# The Influence of Mentorship and Role Models on University Women Leaders' Career Paths to University Presidency

Lilian H. Hill
*University of Southern Mississippi*, lilian.hill@usm.edu

Celeste A. Wheat
*University of West Alabama*, cwheat@uwa.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr

Part of the Higher Education Commons, and the Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons

# The Influence of Mentorship and Role Models on University Women Leaders' Career Paths to University Presidency

## Abstract

While the literature concerning female administrators in higher education indicates the critical role that mentors and role models play in contributing to women's professional advancement, the relationship between mentorship and women's attainment of senior leadership positions including the college presidency remain underexplored. The purpose of this study was to explore how women in key-line administrative positions to the presidency (e.g., academic dean, vice president, chief academic officer) and women presidents understood the role of mentoring relationships and role models in their career paths to leadership. This study employed a postmodern feminist theoretical framework and a feminist qualitative design to give voice to the unique and individualized ways university women in key-line positions to the presidency and women presidents made meaning of the influence of mentors and role models during their careers. Data collection involved 16 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a criterion-based sample of 12 female key-line administrators and four presidents employed at universities located in the southeastern United States. The data analysis revealed four main themes related to: (1) the minimal role of mentors and role models; (2) gender dynamics characterizing participants' role models and mentoring relationships; (3) mentoring moments with multiple and non-traditional mentors and role models; and (4) the benefits of mentors and/or role models. This study recognizes the participants' complexity in their multiple identities and demonstrates women's resourcefulness in seeking career guidance and social support from multiple sources including male and female mentors, role models, colleagues, friends, and family members.

## Keywords

Mentoring, Gender, Leadership, Higher Education, Women's Advancement, University Presidency, Feminist Qualitative Research

## Creative Commons License

# The Influence of Mentorship and Role Models on University Women Leaders' Career Paths to University Presidency

Lilian H. Hill
University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, USA

Celeste A. Wheat
University of West Alabama, Livingston, Alabama, USA

*While the literature concerning female administrators in higher education indicates the critical role that mentors and role models play in contributing to women's professional advancement, the relationship between mentorship and women's attainment of senior leadership positions including the college presidency remain underexplored. The purpose of this study was to explore how women in key-line administrative positions to the presidency (e.g., academic dean, vice president, chief academic officer) and women presidents understood the role of mentoring relationships and role models in their career paths to leadership. This study employed a postmodern feminist theoretical framework and a feminist qualitative design to give voice to the unique and individualized ways university women in key-line positions to the presidency and women presidents made meaning of the influence of mentors and role models during their careers. Data collection involved 16 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a criterion-based sample of 12 female key-line administrators and four presidents employed at universities located in the southeastern United States. The data analysis revealed four main themes related to: (1) the minimal role of mentors and role models; (2) gender dynamics characterizing participants' role models and mentoring relationships; (3) mentoring moments with multiple and non-traditional mentors and role models; and (4) the benefits of mentors and/or role models. This study recognizes the participants' complexity in their multiple identities and demonstrates women's resourcefulness in seeking career guidance and social support from multiple sources including male and female mentors, role models, colleagues, friends, and family members. Keywords: Mentoring, Gender, Leadership, Higher Education, Women's Advancement, University Presidency, Feminist Qualitative Research*

Scholars have consistently pointed to the crucial role that mentoring and role models play in women's career path advancement (Brown, 2005; Dunbar & Kinnersley, 2011; Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011; Madsen, 2008; Schipani, Dworkin, Kwolek-Folland, & Maurer, 2009). Mentoring is important for women at all levels of the academy—as graduate students, faculty, and administrators—in providing them with (a) career role models, (b) career development and advice, (c) sponsorship and greater visibility, (d) advice for successfully balancing work/family responsibilities, (e) career guidance and support, and (f) strategies for overcoming gendered barriers (Brown, 2005; Dunbar & Kinnersley, 2011; Gibson, 2006; Kurtz-Costes, Helmke, & Ulku-Steiner, 2006; Madsen, 2008, 2012). Researchers suggest that women need role models who can show them how to advance despite existing barriers (Kurtz-Costes et al., 2006). There is a critical need to prepare women to form leadership identities, negotiate barriers to women's advancement, seek mentoring and role models, support one another, and combat stereotyped attitudes toward women's leadership (Pfafman & McEwan, 2014; Madden, 2011; Salas-Lopez, Deitrick, Mahady, Gertner, & Sabino, 2011).

Madsen (2008) explains that the dearth of research concerning university women's pathways is a result of the small percentage of "women serving as presidents of research and comprehensive institutions" (p. 136). Further, King and Gomez (2008) assert, "there is almost no information on those individuals in the senior campus administrative positions [e.g., academic dean, executive vice presidents, CAO, etc.] that most typically lead to the presidency" (p. iv). As such, the majority of leadership studies in higher education have almost exclusively focused on the experiences of white males—"render[ing] women's experiences as invisible" (Chliwniak, 1997, p. 19). The lack of published research pertaining to the influence of mentoring and role models on women administrators' career paths to the university presidency is made more significant when considering the findings from *The American College President* report, which projected that over the next 10 years there will be a large number of presidential retirements (American Council on Education, 2012). The projected vacancy in presidential positions will present greater opportunities for qualified and talented women to advance to presidencies. However, unless women are prepared to assume these leadership roles, it is likely that the majority of these positions will continue to go to men. Consistent with this idea, Morley (2013) lamented the loss of talent through a lack of mentoring, sponsorship, guidance and support at critical moments in women's career path and commented that remedial mentoring programs designed to address women's "inadequacies" in leadership preparation have not alleviated gender disparities in attainment of leadership positions.

Bornstein (2009), Madsen (2008, 2012), and Marshall (2009) point to the need for more empirical research relating to the career path and pipeline issues that may serve to motivate or hinder women's advancement to the presidency in university settings. In general, there is a gap in the empirical literature in higher education pertaining to the career paths of university women in key-line administrative positions to the presidency (e.g., academic dean, vice president, chief academic officer) and university women presidents (Arini et al., 2011; King & Gomez, 2008; Madsen, 2008, 2012). Consequently, the relationship between mentoring and women's advancement to the college presidency remains underexplored (Brown, 2005).

## Purpose Statement

In seeking to add to the empirical research on the role of mentorship in women's advancement to university presidencies, our intention was to explore how women in key-line administrative positions to the presidency and university women presidents understood the influence of mentoring relationships and role models in their career paths to leadership. Understanding the unique and individualized ways women experience and view the influence of mentors and role models on their leadership aspirations and advancement to leadership is a factor of critical importance to increasing the representation of women presidents in higher education. Influenced by the literature review and theoretical framework, the broad research questions that framed this study were: (1) How do women leaders experience and define mentoring and role models?, (2) How do women's relationships with mentors and role models influence their career paths, leadership aspirations, and identities as leaders?, and (3) How do the salient dimensions of women leaders' lives shape their experiences and view of mentors and role models?

## Literature Review

Because there is definitional confusion in the literature regarding role modeling and mentoring, some clarification is provided here. In addition to the more traditional terms frequently used in the mentorship literature, Madsen (2007) found that the university women presidents in her study "used a variety of words, often interchangeably, to refer to different

people's influential roles: *mentor, role model, coach, advisor, sponsor, encourager, counselor, and supporter"* (p. 153, [italics in original]). Primary career mentors are considered more experienced individuals "who provide guidance, assistance and support to help pave the path for mentees in achieving their career goals" (Brown, 2005, p. 659). A role model is defined as "an individual whose behavior in a particular role is imitated by others" (Madsen, 2008, p. 157). Mentoring involves a developmental relationship and sustained interaction between the mentor and protégé. A protégé may consider her mentor to also be a role model; alternatively a role model may be an influential individual whom is observed from a distance without the awareness of being a role model (Madsen, 2008). A non-traditional mentor is an individual with informal or unofficial influence such as a friend, peer, or family member who provides guidance (Madsen, 2008).

Twenty years of social science research has confirmed that mentoring is helpful to executive women in advancing to leadership positions (Schipani et al., 2009). For a woman possessing attributes such as intelligence, a strong work ethic, ability, and ambition, mentoring may make the critical difference in advancement to the highest level within organizations (Scanlon, 1997). Likewise, mentors can serve to build women's self-confidence by instilling the idea that they are capable of becoming a college president (Brown, 2005). Research also suggests that "a mentor can buffer an individual from overt and covert forms of discrimination, lend legitimacy to a person or position, provide guidance and training in the political operation of the organization, and provide inside information on job-related functions" (Schipani et al., 2009, p. 100). While mentoring serves the function of promoting career development, it can also serve as a psychological and social support (Schipani et al., 2009). Kurtz-Costes et al. (2006) suggest that individuals need role models who they view as being like themselves with respect to characteristics like gender and race in order to be able to legitimize women in professional roles. Although the topic of mentoring with respect to women's career advancement has received a great deal of scholarly attention, few current studies have focused on the influence of role models on women's leadership development (Sealy & Singh, 2010). Further, there is little research that has examined the influence of role models as a separate concept from mentoring (Gibson, 2003, 2004; Ibarra, 1999; Sealy & Singh, 2010).

Research on mentoring and female leaders in higher education indicates that most women had a mentor and viewed mentoring as contributing to their career advancement. Dunbar and Kinnersley (2011) found that among the 64% of women in their survey who reported having a mentor, 91% of the mentors held a higher rank than the respondent. In surveying 91 female college presidents, Brown (2005) also found that female college presidents tended to have career mentors who assisted them in advancement through administrative ranks. The majority, or 68%, of the presidents' mentors were male. Madsen (2008) found that most of the female university presidents she studied emphasized the importance of relationships with others in their development. Many of the women believed that without role models or mentors, career achievement is more difficult (Madsen, 2008). Most female college and university presidents in Steinke's (2006) study also spoke to the prominent role of mentors in their advancement to the presidency. Nevertheless, mentorship tends to favor males who are offered more developmental experiences while women report difficulties obtaining developmental opportunities, exclusion from informal networks, and lack of fit (Davey, 2008).

To be effective, it is important for women to develop a good understanding of organizational culture and become politically savvy (Salas-Lopez, Deitrick, Mahady, Gertner, & Sabino, 2011). Warner and DeFleur (1993) maintained that having a male mentor can be particularly advantageous in helping women navigate the power structures, particularly the "good ol' boy' network." Due to gender disparities in higher education administration, women typically have greater access to male mentors and role models than female mentors and role models (Brown, 2005; Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011; Madsen, 2008). While there may be

difficulties associated with it (Davey, 2008), cross-gender mentoring/protégé relationships can have a number of positive benefits in women learning to be more assertive, expect crises, and recover from crisis. Women can benefit from both male and female mentors (Brown, 2005). Dunbar and Kinnersley (2011) reported that the women in their study believed that the mentors' gender was important to the effectiveness of their interactions and preferred a female mentor. Nevertheless, Salas-Lopez et al. (2011) suggested that the gender of the mentor is not as important as the match between mentor and mentee, and commented that a male mentor can teach ways to navigate an organizational culture dominated by men.

Studies show that multiple mentorships are valuable in helping women advance in their careers and build self-confidence (Brown, 2005; Madsen, 2008). Some women develop a social network of mentors and advisers, and this may include family members, friends, professional colleagues, and superiors (Salas-Lopez et al., 2011). Research addresses the benefits of women having "multiple mentorships" that encompass different types of mentoring relationships (e.g., faculty mentorships, administrative mentorships (Brown, 2005, p. 661). Over half of the female college presidents in Brown's (2005) study reported having several mentors.

Research also reveals that younger female administrators may have difficulty identifying mentors and role models who balance motherhood with their administrative role (Kuk & Donavan, 2004; Marshall, 2009). For example, Marshall (2009) reported that the women administrators with school-age children who participated in her study "were among the first to negotiate the work-family dance within the senior administrative ranks in colleges and universities" (p. 213). Family responsibilities are often considered a liability for women in the workplace because of a biased assumption that mothers have primary responsibility for children, yet Salas-Lopez et al. (2011) found that families, especially spouses, took responsibility, and provided practical and emotional support. It is critical for women to receive guidance and support to advance in their careers in a society that remains largely sexist in its orientation and behavior (Madden, 2011).

**Conceptual Framework**

The literature review and the following conceptual framework contributed to the development of the purpose statement and research questions outlined above. This study used a postmodern feminist theoretical framework to give voice to the unique and individualized ways that university women administrators and presidents made meaning of the influence of mentors and role models on their career path. Rooted in a postmodern paradigm, postmodern feminist theory focuses on "unearthing [women's] subjugated knowledge" (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 3). Postmodernists reject the use of totalizing schemas to create space for marginalized groups such as women to "articulate their own 'subjugated' knowledges" (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 375). Postmodern feminism seeks to challenge humanist and essentialist assumptions that all women are unified by a prescribed set of "fixed essential qualities" (Weedon, 1987, p. 175). Essentialist views of male and female leadership are based in conceptions of gender characteristics as unchanging and results in (a) ignoring the ways that gender is socially constructed, (b) categorizing leadership behaviors as primarily male, and (c) characterizing women leaders as driven by an ethic of care (Enke, 2014; Fine, 2009; Morley, 2013). Equating leadership with men is associated with valuing socially constructed male traits and behaviors, while devaluing female identities (Fine, 2009). Organizational politics involve the ways that power is enacted in daily social interactions and incorporates gendered roles with men assumed to be active while women serve in supporting roles (Davey, 2008).

Postmodern feminists highlight the ways that humanist and essentialist discourses ignore the "multiplicity of cultural, social and political intersections in which the concrete array of 'women' are constructed" (Butler, 1990). Subjectivity, a key principle of postmodern

feminist analysis, is understood as "the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of an individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world" (Weedon, 1987, p. 32). Postmodern feminists view women's subjectivity as active, fluid, and transformative (Bloom, 2002). Therefore, postmodernism feminism questions gender categories rooted in modernism and employs postmodern momentum to deconstruct gender ideals. Through recognizing the limitations of essentialist notions of fixed or universal identity, a postmodern feminist perspective presents new opportunities for women to construct their persona and assert agency (Weedon, 1987).

## Our Positionality

Positionality from a postmodern perspective is constituted within a web of relationships. It is therefore fluid and a process of constant realization (Bettez, 2015). With respect to our positionality as researchers, we are White/Caucasian, middle-class women with Ph.D. degrees who hold faculty positions in schools of education in research university settings. We were motivated to seek information that may be instructive to women in navigating their own path to leadership. Further, we have both experienced transitions in our relationship and careers.

The first author is a naturalized U.S. citizen from Canada who remembers "discovering" feminist ideas as a teen and her mother's response, "But of course, dear." She has master's and doctoral degrees in adult education and her publications focus on adult health education and professional development. She has worked at universities in Canada and the U.S. and is now a professor with 25 years of experience. Because she has been the recipient of mentoring by talented women teachers and colleagues throughout her career, she tries to both mentor and form collegial relationships with students and colleagues. She had no intentions of becoming an administrator, however, she was appointed as a department chair shortly after being awarded professor status. While the appointment was welcome, the transition has been challenging due to the need to assume responsibility with little preparation and the change in role vis-à-vis long-term colleagues. She has one adult child from a previous marriage and was a long-time single-parent. She has remarried and also become a grandmother.

At the time the data were collected, the second author was a doctoral candidate and adjunct professor. After graduation from her doctoral degree, she assumed a tenure-track position with a small university and has recently resigned from part-time director responsibilities for a center for teaching excellence because these administrative responsibilities took time away from preparation for tenure and promotion. She is a native of the southeast and has degrees in English, sociology, and higher education. She is unmarried and has no children. She has sought out mentors and role models during her doctoral studies and subsequent academic appointment. In time, she would like to advance to high level university leadership and currently follows the career of a female mentor who has recently been appointed to a university presidency.

Learning about the research participants' experiences and perspectives has been helpful to both researchers in navigating their own changing responsibilities and identities. We are both interested in women's experiences in higher education leadership, especially now that we have assumed leadership roles in higher education institutions. This article is based on the second author's dissertation and the first author was her dissertation chair and mentor. This is the second of several publications derived from the second author's dissertation. We are alternating first authorship because we feel that our contributions to the work are equivalent now that we have become co-authors and colleagues. We do not always agree about data analysis, however, we have learned to talk issues out and come to consensus. Because we have both experienced the effects of sexism in the workplace, we believed that this topic is pertinent

for other women with administrative goals in post-secondary institutions and that our participants' stories need to be told.

## Method

This study employed a feminist qualitative design, which was useful in understanding how the university women leaders who participated in this study made meaning of their career experiences with mentors and role models. Feminist inquiry is characterized by a focus on (1) understanding the aspects of women's lives that have been missing from mainstream research; (2) conducting research that has individual, social, and political implications for creating more equitable opportunities and institutions for women; and (3) acknowledging the influence of the researcher's positionality (e.g., characteristics, values, and biases) in the research process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Olesen, 2008). Feminist qualitative research honors the "principles of respecting women's (and other oppressed groups') unique ways of knowing, destabilizing power relations in the research process, and confronting socially constructed gendered inequalities" (O'Shaughnessy & Krogman, 2012, p. 495). "From a postmodern feminist perspective . . . a researcher shares multiple truths and realities; and acknowledges that reality is shaded by social, political, economic values, which change over time" (Pasque, 2013, p. 121).

Feminist qualitative research may employ varied data collection and analysis strategies, however, its main focus is on the ways that women's experiences are structured in society and confronting social inequalities (Olesen, 2008; O'Shaughnessy & Krogman, 2012). Taking a feminist postmodern stance involved the analysis of power as it is situated in historical and material contexts, and giving voice to women's experiences. We employed criterion-based sampling, in-depth interviews with the research participants, data analysis strategies recommended by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2015), creation of a narrative in which the participants' experiences are the central focus, and discussion that makes recommendations to redress societal inequities present in higher education.

### Participant Criteria

Because this article is based on the second author's dissertation research, she selected the participants based on the following criteria: (1) possessing a minimum of one year of experience in their current administrative role; and (2) being employed at an institution officially designated under the Carnegie Classification System as a type of university (e.g., doctoral/research universities, master's universities, historically black universities, etc.). In selecting from the population of university women in key-line administrative positions, the participants were required to: (1) occupy a senior-level leadership position at the level of dean or above, (2) report directly to a vice president or president, and (3) have responsibilities that contribute to the overall management of the institution or a subdivision of the institution.

### Participant Recruitment

Potential participants for this study were identified by the second author who conducted an internet search of websites for universities located in the southeastern region of the United States, regional professional leadership organizations in higher education, and national professional leadership organizations in higher education (e.g., American Council on Education). She identified 40 potential participants: seven university women presidents and 33 university women leaders in key-line positions to the presidency. She contacted interview candidates through a formal letter which invited potential candidates to participate in an

interview for this study. The second author also sent a follow-up e-mail to ascertain their willingness to participate in the study.

**Sample**

This study involved a sample of 16 participants serving in key-line positions of university leadership or university presidencies in the United States including four current university women presidents and 11 university women currently serving in key-line administrative positions, and one woman who recently retired from a university key-line administrative position. The key-line administrators included three academic deans, three provosts/chief academic officers, and six vice presidents representing the areas of advancement, communications, economic development, research, student affairs, and technology. The majority of participants, including all four of the university presidents and nine of the key-line administrators, were employed at doctoral-granting universities, under the Carnegie Classification System. The participants ranged in age from 39 to 70 with a median age of 62. Although the second author made efforts to obtain a racially diverse sample, 14 of the participants identified as White/Caucasian and only two identified as Black/African American. This is reflective of recent demographic data concerning the racial composition of female university senior-level leaders and university presidents on a national basis (American Council on Education, 2012; King & Gomez, 2008). Most women in this study, including all the deans, provosts, and presidents, had over 20 years of full-time experience working in higher education. Fourteen of the participants held an earned doctorate while two of the non-academic key-line administrators held master's degrees.

**Data Collection**

IRB approval was obtained from The University of Southern Mississippi by the second author before proceeding with data collection. Like much of the research reviewed by O'Shaughnessy and Krogman (2012), the primary source of data involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews that were conducted by the second author. Influenced by the key themes from the literature review and theoretical framework, the interview protocol included questions that reflected the key themes from the literature review (Appendix A). Sample questions included: (1) What career path did you take to your current leadership position?, (2) What role have mentors and role models played in helping you to advance to your current leadership position?, (3) Have you had more male or female mentors and role models?, and (4) How has your gender or other life roles (such as family roles) shaped your leadership experiences? The second author collected data via 16 audio-recorded, face-to-face or telephone interviews lasting approximately one hour. She conducted 10 telephone interviews and six face-to-face interviews. She allowed the participants to select the time of the interview and to choose the location of the face-to-face interviews.

The second author conducted all of the face-to-face interviews on the participant's respective university campuses in a quiet setting that ensured privacy, such as a private office. Nine of the ten participants involved in phone interviews chose to conduct the interview in their private campus office and one chose a private setting off campus. The second author observed that being in a space in which the participants were comfortable seemed to contribute to their willingness to provide candid, thoughtful, and detailed responses to the interview questions. Although the in-person interviews allowed the second author to observe the participants' non-verbal communication such as body language and facial expressions, she felt that all participants were articulate and expressive in communicating their thoughts, experiences, and opinions. The second author developed rapport with the women participating

in phone and in-person interviews by providing verbal cues that she was attentively listening, responsive, and interested in the participants' responses. The second author transcribed the interviews for data analysis. In order to maintain participant confidentiality and anonymity, she assigned pseudonyms for each participant.

## Data Analysis

We aligned our data analysis as closely as possible to the ideas expressed in the introduction, literature review, and conceptual framework; however, we were also prepared for findings that would contradict or expand the meaning of these ideas. Each author began the analysis by individually using first-cycle descriptive coding process that identified all relevant units of data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Next, we employed a second-cycle coding process in which we consolidated repetitive codes into a modified number of pattern codes that related to our research questions (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). During the initial phase of analysis, we composed a list of codes that reflected the main idea of interview responses or documents (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Next, we reduced the number of initial codes by consolidating all redundant codes into a modified list of codes that addressed the research questions. Several sample codes were "women firsts," "generational differences," "nontraditional mentors and role models," "career paths," "male mentors and role models," "female mentors and role models," and "benefits of mentors and role models." Third, reflecting the definitions outlined in the introduction, we organized and modified the codes into a preliminary category list. In steps four and five, we reviewed the initial list of categories to determine which categories were most important and which categories needed to be modified to eliminate redundancies. In the final stage of analysis, we transitioned from categories to concepts through selecting four key themes that reflect the meaning we derived from the data. We were particularly attentive to ideas resonant with the postmodern feminist conceptual framework regarding our participants' career paths to leadership, gender expression, leadership identities, as well as aspects of their identities that extended beyond their work.

## Trustworthiness

We used three strategies to promote credibility and dependability in confirming research findings including peer review, audit trail, and researcher reflexivity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In employing the first strategy, we invited peers with expertise in the content area and methodology to review and assess the findings' credibility. The second author maintained an audit trail by keeping a research journal to detail the processes involved with data collection. She used the research journal to clarify her experiences, assumptions, biases, and worldview during the data collection. Together, both authors kept notes about our evolving ideas concerning the coding and categorizing of data during data analysis. We also employed the strategy of reflexivity on the researchers' positionality vis-à-vis the research participants. Based on the results of the coding process outlined above, we derived four main themes from our study that are described below.

## Findings

We derived four main themes from the data analysis concerning: (1) the minimal role of mentors and role models; (2) gender dynamics characterizing participants' role models and mentoring relationships; (3) mentoring moments with multiple and non-traditional mentors and role models; and (4) the benefits of mentors and/or role models. Each of these themes are presented with relevant categories that illustrate patterns informed by the conceptual

framework, relationships the participants described, and possible causal explanations. In establishing the context of the findings, it is important to note that the women in this study often used the words mentor, role model, or supervisor interchangeably. Six of the women's descriptions of the influence of mentors and role models on their career paths revealed how some considered their role models to be mentors, although they did not have a relationship with the individual. In this way, their definitions of role models and mentors differed from the definitions of the terms introduced earlier. For example, Vice President Carter states,

> I didn't really have mentors that were women early on, but there were guys here that . . . were my ideals of what you were [supposed to be like] as a faculty member . . . They were absolutely revered by their students, and I just used them as my mentors all along. One of them knew it [and] the other really had no clue until very late in his life. One day I went to see him and tell him—to thank him—and just say, "Hey, I want you to know that you have been my model." . . . I really realized that those were my mentors, early on, and they had a profound influence about the way I behaved as a faculty member. . . So they really gave me those characteristics of what I think a faculty member's about.

While six of the participants used the term role model and mentor interchangeably, the remaining 10 did not. In these instances, we used the definitions in the introduction to guide the data analysis process and organize the findings from the data in order to establish a congruency between the ways that mentors and role models are defined in this study.

**Minimal Role of Mentors and Role Models.** The majority of participants reported that they lacked a primary career mentor. Fourteen out of the 16 participants in this study reported that they did not have a "key" or "primary" career mentor in a more senior-level position of university leadership, male or female, who served to "guide," "help lay the groundwork," and/or "sponsor" their progress to their current positions as key-line administrators or university presidents. Consistent with the definition of a primary career mentor used in this study, President Perkins, exemplified the understanding of a primary career mentor shared by the women in this study:

> When I think of mentors there is no one person that guided my career. I wish to heaven that that person had emerged because I know people who have had . . . [a] Svengali—that person that says, "now go left, now go right, take two steps forward, smile." I never had that.

Vice President Kennedy also relayed,

> I can't really pick out someone that I thought really mentored my career . . . [so] I don't really have a *key* mentor that I thought, "okay, they're going to tell me how to get down this road to this position [that] I have." I'm kind of just hacking my own way through the forest.

Only two participants in this study, Vice President Owens and President Whitley reported having a primary career mentor with experience as an executive-level university administrator who played an important role in helping to facilitate their career advancement to their current positions of university leadership. Vice President Owens described:

> I [have] . . . [a] male mentor, [who] had been [the] president of several universities . . . [and] he has really helped me from the ground up. . . I [first]

met [him] at a conference several years ago when I was in school, doing my thesis and this gentleman offered to review my thesis when it was finished. When I applied for the position of vice president, he assisted . . . he helped me just review my documents and really has been a true, true mentor. I think that having . . . a mentor is really responsible for a good part of my success.

President Whitley also discussed how her primary career mentor was instrumental in guiding and sponsoring her career pathway to top-level university leadership. She stated,

I would say that people talk about this, but it's very, very, very true that if you are mentored by someone, they look for opportunities for you . . . I know that I would not be where I . . . [am] today if . . . the [university] president of the last institution I was at had not picked me out to mentor and put me into positions. He put me into [interim] positions that I . . . did not apply for, and then after unsuccessful national searches, [I] applied for [the positions]. So his mentoring is absolutely what got me here today. [So,] I think it's extraordinarily powerful [to have a mentor].

Despite President Whitley's sentiment about the utility of mentoring to support women's advancement, the majority of the women in our study did not experience that benefit.

**The Secondary Role of Mentors and Role Models.** Most of the women indicated that mentors and role models played a secondary role in their career advancement to administrative positions. Provost Barlow clarified that mentors and role models helped "very little, actually, in terms of moving into leadership roles." Dean Atwood was also aware that mentors have "not [played] as much [of a role in her career advancement] as they should have."

Since the majority of women did not begin their careers with aspirations of achieving a senior leadership role, many of the women did not realize the need to have mentors and role models with university leadership experience at an earlier point in their careers. Several women spoke to how their lack of primary career mentoring experiences by individuals with university leadership experience was a result of their unplanned career paths to university leadership. Provost Barlow explained, "I just didn't look at . . . the dean position . . . [or] the provost position . . . and say, 'that's something I'd like to do and therefore I need a mentor or role model to help me develop the skills that I need [in order to] to get into those [positions].'"

Many of the participants who began their careers as faculty members attributed their lack of leadership aspirations in the earlier stages of their academic careers to the enjoyment and satisfaction that they found in the teaching and research components of their faculty roles. President Rice, who conveyed a sense of surprise by her advancement to administrative roles, embodied the sentiments shared among many of the participants who began their careers as faculty members and did not initially view themselves as becoming university leaders. When asked if she envisioned herself in a position of university leadership in the early stages of her academic career, President Rice replied, "No, I thought of myself as a professor." President Rice explained, "I was successful and happy . . . as a professor . . . So, I didn't think of myself as doing anything really beyond [that]."

Vice President Young stated, "My [educational] degrees, my credentials, [and] my other experiences . . . have really played more of a role" than mentors and role models in her career advancement. She distinguished that the factors which facilitated her career advancement are largely reflective of "[what] I've had to do on my own [and the] things that I have actively pursued on my own in terms of building credentials." President Howard, who lacked primary career mentors and role models, indicated that her advancement to top-level university leadership was the result of her efforts to "build up a reputation and then people

recommended me . . . [based on] what I had done in various roles." The secondary role that mentors and role models played in the majority of women's movement to positions of university leadership may also be attributed to how they viewed their own "achievements," or abilities to "do a good job," "produce credentials," and/or "build a professional reputation" as being more influential in facilitating their advancement to university.

## Gender Dynamics Characterizing Participants' Role Models and Mentoring Relationships

The gender dynamics of the participants' access to role models and mentors was often influenced by aspects of their positionality with respect to their age, status as a woman first, and/or career stage. Among participants who described having mentors and/or role models, Provost Ellis exemplified the majority (14) of participants' experiences in conveying, "I would say that most of my mentors were male." Many sought to emphasize that most or all of their mentors and role models had been males. As Dean Atwood clarified, "notice . . . both [of my mentors are] male[s], there's no women." However, the youngest participant in the sample, Vice President Landon, who was in her late thirties, indicated she had "more female mentors" than male mentors. She reported having three female career mentors serving in university key-line administrative posts at various institutions. Vice President Landon noted that when she was selected for her current administrative role she sought out two female mentors who were "vice president[s] of student life" at two different universities to help her learn the "nuts and bolts" of her new administrative role.

Dean Atwood represented half of the participants' experiences in pointing out, "I've had *no* female mentoring whatsoever." Dean Atwood exemplified the shared sense of recognition among many of the participants in this study by stating, "I've been keenly aware that there was sort of this paucity of female mentors out there for somebody like me." Most participants, especially participants who represented the first woman to hold their administrative position at their respective institutions, spoke to the dearth of female university leaders to serve as role models and mentors.

**Female Mentors and Role Models.** Nine participants described having a female career mentor (e.g., faculty member, peer mentor) at a certain point in their career path. Although President Perkins had mostly male mentors, she described a female faculty member who served as a mentor in her early career.

> When I was a new faculty member there was another woman. . . . There weren't many women on the faculty and she had only been hired a year ahead of me. . . Yet, she took a lot of her precious time just to . . . show me the ropes. She'd sit me down and say, ". . . honey here's what you need to know and here's what you need to keep your eye on."

Three participants, Provost Barlow, Vice President Landon and President Rice, reported having a female mentor who had experience serving in a university key-line administrative position and only one participant, Provost Ellis, reported having a female mentor who was a university president. These women communicated that they did not have a female mentor with experience in university leadership until the mid-stages of their career path when they entered their first key-line administrative position (e.g., dean, vice president). Provost Ellis, who was the first woman to serve as a provost in her institution's history, had mostly male mentors throughout her career path. However, she indicated "we [now] have a president who is a female . . . and I really feel like I've been mentored by [her . . . in the past] year."

Participants also spoke to having only a few, if any, female role models serving in positions of university leadership.  Most participants did not begin to have role models who were female university leaders until the mid-to-latter stages of their career paths, often after the participants had achieved official positions of university leadership. The influence of the lack of female role models and mentors in leadership roles during the participants' early career stages may also help explain why many of the participants did not aspire to university leadership in an earlier point in their career paths. President Perkins explained that when she began to have presidential aspirations in the mid-to-later stages of her career path, "there were not a lot [of women presidents to serve as role models], but [there were] a few."

President Perkins indicated when she began aspiring to a presidency, "the numbers [of women] were growing.  I think the term I heard . . . [was], we were in the *pipeline* . . .  There were growing numbers of women in the pipeline—moving up into deanships, [and] provostships."  Although President Whitley had a few female mentors and role models who were employed as administrators at a research foundation, she noted that she did not have a female presidential role model until she achieved her first presidential appointment:

> I had a female president . . . who was terrific and wonderful. . . . [She] was the first person to reach out to me when I became president here.  She wasn't a personal mentor when I knew her, but she certainly reached out to me when I reached this point.

The gender dynamics of the majority of participants' experiences concerning the availability of male university leaders to serve as role models and mentors and the "paucity of female [university leaders to serve as] mentors" and role models may also be attributed, in part, to how most of the participants (13 out of 16) in this study were "the first woman" to serve in their current position as a key-line administrator or university president at their respective institutions. President Perkins communicated,

> there weren't any women ahead of me. . . .   I was [the] first woman dean, . . . the first woman provost, . . . I was the first woman [president].  So, I didn't have a lot of women to watch.

President Rice also characterized the uniqueness of her experiences as the first person of her race and gender to hold certain administrative positions in her career path. "Being the only woman and the only African American . . . was my world . . . for a long time."

Likewise, Vice President Carter, who was the first-ever female to serve on the university president's executive cabinet at her institution, conveyed that prior to her appointment, "they didn't even have any women deans."  When she began her academic career as a faculty member "there were very few women who were faculty and so I didn't really have mentors that were women." Although most of the "women firsts" indicated having female leaders to look to as role models in the later stages of their careers, prior to moving to positions of top-level university leadership they were not aware of any female leaders to serve as role models.

**The Influence of Age and Generation on Participants' Having More Male Mentors and Role Models.** Although the participants who were the first woman to occupy their current position represented a variety of ages, with two of the youngest women firsts in their forties, the majority of the participants who were over sixty sought to emphasize, in the words of President Howard, the "generational differences" of their career path experiences concerning the lack of university women faculty and administrators to serve as role models and mentors in the early and middle phases of their careers in higher education. Dean Reed, who was in her

sixties, contextualized the generational differences for the women of her generation concerning their lack of mentoring:

> In all honesty, I think [many] women of my generation and of my age in . . . careers missed out on mentoring. There just were not any mentors available to us, and frankly we probably didn't understand the importance of mentors, either. . . I believe I was the first woman ever to be tenured at the university. So, it's not like there were a lot of women on faculty who could mentor me. There really weren't any. . . Some of the men who were a little bit more senior [in the faculty ranks] may have been doing a little bit of mentoring for the guys, but they weren't doing any mentoring for me.

Despite the increases in the number of university women administrators, Dean Atwood, who was in her late forties, indicated that many of the women of her generation continue to lack female mentors and role models. She explained, "I don't think I actually modeled myself after any female academic administrators because . . . I knew so few of them or was even aware of them." In contrast, the younger generations of women administrators, between the ages of 39 to 57, such as Vice President Landon who reported having "more female mentors," spoke to their awareness of the presence of university women leaders to serve as role models and mentors.

**Generational Differences Among Women Firsts.** Many participants discussed the value of having male leaders as their mentors and/or role models. Provost Ellis, noted, "most of my mentors were male . . . [who] were interested in what I brought to the table and [in] giving me good advice." President Perkins recalled:

> As a matter of fact . . . [my mentors] were all men. And they were men that were, what we now call, "evolved men." They weren't threatened by women in the workplace [and] they weren't threatened by a woman moving into a position of leadership. I think they welcomed that. . . They were not father figures, they were just good, decent people who recognize[d] some ability in me and they wanted to encourage it.

Although many of the participants who represent women firsts in their current and/or previous administrative roles were aware of the uniqueness of their status as a woman first, most participants did not view their lack of female role models and mentors to serve as a hindrance in their career advancement.

**Mentoring Moments with Multiple and Non-Traditional Mentoring Relationships**

The majority of participants (15), including the two participants who had primary career mentors, described experiencing mentoring moments with multiple and non-traditional mentoring relationships at various points in their career paths. For example, Vice President McNair described having a total of six significant mentoring relationships (e.g., dissertation advisor, peer mentors, etc.) during her career. Vice President McNair is representative of many other participants in indicating that her mentoring relationships were often "serial" in their nature. Similarly, President Rice relayed, "I've had good mentors . . . and many of them . . . all along the way." President Perkins also expressed, "at key intervals, somebody stepped in with a word [of advice] and I took it and ran with it. So, they were the ones who made the difference."

In comparison to the experience of having an ongoing relationship with a primary career mentor who guides one's career to leadership, participants with multiple mentors often described how these experiences took the form of short intervals of time or "mentoring moments" which, provided them with what President Perkins referred to as "little assists" at certain points in their career paths such as providing a word of "encouragement" or "career advice."

In lacking primary career mentoring experiences, especially by female mentors, six of the participants may be viewed as asserting personal agency in taking the initiative to obtain non-traditional mentors and role models from the relationships in their personal life such as family or friends. Vice President McNair represented many participants' mentoring experiences in stating, "I think that when I consider mentors, they are . . . not always in traditional roles, [al]though some [of my non-traditional mentors] have played those [traditional mentoring] roles from time to time, for me." President Howard, who did not report having a mentor with university administrative experience, also noted that she viewed her peers as playing a mentoring role in her early career path as she stated, "in many ways it was my fellow graduate students that actually helped my career." Vice President McNair also described how her friends served as her role models:

> [As] . . . an African-American vice president for student affairs, my girlfriend . . . was always going before me. She was the director before me. She was the vice president before me. So, I did get to see her doing things, and then I've just had women friends who are achievers. They achieve, and so it's the circle that I'm in . . . Almost all [of us are working] in higher education . . . we all expect each other to achieve.

Several participants indicated that members of their family such as their mothers or siblings served as their role models and mentors. President Whitley described how her mother and the women in her family served as important role models in influencing her career path to leadership. She states:

> Well, I came from a long line of very influential, powerful women, and . . . [I have been] surrounded by mostly women in my personal life. I had a grandmother, a mother, . . . sisters, a daughter, . . . granddaughters, a mother-in-law. . . So, I think I've had a lot of strong, female role models in my life . . . [They are] independent women who . . . carved out very wonderful lives for themselves.

Although President Perkins did not have a primary career mentor, she noted "I did have people that encouraged [me] and were . . . generous with their time." President Rice pointed out that although most of her mentors were male, "I [have] had women [mentors] at different times in my life who were real supportive." The women in this study were resourceful in obtaining needed advice and support during their career.

**Spouses/Partners as Informal Mentors.** Many of the married women voiced how their spouse often functioned as an informal mentor through providing the support and encouragement they needed to pursue and thrive in leadership roles. President Perkins described how her spouse has influenced her career.

> I have a retired husband who is wonderful [and] . . . he's my champion . . . He was key even before he was my husband. He was just really supportive about

[my career in suggesting,] "you might want to think about this [career position]
and you might want to think about that [opportunity].

Although Vice President Landon had no presidential aspirations herself, she described how her husband, also a faculty member, encouraged her to advance to a presidency. "My husband has said, 'Yeah.  Be a president' . . . He would be all for it!"

The participants' relationships with multiple and non-traditional mentors and role models expands the extant literature by detailing how many of the participants in this study gained valuable mentoring experiences from informal and non-traditional mentors and role models, including family members peers, and/or friends. Women's relationships with informal and non-traditional mentors and role models may play an important role in influencing their career development and leadership aspirations, especially when women lack formal and traditional career mentors and role models.

## The Benefits of Mentoring Relationships and Role Models

Although most women did not view mentors and role models as playing a major role in their advancement to positions of university leadership, many women discussed how mentors and role models provided them with a variety of benefits, which served to increase their self-confidence in their ability to advance to administrative roles and/or build their credentials in becoming qualified candidates for leadership positions. Vice President Young explained how mentors and role models influenced her career advancement:

a great deal primarily just through encouragement . . . and interactions between
myself and others who have encouraged me to do different things or be engaged
in different types of activities to give me a range of experience so that I am
actually a qualified applicant [for leadership positions].

The three most commonly reported benefits pertained to participants receiving encouragement and support, career advice and information, and skills and/or training. Eight women described how they had received encouragement and/or support through their relationships with both traditional and non-traditional role models and mentors and eight also spoke to the value of receiving career advice from traditional and/or non-traditional mentors and/or role models. Vice President Landon shared how, prior to entering her current position, two female mentors, with experience as vice presidents of student affairs, provided her with career advice and information pertaining to the responsibilities that accompanied the role of a vice president of student affairs.  She relayed:

[One] sat down with me . . . for . . . two hours [and] she said, . . . "This is how I
lead a staff meeting . . .  [These are] the professional networks [in student
affairs]. . .  [These are] . . . the challenges [of this role, and] this is how you act
in cabinet [meetings]."

Half of the participants also described the benefit of gaining skills and/or training through their relationships with mentors and/or role models. Provost Fields noted,

I have been very fortunate to be able to work with very capable administrators
throughout my career and they have served as [my] role models and mentors.  It
has been very helpful to me to have the association that I have had with them.

> Their leadership style has given me the opportunity to learn effective strategies
> for handling issues.

This finding suggests that receiving encouragement and support from mentors is critically important for women in gaining a vision for leadership and confidence in their ability to achieve top leadership roles. The participants' lack of primary career mentoring relationships may also help explain why most women in this study reported that factors related to their own efforts such as educational attainment and job performance played a greater role in their advancement to leadership roles than mentors and role models.

## Discussion

We used a postmodern feminist framework to illuminate the complexity of multiple identities of female working professionals rather than examine them as one-dimensional persons. We recognize the participants as working professionals who are colleagues, sisters, friends, daughters, wives, and mothers. The participants in our study used the term mentor and role model interchangeably, which is consistent with the findings of Madsen's (2008) study of university women presidents. Possibly, because many of the participants did not plan to become a senior leader in higher education, mentors and role models played only a secondary role in their career paths. Our study also found that women in key-line administrators or presidents often advanced to leadership roles in the mid-to-latter stages of their careers. This is similar to the findings of Cox (2008), Eddy (2009), Madsen (2008), Steinke (2006), and Switzer (2006). This outcome may be explained, in part, by the context of our participants' *emergent* career paths to university leadership and their sense of subjectivity in their early career paths, which shaped their view of having mentors. Seeking leadership positions is associated with identity (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011) and many participants did not initially view themselves as leaders. None of the women in this study began their careers with the aspiration of becoming a university leader, but rather each emerged as leaders in the mid-to-latter stages of their careers.

Our findings contradict studies that found mentoring plays an instrumental role in women's advancement to top leadership in higher education (Warner & DeFleur, 1993) in that mentoring appeared to play only a minimal role in our participants' career paths to senior leadership. However, Steinke (2006) and Switzer (2006) found in their respective studies of women presidents that some but not all of their participants had a primary career mentor who supported, sponsored, and guided their career paths to the presidency. The lack of female mentoring experienced by our participants may be the result of generational differences due to a scarcity of women in leadership, competition, and gendered norms about leadership (Frechette, 2009). The participants' lack of available female leaders to serve as mentors and/or role models reflects the long-standing under-representation of women in university administration (American Council on Education, 2012). The debate about whether a mentor needs to be similar to the mentee in gender and other characteristics (Kurtz-Costes et al., 2006) is rendered inert when women lack mentorship opportunities.

What is remarkable is how resourceful the women we studied were in creating mentoring relationships and seeking career guidance and social support from multiple sources including male and female mentors, role models, colleagues, friends, and family members. This inventiveness can positively influence women's preparation for top university leadership. This finding closely resembles the university women presidents in Madsen's (2008) study who had a variety of people serving as "influential individuals" across their higher education careers (p. 163). Brown's study (2005) also found that over half of female presidents had multiple mentoring relationships. Generational differences also played a part in the experiences of the

research participants, with younger women having more opportunities for female mentoring simply because there were women who preceded them in leadership.

To progress in new roles, women not only need to learn the skills of the new position but also the socially constructed norms and rules regarding how they should behave. Women in this study had to resist normative assumptions of femininity (Frechette, 2009) to assert their right to participate as competent academic leaders amid discriminatory practices. Madden (2011) indicates that power threads through the structure of academic institutions and gender stereotypes remain active in the academic world. She further suggests that women first fit in and then work to change the culture to suit themselves and other women. New generations of women in leadership offer hope for disrupting and ultimately changing the power structures to benefit women and minorities (Frechette, 2009; Madden, 2011). Having female mentors and role models who challenge the gendered assumptions of leadership may promote social change.

In keeping with the aims of feminist research and praxis (Lather, 1991; Nidiffer & Bashaw, 2001), one of the goals of this study was to provide women with information that would be instructive for navigating their career paths to university leadership. This study supports previous research (Brown, 2005; Dunbar & Kinnersley, 2011; Kuk & Donovan, 2004; Marshall, 2009) which indicated that it may be particularly helpful for women to find other women to serve as mentors who can provide sponsorship, advice, and support concerning work/life balance issues. Given the lack of primary mentoring experienced by women in this study and the importance they accorded to having role models and mentoring, it is clear that women interested in academic leadership should take responsibility for seeking out and providing mentoring opportunities. Women should support other women (Morley, 2013). Women could share their leadership experiences with other women seeking opportunities, thereby serving as role models. "Mentoring can be another form of leadership . . . [and] can result in a form of feminist redistribution of power and social capital" (p. 125). Women could also benefit from cultivating multiple traditional and non-traditional mentoring relationships across the span of their career paths (Brown, 2005; Madsen, 2008).

The implications of this study support the development of practical applications aimed at providing women with mentoring experiences in university settings, especially doctorate-granting universities, where it may be more difficult for women to identify role models and mentors of a higher rank due to the continued underrepresentation of females and minorities as key-line administrators and presidents (Airini et al., 2011; Madsen, 2012). Academic institutions could develop formal mentoring programs that pair aspiring women leaders or new administrators with male or female mentors who hold a more senior-level position of university leadership and also provide women with opportunities for cultivating informal mentoring relationships. However, gendered assumptions of male and female behaviors remain prevalent in higher education and continue to foster gender discrimination (Madden, 2011). Programs designed to encourage women to seek leadership need to be attentive to the evolving, adaptive nature of discrimination so as to counteract it. Mentoring programs could encourage women to develop authentic leadership identities, recognize and challenge gender bias, and contribute to social change in the academy (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2013; Morley, 2013).

The limited empirical data on the topic of university women administrators' and presidents' career paths underscores the need for future research that provides a more detailed and comprehensive understanding of why women continue to be underrepresented in top leadership positions in university settings. In the future, researchers could seek to delve deeper into the personal and professional factors which influence women's career paths and leadership aspirations, and tell the stories of minority women in leadership positions. Another productive form of research should involve the leadership experiences of women who are minorities.

## Limitations

The main limitations of this study relate to criteria for the selection of the research sample. Since the participants were from the southeastern region of the U.S., the study is limited in addressing how geographical location might have affected the participants' experiences with mentors and role models. The sample of participants for this study was also limited to women with current or recent experience holding key-line administrative roles (e.g., academic dean, vice president, and provost) or university presidencies. Next, the sample of participants was limited to women holding administrative roles in university settings. Therefore, the findings may not apply to other types of higher education institutions such as two-year colleges. Finally, the use of a qualitative design limits the generalizability of the findings obtained from the sample in this study to the larger population of female university key-line administrators and presidents. Although the qualitative design of this study does not allow for generalization of the research findings, the richness of the data presented allow for the possibility of other women who plan to pursue leadership opportunities in higher education applying the findings of this study to their own situations.

## Concluding Thoughts

While some women have broken through the metaphorical glass ceiling in higher education to attain top positions of leadership, the findings of this study provide insights into the subtle ways that availability of mentors and role models can actually serve as social and cultural barriers to women's advancement in regard to (a) a lack of primary career mentoring by a mentor in a higher-level administrative position, (b) the paucity of women in university administration to serve as mentors and role models, (c) having more male than female mentors and role models, and (d) generational differences in access to mentors and role models, particularly among women who were the first to occupy their respective position. The women in this study described the unique and individualized ways they exercised personal agency in navigating the subtle social and cultural barriers concerning their lack of primary career mentoring to reach their current position, such as identifying non-traditional mentors and role models. This study provides greater insight into how traditional and nontraditional mentors and role models can positively influence women's preparation for top university leadership. Providing women with encouragement or career advice enables women to draw upon the unique and individualized aspects of their personhood to overcome subtle barriers to attaining leadership roles in academic settings. With this research, we hope to encourage other women to aspire to leadership roles in higher education and that they find this information useful in preparing for leadership roles through identifying relationships that would be instrumental to the attainment of the aspiration.

## References

American Council on Education. (2012). *The American college president* (2012 ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

Airini, C. S., Conner, L., McPherson, K., Midson, B., & Wilson, C. (2011). Learning to be leaders in higher education: What helps or hinders women's advancement as leaders in universities. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *39*(1), 44-62.

Bettez, S. C. (2015). Navigating the complexity of qualitative research in postmodern contexts: Assemblage, critical reflexivity, and communion as guides. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *28*(8), 932-954.

Bloom, L. R. (2002). Stories of one's own: Nonunitary subjectivity in narrative representation.

In S. B. Merriam & Associates (Ed.), *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and practice* (pp. 289-309). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education.

Bornstein, R. (2009). Women and the quest for presidential legitimacy. In D. R. Dean, S. J. Bracken, & J. K. Allen (Eds.), *Women in academic leadership* (pp. 208-237). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.

Brown, T. M. (2005). Mentorship and the female college president. *Sex Roles*, *52*(9), 659-666.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Chliwniak, L. (1997). *Higher education leadership: Analyzing the gender gap.* Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University Press.

Cox, K. S. (2008). *Motivational factors influencing women's decisions to pursue upper-level administrative positions in higher education* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3341506)

Davey, K. M. (2008). Women's accounts of organizational politics as a gendering process. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *15*(6), 650-671.

Dunbar, D. P., & Kinnersley, R. T. (2011). Mentoring female administrators toward leadership success. *Delta Kappa Bulletin*, *77*(3), 17-24.

Eddy, P. L. (2009). Leading gracefully: Gendered leadership at community colleges. In D. R. Dean, S. J. Bracken, & J. K. Allen (Eds.), *Women in academic leadership: Professional strategies, personal choices* (pp. 8-30). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Enke, K. A. E. (2014). Identities, intentionality and institutional fit: Perceptions of senior women administrators at liberal arts colleges in the upper Midwestern USA. *Higher Education Research and Development*, *33*(1), 100-113.

Ely, R. J., Ibarra, H., & Kolb, D. M. (2011). Taking gender into account: Theory and design for women's leadership development programs. *Academy of Management Training and Education*, *10*(3), 474-493.

Fine, M. G. (2009). Women leaders' discursive constructions of leadership. *Women's Studies in Communication*, *32*(2), 180-202.

Frechette, J. (2009). Women, leadership, and equality in academe: Moving beyond double binds. *Forum on Public Policy Online*, *2*, 1-26.

Gibson, D. E. (2003). Developing the professional self-concept: Role model construals in early, middle, and late career stages. *Organization Science*, *14*(5), 591-610.

Gibson, D. E. (2004). Role models in career development: New directions for theory and research. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, *65*(1), 134-156.

Gibson, S. K. (2006). Mentoring of women faculty: The role of organizational politics and culture. *Innovative Higher Education*, *31*(6), 63-79.

Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2007). Feminist research: Exploring the interconnections of epistemology, methodology, and method. In S. N. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis* (pp. 1-28). London, UK: Sage.

Ibarra, H. (1999). Provisional selves: Experimenting with image and identity in professional adaptation. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *44*(4), 764-791.

King, J. E., & Gomez, G. G. (2008). *On the pathway to the presidency: Characteristics of higher education senior leadership.* Washington, DC: ACE Publications.

Kuk, L., & Donovan, J. (2004). Women in higher education revisited: Intergenerational conversations. *Journal of Student Affairs*, *13*, 1-10.

Kurtz-Costes, B., Helmke, L. A., & Ulku-Steiner, B. (2006). Gender and doctoral studies: Perceptions of Ph.D. students in an American university. *Gender and Education*, *18*(2), 137-155.

Lather, P. (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy within the postmodern.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Madden, M. (2011). Gender stereotypes of leaders: Do they influence leadership in higher education? *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's and Gender Studies*, *9*, 55-88.

Madsen, S. R. (2008). *On becoming a woman leader: Learning from the experiences of university presidents*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Madsen, S. R. (2012). Women and leadership in higher education: Learning and advancement in leadership programs. *Advances in Human Resource Development*, *14*(1), 3-10.

Marshall, S. M. (2009). Women in higher education administrators with children: Negotiating personal and professional lives. *NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education*, *2*(1), 188-221.

Merriam, S. B., & Associates. (2002). Introduction to qualitative research. In S. B. Merriam (Ed.), *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis* (pp. 3-17). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Morley, L. (2013). The rules of the game: Women and the leadership turn in higher education. *Gender and Education*, *25*(1), 116-131.

Nidiffer, J., & Bashaw, C. T. (2001). Quiet inspiration and hard work: The impact of women administrators. In J. Nidiffer & C. T. Bashaw (Eds.), *Women in higher education administration* (pp. 1-10) Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Olesen, V. L. (2008). Early millennial feminist qualitative research: Changes and contours. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The landscape of qualitative research* (pp. 311-370). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

O'Shaughnessy, S., & Krogman, N. T. (2012). A revolution reconsidered? Examining the practice of qualitative research in feminist scholarship. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *37*(2), 493-520.

Pasque, P. A. (2013). (Re)membering and (Re)living: A methodological exploration of postmodern and constructivist feminist approaches to interviewing women leaders in higher education. *NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education*, *6*(1), 99-126.

Pfafman, T. M., & McEwan, B. (2014). Polite women at work: Negotiating professional identity through strategic assertiveness. *Women's Studies in Communication*, *37*, 202-219.

Scanlon, K. C. (1997). Mentoring women administrators: Breaking through the glass ceiling. *Initiatives*, *58*(2), 1-10.

Salas-Lopez, D., Deitrick, L. M., Mahady, E. T., Gertner, E. J., & Sabino, J. (2011). Women leaders: Challenges, successes and other insights from the top. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, *5*(2), 34-42.

Schipani, C. A., Sworkin, T. M., Kwolek-Folland, A., & Maurer, V. G. (2009). Pathways for women to obtain positions of organizational leadership: The significance of mentoring and networking. *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy*, *16*(8), 89-136.

Sealy, R. H. V., & Singh, V. (2010). The importance of role models and demographic context for senior women's work identity development. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *12*(3), 284-300. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2370.2009.00262.x

Steinke, K. (2006). *Madwoman, queen, and alien-being: The experiences of first-time women presidents at small private colleges* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3209237)

Switzer, J. Y. (2006). Women college presidents: Interviews about journeys and adaptations. *Advancing Women in Leadership Online Journal*, *21*(1), 1-15. Retrieved from http://www.advancingwomen.com/awl/summer2006/Switzer.html

Warner, R., & DeFleur, L. B. (1993). Career paths of women in higher education administration. In P.T. Mitchell (Ed.), *Cracking the wall* (pp. 3-18). Washington, DC: The College and University Personnel Association.

Weedon, C. (1987). *Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory.* Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.

# Appendix

**Interview Protocol**

*Career Path*

1) I would like to begin the interview by asking you to tell me a little bit about yourself and your academic background?
2) Could you briefly describe for me the career path that you took to becoming an administrator/ president?
3) What was the immediate prior position that you held before being selected to serve in your current leadership role?
4) At what point in your career did you begin to have a vision for leadership?
5) What are your future career goals after your tenure in your current leadership role?

*Mentors and Role Models*

6) What kind of a role has mentors or role models played in helping you to advance into leadership positions?
7) How did your mentoring relationship(s) first develop?
8) Have you had more male or female role models and mentors?

*Balancing Work-Life Issues*

9) Could you briefly describe what are the most important roles and responsibilities that accompany your leadership position?
10) What kinds of demands does this position make on your time?
11) As an administrator or president, how would you describe your ability to achieve balance between your professional life and your personal life?
12) How have issues related to work-life balance influenced your career decisions and career goals?

*Family Influences on Women's Career Paths and Aspirations*

13) In general, how do you think the relationships that women administrators/presidents have in their personal lives (e.g., with children or spouses/ partners, etc.) influence their career paths and leadership aspirations?
14) What influence have the significant relationships in your personal life (e.g., with children or spouses/ partners, etc.) had on your career path and leadership aspirations?

*Gendered Perceptions of Leadership*

15) How would you describe your personal leadership style?
16) What particular personal traits, characteristics, or qualities that you would use to describe your leadership style?
17) From your experiences serving an administrator or president, have you seen any differences in male and female leadership?
18) In your own life, how has your gender shaped your leadership?
19) As a female administrator or president, how do you believe your leadership is seen or perceived by others?

*Concluding Question*

20) Given that my research focus is on women's leadership, is there anything that I did not ask today that you think is important for me to know?

**Author Note**

Lilian H. Hill is professor and co/chair of the Department of Educational Research and Administration at The University of Southern Mississippi. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: lilian.hill@usm.edu.

Celeste A. Wheat is an assistant professor of student affairs in higher education at the University of West Alabama. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: cwheat@uwa.edu

**Article Citation**

Hill, L. H., & Wheat, C. A. (2017). The influence of mentorship and role models on university women leaders' career paths to university presidency. *The Qualitative Report, 22*(8), 2090-2111. Retrieved from http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol22/iss8/2