one position outside of higher education during a semester abroad that she said, “speaks to my global citizen identity.” Lidess immediately returned to a residence life position after her international travel. Two residence life positions exposed Lidess to student advising, roommate conflict, and problem solving. Collectively, this led Lidess to “gravitate towards the counseling and the development side” of the field. When applying to a graduate program, Lidess’ resident director was excited as he exclaimed, “You're going into Student Affairs. I knew it.”

Mardces also noted the significance of her first undergraduate student assistant position. Her position in the library led to working with the learning resource center, which was the entryway to a summer bridge teaching assistant position. After working in multiple positions related to the program, the university offered Mardces a full-time position as a summer bridge coordinator. Information about these positions was not included on Mardces’s resume because they exceed her professional recommendation of a “10 year demarcation.”
Locille’s college experience did not include a paid student assistant position but she was involved in a professional co-ed business fraternity for two of her four undergraduate years. In addition, Locille recalls:

I’m a product of the university. I came in very raw, really not knowing much, not knowing myself, and I like to tell even my students now that college is so much more than a degree. It taught me more than the business degree that I earned. So my time at [that university] really groomed me. It really made me the professional that I am now, it was everything. It really was everything.

This experience inspires Locille to continue her work in Student Affairs. She wants to be able to teach things that I didn't have or take advantage of as an undergraduate student, different little things that I want to be able to give back, deposit nuggets [or] deposit some wisdom of lessons learned the hard way and the good things that I've been able to do. I want to be able to have that influence.

Shylara did not enter into the field by way of a student assistant position nor a specific undergraduate experience. She took a more direct approach to working in higher education. After working in customer service, Shylara gained professional experience in fiscal and operations in local government, non-profit, and secondary education. Shylara resigned from a local chapter of a national organization to gain experience in financial aid and managing various grants at a community college.

**Intentional Efforts**

The third theme that emerged was intentional efforts. The participants noted that working in Student Affairs was difficult, in particular, for African American women.
Lidess believes that other professionals carry “preconceived notions” into the workplace. She continued to share that these preconceived notions could derive from “negative images depicted in movies.” Mardces added that there is a “lack of understanding of race relations” that adds to the stereotypes of African American women. Shylara shared that one of the biggest professional challenges that she faced occurred when starting a new position. The department “was led previously by an African American woman, and there were stereotypes associated with the position and the department. It was a challenge to overcome that and to provide a different type of leadership as an African American woman.” Lidess stated that among the stereotypes of African American women are “losing her temper” and “speaking poorly about people.” Jesyell added the stereotype of being “combative” while Shylara noted “appearing as negative.”

Jesyell asserted that when working in a professional space, the intentions of African American women are misunderstood because of these stereotypes. Jesyell believed that “if I’m too excited then I’m too loud, if I’m too passionate about something, I’m aggressive, or I’m angry. I’ve had to face finding a way to navigate [that] and numb who I am as a person [and] dilute it sometimes.” Jesyell continued to explain how these descriptors limited her number of invitations to join committees and assist in special projects.

Mardces confirmed that African American women in the field are oftentimes limited in their opportunities. She realized that A lot of the things that I have found myself involved with, a high percentage of those things is because I see some new initiative happening, I think I could play a part and then I get involved with it. [For] a lot of African American men and
women, more often than not they have sought out the challenges as opposed to somebody saying to them, come on board being an African American and female, oftentimes if you want to be in leadership, you have to kind of seek out stuff because they're not going to always tap you on the shoulder. I just think it's the way that our country still needs to advance with regards to race relations [and] with regards to how women versus men get opportunities. I just am pretty sure that others that look differently from me would not have to advocate for opportunities the way in which I've had to.

Collectively, the negative descriptions of African American women caused participants to alter their behavior as well as restrict their interactions.

In an account about how her behavior became restricted, Lidess shared that a White male supervisor who was not very encouraging and [not] positive with me, and it felt like he was favoring other people, just being mean, just kind of ignoring me in the office, so I wouldn't get added responsibilities. When I went outside of the office to help out with other things around campus, through the diversity ambassador or presenting in other capacities, he told me that it would come across that I want to do anything but my job. So, I took that as I need to just stick to my specific role even when it's not busy, just stay in my office. I think that definitely played [and] had a negative impact on my freedom to grow within the university and just to be seen outside of the office.

Lidess described the supervisor’s dislike for her, but, she understood the need to remain diplomatic. Lidess recognized that “if I had shifted in my professionalism, he
would have had real things to complain about” because “preconceived notions [were] validated.”

With professional challenges of stereotypes, restricted interactions, and limited opportunities, participants became intentional about their efforts and actions in the workplace. Shylara intentionally used a “very hands on tangible, boots on the ground type of approach” to “ensure that [she provided] the necessary instruction” to her department instead of taking an authoritative approach to leadership. Jesyell’s intentional approach now includes maintaining a “balance” between being too close to the stereotypes of African American women and “too reserved and not fun.” Mardces, as a 30-year veteran in the field, has more flexibility in her position which she said allows her to

Intentionally put myself out there to be involved with a wide array of things that are happening across this campus not just staying in the career center [but seeking] out ways to be involved where I’m going to come across and come in contact with people from all walks of life.

Lidess, unlike Mardces, had more restrictions in her workspace so she chose to find work-related projects that allowed her to “continue to partner with international students, so that I can help their students articulate their experiences on their resumes or in their interviews or on their cover letter.” Lidess continued to say that she collaborates with diversity ambassadors “essentially [to] be a voice for diversity initiatives within [the] office.”
Love and Passion for the Students as well as the Job

Theme four, love and passion for the students as well as the job, was found by identifying positive aspects in the field. Although participants recognized their professional challenges and struggles, they all adamantly professed their love for the job. More importantly, participants spoke well of the students they serve. Most notably Locille stated that “the bottom line, regardless of [what] may or may not work, [or] may not be great it's still the student and that's what we're here for.” Jesyell recognized that she may not be the typical Student Affairs practitioner but she is enthusiastic about her work. Jesyell shared, “I love being on the frontline for my students, being able to create an environment for students that they want to call home, where they feel like this is their home.”

That same intensity showed during the interview with Lidess. Lidess candidly shared that her “favorite type of appointment is career exploration, where someone isn't sure what's next for them.” Lidess enjoys brainstorming about the student’s “skills, values, and interests” because it allows her to connect them with various industries and roles. Mardces revealed her love for students and all people when she shared that at the core of the things that I've done over the last 30 plus years really has been about helping at the core of that is really helping people find out their passions, helping them to be successful [and] really feel excited about what it is they're trying to do and finding fulfillment.

Shylara expressed her love for students and the job as an extension of my values, not about the position title. It's about being able to do some things that I believe in. And I do believe in education, in all different shapes
and forms, colors and sizes, so for me it's to be able to give back. It's an extension of who I am, not what I am.

**Feeling Blessed, Inspired, and Privileged**

Blessed, inspired, and privileged is the fifth theme of the study. Similar to theme four, it was revealed by identifying positive aspects of the field. Mardces stated that “I've been blessed to be able to choose what I want to do.” She continued to say that I “feel really privileged [and] honored to [have] had the opportunity to do this kind of work in every setting under the education umbrella.” Jesyell recognized “privilege in a sense [because] I have children I'm responsible for.”

Lidess spoke to this theme of being inspired theme of being inspired while working with students. She stated that

the most exciting aspect of my job is that I will sometimes be inspired [by God] to ask a certain question and that student or alum will respond in a way where I realized that was a perfect question for that time.

Shylara stated that she has been “fortunate enough to be in leadership roles at a very young age and lead people who are 10 plus years your senior and [who] have a different race or ethnicity.” She explained how these experiences called for the “finding [of] my own style of leadership, but the positive of that is that you truly do develop into a leader and the leader that you can be proud of.

**Mentors, Mentoring, and Giving Back**

Mentored, mentoring, and giving back was the sixth theme to emerge. Each interview led to a discussion about mentors. In Shylara’s interview, the word mentor was used very little (less than three times). Interviews for both Jesyell and Lidess included the
use of the word mentor a dozen times. Mardces’s interview mentioned variations of the word mentor at least 25 times. Recurring words in Locille’s interview were “give back.”

Mentors were significant to Jesyell’s education and career. When discussing her educational path, Jesyell shared the colleges that she attended were selected because of “a teacher or mentor that went to that university” or worked there. Jesyell confidently explained that she “never visited either of the campuses.” Hard and soft skills developed by Jesyell “came from watching Black women in higher education. It’s not something that I took a class in or read a book about.” Jesyell credits herself as a good observer but “people don't realize that I notice as much as I notice. I just kind of sit back and I'll watch everything.” Observing how women (both Black and White) navigated spaces was helpful to Jesyell. Jesyell finds that a trusted mentor is one that gives the benefit of the doubt often. She believes that mentors are most beneficial because they can “tell you you're right, tell you you're wrong, if you were right about something but it wasn't the right time to convey that, they will tell you that.”

Lidess discussed her experience mentoring a variety of students. She started to wear a mentor hat during undergraduate school. Her four mentees were “a mixture [of] a combination of first gen, African American, another was an international student, another was a Caucasian, more middle class.” Lidess explains that she mentored a diverse group of students that she was individually “drawn to” as opposed to intentionally seeking out a particular demographic or identity. Similar to Jesyell, Lidess “learned how to handle” herself by watching a mentor.

For Mardces mentoring, giving back, and helping are the central focus of her interview. Mardces, raised Baptist and now attends an African Methodist Episcopal
church, lives by a biblical principle that has been instilled in her: “To whom much is given much is required.” Mardces believes that line of wisdom “is not a saying just for the fun of it, it is so true.” During her career she worked as a graduate mentor, volunteered for 14 years at a community food distribution center, served as a mentor with a non-profit organization for five years helping provide resources and college access to underserved students, and continues to mentor colleagues and peers in regards to identity concerns and education goals. Mardces believes that mentoring can be as simple as “willing to have a conversation, [or] have a listening ear.” Mardces values mentoring and explained that having a mentor or two is, I think, crucial. There will be challenges, not always challenges just because you're Black or female but [just] challenges, [and] you need someone who is a professional, too, who you can bounce ideas off of, who can give you some ideas of how to navigate treacherous waters or even calm water. You need someone who can check you when you're trying to decide the next thing that you want to do. Does this make sense for where you want to be later or should you be looking at something else?

Shylara recognized that she benefited both personally and professionally when she stated “I have been fortunate to have good mentors and people along the way.” As a department head, Shylara sees that “mentorship was critical in the collaboration and communication. It was important to have the proper critique and feedback and examples of skills in order to know how to develop.” She continued to say that mentors “provide a level of insight [that] goes beyond the actual job.” Shylara discussed that her work is more than a job. Giving back for Shylara includes volunteering at local charter schools,
serving in church ministries and inspiring and empowering young women through mentoring and advocacy at a local chapter of a non-profit organization.

Locille “attribute[s] a lot of what I have learned and who I am as a professional in higher education” to a mentor. She recalls and appreciates her mentor’s “conversations, her wisdom, her teaching.” In addition to helping with career progression, Locille consulted with her mentor when considering a second master’s program. Described by Locille as “absolutely amazing” and a “very well educated African American woman,” the mentor is a past supervisor that taught Locille how to mentor other African American women in the field. Currently Locille gives back by mentoring:

[I mentor] one particular member of my team. She is a young African American, a woman. She's currently right now pursuing her master's degree. Her goal is to work in Student Affairs, in higher education. We talk very often about some of the challenges and things that she's even currently now experiencing. I can kind of remember some of the things [and] some of the times where I was in her position, in her seat. [I] share with her my experiences and oftentimes a lot of encouragement. She can be easily overwhelmed by what I like to call the political game sometime of Student Affairs so [I] kind of encourage her to remember her “why.” I think that's important.

Locille continued to say that “it's the way that I give back. It is my reasonable service.”

**Intersectionality**

The participants in this study described their intersecting identities. In addition to being an African American woman, participants identified as Christian, wife, and mother. No interview question asked about other identities, religion, or family, and at least one of
these identities was stated in each interview. After participants mentioned other identities, religion, or family, a follow-up question was then asked.

Three of the participants explicitly stated their affiliation with Christianity before being asked. Mardces acknowledged her religion when she stated, “I feel like I had been placed in different places and spaces over the years by God to do good work.” Throughout the interview Mardces also referred to her church. Similarly, when elaborating about her personal belief system, Shylara recalled that it “comes from my upbringing a part of my faith. I am Christian by choice so [it is] an extension of my responsibility and Christian duty.” Lidess shared that as an African American woman “soft skills . . . to do with personality or how you handle yourself, I learned that through church [by] not putting the pressure on myself to always be at my best, but to ask Jesus to help me.” Locille did not directly mention Christianity, religion, or spirituality but made references to biblical concepts. When discussing her career, Locille described giving back to others as her “reasonable service.” In addition, she shared, “I like to look at the instructing piece as my testimony.” Locille mentioned “testimony” three times in her interview.

Considering family, Jesyell’s family dynamic is one way that she learned her hard and soft skills. When asked about development of interpersonal communication skills and flexibility, Jesyell said,

I am a Black woman that was raised as the middle child, those skills came from family. It’s not something that I took a class in or read a book about. It was literally seeing how my family structure was navigated, which is very common for a lot of the Black professionals [that] I interact with depending on how we
navigate professional places sometimes is based on how, where we range in our family.

The identity of wife was revealed by Lidess and Shylara, both when discussing future plans. Lidess shared, “I was actually talking to my husband about this, maybe doing another master's. He [my husband] works in the business field. So it's very probable that we could, super possible, that we could be in another country.” Shylara shared that she is “newly married [and] settling into new wife. Family settling before setting any additional goals is important.” Shylara’s identity as a mother was also revealed during the same time. She is “mother to an older child now” because she has “a soon-to-be seventh grade daughter” to focus on. Two participants, Jesyell and Locille, shared an interest in starting a family in the near future.

**Strategies for Advancement**

The participants in this dissertation study identified three types of strategies for career advancement: personal, professional, and educational. Personal strategies focused on individual development and the identity of an African American woman. The two personal strategies are be comfortable, be confident, and be courageous and observe other African American women. Professional strategies discussed by the participants are applicable to any functional area in the field and included identifying sources of support and gaining a variety of experience. The strategies that relate to education concentrate on continuous learning.

**Be comfortable, be confident be courageous.** Participants in the study explained that as African American women continue to be either one of few or the only in a room, they have learned to become comfortable with their identities, including those perceived
by others, age, class, spirituality, and sexual preference. Jesyell and Lidess experienced being one of few or the only during their graduate program. Their interviews and resumes revealed that they shared the same type of educational background from a private university whose student body reflected the following demographics: 40% White, 30% Hispanic or Latino, 10% Asian, less than 10% unknown, 5% African American, 3% non-residents, 1% Native American or other Pacific Islander, and less than 1% American Indian or Alaska Native. They both completed a master’s program in college counseling despite being one of few African Americans on their respective campuses. Being one of few or sometimes the only African American or African American woman in a professional space was discussed by all of the participants. Most memorable of the interviews, Mardces shared that

[In] Student Affairs, I've had to be comfortable with being the only one. I've had to be really good at making other people feel comfortable so that I can do what I've been called to do because I walk in the room and people see me and expectations are placed, whereas I don't think that always happens with other groups. You have to be comfortable with being the only person in the room because, especially as you move up into more and more roles of responsibilities, you're going to look around, and you're not going to see anyone that looks like you, more often than not.

Participants developed comfort about race and gender primarily by acknowledging that identity impacts an experience. A high level of comfort with a personal identity and knowledge of intersectionality is integral in having confidence as a Student Affairs practitioner. One participant referenced a formula that teaches adequate
knowledge plus tested judgment leads to courage (Graham, 1984). Adequate knowledge, increased comfort, and tested judgement comes by way of experiences that speak more to character and confidence as opposed to an identity; collectively, all components led to more courageous behavior. The first personal strategy for career advancement for African American women Student Affairs practitioners is learning to be comfortable, be confident, be courageous.

**Observe other African American women.** Participants noted that several African American women were beneficial in their personal development process. By observing other African American women, participants learned how to navigate spaces, mentor and encourage other women, and use appropriate professionalism. Having other African American women as models is significant to Student Affairs practitioners because few exist, few are visible, or few are willing to serve as a mentor in a formal capacity. Observation of the actions of other African American women both in the field and outside of professional work environments is the second successful strategy used by participants for career advancement.

**Identify sources of support.** Participants identified various sources of support. Individuals who were a source of support to participants held positions as mentor, coach, sponsor, teacher, Student Affairs practitioner, Resident Director, supervisor, subordinate, and family. In professional spaces, sources of support and motivation include programs, projects, and committees of interest. Through programs, projects, and committees, participants were able to learn more about their work, the work of others and, in some instances, develop a level of expertise.
Although participants did not provide in-depth discussions about sources of support prior to their career in Student Affairs, evidence of support and resiliency was revealed. One noteworthy accomplishment of Shylara was that she completed high school at age 16. She graduated from a traditional public high school after completing only three years of secondary education. Later she completed a master’s program as a working single mother. These two accolades speak to Shylara’s resilience. Similarly, Locille completed her first degree in four years. Locille revealed her ability to be resilient when she shared that “sometimes Student Affairs, because you're dealing with people, [is] a blood sport, it can take a lot out of you.” Locille continued to say that I have to remind myself of my “why” quite often, especially when I think things are not going my way for me in Student Affairs. It was a blend of my personal self as well as my professional self, it combines who I am as a person and also who I want to be as a professional, and, Student Affairs is what aligns with me most.

As a professional strategy for career advancement, identifying and utilizing sources of support as well as tapping into an inner resiliency is crucial.

**Gain a variety of experience.** Participants intentionally exposed themselves to a variety of experiences that helped them to gain knowledge and skills. The variety of experiences derived from (1) additional duties, (2) para-professional positions and internships; (3) community involvement and membership with professional organizations or formal campus groups, or (4) a change in position.

(1) Additional duties listed by the participants included facilitating group dialog, conference presentations, and on-campus trainings.
(2) Participants completed internships, graduate assistantships, and a NASPA undergraduate fellows program (NUFP).

(3) Memberships of the participants include

a. Black Faculty & Staff Association
b. A business fraternity
c. Career Development Associations (state and national)
d. Financial Aid Administrator Association
e. An honor society
f. NASPA
g. NASPA (WRCSAD)
h. National Black MBA
i. A Black sorority

(4) Four types of position changes occurred by the participants: a lateral move in the same functional area, a lateral move in a different functional area, an advancement in the same functional area, or an advancement in a different functional area. Two participants obtained significant work experience outside of Student Affairs and higher education. One has remained in the field since starting and the second participant obtained work experience outside of Student Affairs by leaving higher education, continuing to educate, teach, and train others in formal professional settings, and then returning to the field.

Having a variety of experiences in multiple roles, in different functional areas of Student Affairs, and outside of higher education is a professional strategy used to advance in the field.
**Continue to learn and grow.** Participants in the study recognized the need to continue to learn. In addition to obtaining additional master’s degrees and pursing doctorates, participants continue to learn through formal trainings, professional development opportunities, and conferences. Mardces shared, “I think one should never stop learning. I really do consider myself a life-long learner, besides getting degrees, there's other ways to be able to continue to learn and grow.” She continued to say, “The professional organizations I'm involved with and committees and advisory boards, that's the way to continue to allow me to grow.” Mardces also mentioned training that covers “counseling psychology, major crisis [and] trauma” because she desires to “do that kind of work once retired.” With enthusiasm Mardces said, “Hey, the education continues.” The participants’ need to stay educated was for personal gratification, professional application, and career progression. Continuing to learn and grow was the first educational strategy for career advancement.

**Continue to improve skills.** Along with life-long learning, participants plan to continue to improve essential skills. Among these skills are technology, writing, and interpersonal communications. As the field of education continues to progress, Student Affairs practitioners must be both technology savvy and a skillful writer, especially if planning to advance into higher positions of leadership. Serving diverse student populations calls for high-quality interpersonal skills especially because participants explained that the intent of African American women may not align with the manner in which others perceive them.

Shylara and Locille both listed their young age as a challenge in their current roles. Recognizing the needs of her team and the demands of her college, Shylara chooses
to take a less governing approach to leadership so that she is well-received by all of her colleagues, despite their race or age. Locille shared that she is “about 20 years younger than [her] counterparts” and struggles with

being taken just as serious as the other assistant directors [or] other directors who I am meeting with, who I'm kind of sitting at the table with. It has been a challenge on some of the things that I can implement, new processes that I want to develop within my current role.

Locille recognizes that colleagues’ opinions about her because of age, ethnicity, and gender impede productivity and obstruct her interpersonal communication. She counters the challenge with focusing on the main mission of Student Affairs and her purpose. The second educational strategy for career advancement used by African American women is to continue to improve essential skills.

**Summary**

Chapter 4 provides a description of the interviews that revealed each participant’s unique story. The commonality of the participants’ stories is recognizing how their identity as an African American woman impacts their experience in the workplace as a Student Affairs practitioner. Open and thematic coding of interview data as described in Chapter 3, resulted in eight themes. Themes are (1) an educator’s desire to teach; (2) a meaningful undergraduate experience; (3) intentional efforts (4) love for the job and a passion for students; (5) feeling blessed, inspired, and privileged; (6) intersectionality; (7) mentors, mentoring, and giving back; and (8) strategies for advancement. The eighth theme was discussed in three categories; personal, professional, and educational. Chapter
5 includes the conclusion, discussion, implications for practice and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter 4 provided data and themes found in the research study. Chapter 5 returned to the original problem, explaining the purpose of the study, and restates the research questions that guided the study. To answer the study’s research questions, themes discussed in the previous chapter were used. The themes are (1) an educator’s desire to teach; (2) a meaningful undergraduate experience; (3) intentionality; (4) love for the job and a passion for students; (5) blessed, inspired, and privileged; (6) other identities; (7) mentors, mentoring, and giving back; and (8) personal, professional, and educational strategies for advancement. The chapter continued with a discussion about Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought as the theoretical frameworks, followed by conclusions. Implications for practice and recommendation for future research close Chapter 5.

Problem and Purpose of the Study

There are few African American women in leadership positions in higher education (Gagliardi et al., 2017; Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014). Additionally, there is limited literature that discusses the experiences of the few African American women leaders in higher education, and specifically, in Student Affairs. Klotz (2014) studied ten women of color who were college presidents to examine the relationship between their gender and career trajectories. Klotz suggested that future research examine the career paths of women one professional step below president. Pagan (2018) followed Klotz’ (2014) suggestion and studied women who were chief Student Affairs officers. Unlike Klotz, Pagan’s participants were not all women of color; seven women were white, one was Latina, and two were African American. To build on the research of Klotz and
Pagan, this study was conducted. This qualitative study examined the career trajectories and experiences of African American women Student Affairs practitioners who hold mid-level or senior-level/associate vice president positions.

**Research Questions and Theoretical Frameworks**

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. **How do African American women leaders in Student Affairs describe and perceive their professional journey?**

2. **What are the professional trajectories and professional ambitions of African American women Student Affairs professionals?**

   a. **How do African American women leaders within Student Affairs explain their career advancement?**

   b. **To what extent are African American women leaders within Student Affairs interested in moving up to another level?**

   c. **What strategies have African American women leaders within Student Affairs implemented for their career advancement?**

   d. **What role, if any, have mentors played in the professional advancement of African American women leaders within Student Affairs?**

In addition, data were interpreted and analyzed through two theoretical frameworks that provided a critical lens for this unique population of participants. Critical Race Theory brings the tenets of race, critiquing society and culture, examining how society and culture relate to the processing of feelings and the unconscious, story-telling, and conflicting, overlapping identities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The conversation of overlapping identities and intersectionality is found in both Critical Race Theory and

Research questions were addressed by five participants in a semi-structured interview when they shared their personal story. Personal story-telling, first-person accounts, and counter-narratives of every day experiences are integral in Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Counter-narratives “have a valid destructive function” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 42) against “controlling images” (Collins, 2000, p. 85), “pictures, tales, and scripts” constructed by society that embed preconceptions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 42). Counter-narratives in this study also speak to Black Feminist Thought concepts of self-empowerment, self-definition, and “finding a voice” (Collins, 2000, p. 99). Furthermore, the counter-narratives of the five participants in this study provided data, themes, and insight that answered the dissertation questions. Thematic coding revealed that research question number 1 relates to research question 2a. When combined, these two questions examine how the participants describe their professional journey, perceive their professional journey, and explain their advancement.

**How do African American women leaders in Student Affairs describe and perceive**

The African American women Student Affairs practitioners in this study, provided a counter-narrative, describing their professional journey as one that is difficult because of challenges and restrictions that require intentional behavior. The challenges included preconceived notions and stereotypes about African American women who are perceived as too loud, aggressive, and combative. Participants put restrictions on
themselves based on comments of other individuals in the workplace. Colleagues placed restrictions on participants by limiting the number of professional opportunities given. Voice, tone, and volume were restricted as well as interactions across campus. Stereotypes and restrictions placed on African American women further impose “behavioral conformity” (Collins, 2000, p. 97).

**What are the professional trajectories and professional ambitions of African American women leaders in Student Affairs?**

All of the participants in the study now work within Students Affairs but each of them have a unique story that revealed how they got started in the field. As Pagan (2018) indicated in her findings, there is “no direct path or trajectory” (p. 76) to the field of Student Affairs and the current positions of the participants. The most common entry to the field (four participants) was by way of a meaningful undergraduate experience. For three participants, the meaningful undergraduate experience was a student assistant position. Once in higher education or Student Affairs, four of the participants remained in the field. Only one participant left an educational institution for other positions, however, she continued to work with students and practiced facilitating and teaching.

A second commonality of the five participants in this study regarding professional trajectories and ambitions was found in resumes and confirmed in the counter-narratives. A desire to teach was found with all of the participants. The desire to teach was present either at the beginning of their college journey or was discovered during their undergraduate college experience. Ultimately, four of the five participants have held a position as a facilitator, instructor, or adjunct faculty at the college level. This finding connects with the notion that Student Affairs practitioners are educators at the core.
Having a desire to help, facilitate learning, develop, teach, counsel, and advise students, even outside of the classroom, exudes the participants’ distinctive character as a Student Affair educators (ACPA & NASPA, 2010; Kerr, Tweedy, Edwards, & Kimmel, 2017; NASPA, n.d.). Jesyell captured professional ambitions the best when she affirmed, “I want to empower the future of higher education by teaching students that are in a higher ed program.”

**To what extent are African American women leaders within Student Affairs**

Career ambitions were further explained in the participants’ counter-narratives. From the five interviews, three types of future career aspirations were found; an exploratory track, an advancement track, and a transition track. Two participants ascribe to the exploratory track and considered a lateral move as part of the next step in their career. One exploratory track participant, Locille, described her long-term plan more intentionally. She would like to eventually advance in the field but will consider a short-term lateral move. Furthermore, Locille is adamant that she will retire in the classroom so she plans to pursue a doctoral degree as a strategy for professional advancement. Locille shared, “I know it's something that I have to do, so something I will do in the near future. I won't be able to matriculate as I desire without it.” The exploratory track of the participants aligns with the theme of gaining a “variety of experience” (Pagan, 2018, p. 72) that emerged in this study and in Pagan’s 2018 finding as a professional advancement strategy.

Two participants described the advancement track as part of their plans to advance their careers. One participant desires to move up and stay in the field while the
second advancement track participant desires to move up in either Student Affairs, higher education, or the nonprofit sector. The third and last track is the transition track. Participants on the transition track are shifting from the field of Student Affairs to a new pathway. Only one participant discussed the transition track and included retiring from her current institution as a short-term plan. Although retiring in the near future was a sincere conversation, the participant plans to volunteer at various organizations and work part-time or consult.

**What strategies have African American women leaders within Student Affairs**

This research study brought about three types of strategies that African American women Student Affairs leaders have already implemented, plan to implement, or would advise a mentor to implement for career advancement. The three types of advancement strategies are personal, professional, and educational. The first personal strategy was to be comfortable, be confident, and be courageous as an African American, especially if there are few in the room who share that identity. The second personal strategy was to observe other African American women to learn how to navigate professional spaces. In addition to gaining a variety of experience, professional strategies included identifying sources of support.

Shylara’s summation of her career trajectory articulates a variety of experience and sources of support as discussed by the participants. Shylara recalled, “I began with the city when I was 17 years old, straight out of high school. The first job was the administrative and programmatic, and then, after that time, I went into fiscal and operations.” Her journey continued as she “spent time in nonprofits and local
government” prior to working on a college campus. After entering higher education, “I was in resource development at [this college], which was the grant writing or the acquisition arm for third party funding.” Shylara also highlighted the importance of specifically, “the management portion of [the undergraduate in business management and marketing] degree,” Shylara’s education and experience was complemented by “really good mentors along the way to help connect the theory to practice.”

The two strategies for advancement that related to education concentrated on continuous learning, both formally and non-traditionally. Four participants shared a desire to obtain additional degrees, one a master’s and three doctorates, as a strategy for career advancement.

What role, if any, have mentors played in the professional advancement of African American women leaders within Student Affairs officers?

Mentors were very instrumental in the education process, career path, and professional advancement of all the women in the study. The theme of mentoring and giving back were used synonymously. Mentoring was found in a simple conversation, informal relationships, and formalized programs. Participants were professionally-groomed by watching mentors, mostly African American women, navigate professional spaces. In addition, participants made life-altering decisions based on the mentors’ suggestions. Participants shared that in various capacities mentors, coaches, and sponsors played a large role in their careers mainly because mentors were reflective, supportive, and encouraging. Lidess described to a three-part professional mentoring framework that consisted of “mentors and coaches and sponsors. Mentors to build you up, coaches to
provide you with real time feedback and sponsors to be able to speak on your behalf where it really matters [are needed].”

**From Theory to Practice**

Stereotypes placed on African American women are prominent in the contemporary culture and have made a way into Student Affairs, a space for diversity and inclusion. The participants confirmed the works of Patricia Hill Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought*, which discusses, as a core theme, how stereotypes and controlling images of African American women are damaging. The participants described the well-known Sapphire Stereotype (named after Sapphire Stevens, played by Ernestine Wade). The Sapphire Stereotype, popularized in media as the Angry Black Women, depicts African American women in its simplest form as sassy, aggressive, “loud, rambunctious, hostile, and unfeminine” (Baker, 2013, p. 3). It “portrays [B]lack women as rude, malicious, stubborn, overbearing, tart-tongued and emasculating [with] one hand on a hip and the other pointing violently and rhythmically rocking her head. [She is] a shrill nagger with irrational states of anger and indignation, mean-spirited and abusive, [with] hyper-sensitivity to injustices [which] make[s] her a perpetual complainer [and] bitter” (The sapphire caricature, n.d.). The findings in research suggest that there are three implications for future practice for African American women, colleges and universities, and the field of Student Affairs.

**Practice for African American women: Share the counter-narrative with others.** Although African American women in the field of Student Affairs cannot erase the preconceived notions that precede them, they can practice continuing to share the counter-narrative to debunk stereotypes. One accessible space recommended to share the
counter narrative of African American women in the field is the NASPA African American Knowledge Community (AAKC). The “AAKC increases members' awareness of, knowledge about, and appreciation for issues unique to African American professionals, through sharing information on research, campus issues, and mentoring” (NASPA, n.d.-c). As a safe space for African American professionals in the field, the AAKC could serve as a central location for both written stories and podcasts. A second space recommended for sharing the counter-narratives of African American women Student Affairs practitioners is the NASPA Annual Conference. In years past, the event included pre-conference workshops and summits for African American attendees. Most recently, the 2019 conference (hosted in Los Angeles, California) included a presentation titled “Surviving in Silence: Unmasking the Strong Black Woman Stereotype” (Fitzgerald, Nicholson & Thornton, 2019). The presentation addressed the three main stereotypes of African American women. As an inspirational presentation, future conferences can build on this.

Practice for colleges and universities: Increase programmatic efforts for African American women in the field of Student Affairs. While the NASPA, AAKC and annual conferences are larger scale venues, African American women in the field are in need of smaller-scale activities. The creation of a national or regional network of African American women can serve as a system of support. The network of support should focus more on convenient, realistic opportunities that maintain and develop positive relationships. One technique to utilize is monthly webinars and conference calls with topics of interest submitted by network members. The webinar and conference calls will highlight the achievement of African Americans and market local events related to
higher education, Student Affairs, women empowerment, mentoring, and professional
development. In addition, at the campus level or within a region, an institution could host
an annual Black Women’s Brunch. Such an event would allow for the networking and
recognition of African American women each year.

Practice for the field of Student Affairs: Create an undergraduate program
aimed at the field and then formalize several career paths that will advance young
African American women into leadership positions within Student Affairs. The
women in this study all had a variety of positions that led to their current role. The size
and number of functional areas found within Student Affairs are large enough to provide
a myriad of entries for African American women. As the field of Student Affairs
continues to grow, the number of functional areas will increase. Several focus areas,
recently added to the Student Affairs portfolio, are receiving national attention. Among
them are adult learners and other non-traditional college students, assessment, emergency
preparedness, emotional support animals, food and other allergies, former foster youth,
homeless and hunger insecurities, mental health, parent engagement, professional
development and training, Student Affairs Professional Preparation Programs, social
justice, and student success.

An undergraduate degree aimed at Student Affairs structured by the California
State University System (the largest university system in the nation) and a Council of
National Professional Organization (such as NASPA, ACE, and ACPA) would better
position African American women who desire to work in the field. The degree would
serve as an introduction to the foundation of the field. The Student Affairs undergraduate
program does not require the creation of a new department within an institution, but
instead is an addition to a college of education. Immersion in the program requires completion of an internship within a Student Affairs functional area and a small research project focusing on social justice. A published formalized co-curricular path must accompany the undergraduate program. The co-curricular path includes membership with at least one professional organization, joining one local or campus-based affinity group, presenting at a regional or national conference, and completing training and professional developments.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The design for this study was qualitative in nature and examined the career trajectory of African American women Student Affairs practitioners who hold a master’s degree and a position at the mid-level and senior/AVP level with at least three years of professional service. To continue to build on this type of literature, future research should:

1. Examine African American women who are “one profession step below” (Klotz, 2014) the participants in this study (entry-level) as well graduate students and undergraduate students. With these populations, research can investigate career paths, professional aspirations, professional development programs, and strategies to retain them in the field.

2. Examine how the careers of African American women Student Affairs practitioners are impacted by their role as a Christian, a mother, and a wife. As a theme in this study, intersecting identities played a role in the decision-making process of future career aspirations.
3. Examine career navigation of African American women who have a sexual orientation other than heterosexual/straight. As a growing population of both students and Student Affairs practitioners, the LGBTQA community increasingly receives national attention in the field.

4. Examine a larger number of African American women in Students Affairs using a quantitative design or mixed-methods. The use of a different method would allow for a new type of data to be collected.

**Conclusions**

This study (1) examined the underrepresentation of African American women Student Affairs leaders, (2) built on research that investigated career trajectories and professional ambitions of African American women, (3) identified successful strategies for advancement in the field, and (4) provided a safe space for counter-narratives of African American women in the workplace. The findings use the participants’ words as African American women Student Affairs practitioners to describe how inseparable and intersecting identities impact their career experiences.

Despite challenges faced along their journey, these African American women were able to continue on their path and serve their students. Creatively, these women found advancement strategies that have helped them and will continue to help them advance their careers. The women also highlighted positive experiences that can serve as motivation for upcoming professionals. The stories and findings are useful for implementing strategies in the field.
Final Thoughts

As an African American woman Student Affairs practitioner, this study (and the doctoral program that preceded it) taught me the importance of my work and the impact that the field has on the lives of future generations. Like many professionals in the field, I did not intentionally seek a career in Student Affairs. I just wanted to make a living by working with numbers; being a math teacher or accountant, either would have sufficed. But instead, my love for numbers led me to become a research assistant in the Educational Opportunity Program at California State University, Los Angeles, and I have been in Student Affairs since then.

Eleven years later, I look back and I remember my entrance into the field, the professional staff that noticed me, supported me, encouraged me, and even pushed me. I also remember the students that I worked with. Now I understand that it is more than just “working with students,” it is mentoring students. Listening to the stories of these five African American women helped me to realize just how much I have mentored students and continue to mentor students on a daily basis. Never before would I call it mentoring, but instead it was always “a chat,” “a walk and talk to Starbucks,” or just a “check-in.” Sometimes it was just a look followed by “hmm!” which allowed my student to rethink that last statement. Sometimes, it was whispers exchanged at my desk. But, it was these moments that helped students talk through and get through their difficult time or life-changing experience during the college years, and it is these moments that keep me in Student Affairs. Seeing how the participants in my study were also able to elaborate on their moments, the love for job, passion for students, compelling desire to give back, and professional ambitions, I am hopeful that other African American women will be drawn
to this profession and that they will recognize that the path is open to them for ongoing professional advancement.
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