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## The Experiences of Black Women Senior Student Affairs Officers: A Multiple-Case Study

Tamekka L. Cornelius

*Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging Professional*

Donald Mitchell Jr.

*Molloy University, dmitchell1@molloy.edu*

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## The Experiences of Black Women Senior Student Affairs Officers: A Multiple-Case Study

### Abstract

Within this multiple-case study, we explored the experiences of Black women in senior student affairs officer (SSAO) positions at four-year historically white institutions (HWIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the United States. We used Black feminist thought and representational bureaucracy to theoretically frame the study. Participants included SSAOs representing three HWIs and two HBCUs. Four central themes—often expressed within experiences of marginalization—emerged across the cases: 1) I Have a Right to Be Here; 2) Creating Networks; 3) No Straight Line to the Top; and 4) I’m Thinking about the Black Girls Coming Behind Me. We conclude the study with a discussion, implications for practice, and recommendations for ongoing research.

### Keywords

Black women, lived experiences, multiple-case study, senior student affairs officer, student affairs

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## The Experiences of Black Women Senior Student Affairs Officers: A Multiple-Case Study

Tamekka L. Cornelius<sup>1</sup> and Donald Mitchell, Jr.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging Professional, Louisville, Kentucky, USA

<sup>2</sup> Molloy University, Rockville Centre, New York, USA

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Within this multiple-case study, we explored the experiences of Black women in senior student affairs officer (SSAO) positions at four-year Historically White Institutions (HWIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the United States. We used Black feminist thought and representational bureaucracy to theoretically frame the study. Participants included SSAOs representing three HWIs and two HBCUs. Four central themes – often expressed within experiences of marginalization – emerged across the cases: (1) I have a right to be here, (2) Creating networks, (3) No straight line to the top, and (4) I’m thinking about the Black girls coming behind me. We conclude the study with a discussion, implications for practice, and recommendations for ongoing research.

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The progression of women of color to positions of leadership has been slow to advance (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010), particularly for African American<sup>1</sup> women. African American women, as compared to other demographics, have faced years of systemic oppression (Thelin, 2019) and are more likely to experience unfair treatment in training, frequent and inaccurate assessments of their work productivity, being overlooked for leadership positions and excluded from succession planning, disengagement, discrimination, and prejudice, and a lack of psychosocial and critical support (Breedon, 2021; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; West et al., 2016). Their experiences are concerning, particularly within U.S. higher education, given recent demographic trends.

The share of students of color in U.S. higher education rose from 29.6% in 1996 to 45.6% by 2016 (Espinosa et al., 2019), with a marginal decrease in 2020 to 41% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Still, the representation of faculty and administrators of color lag far behind student of color representation. As of 2016, people of color represented less than one-fifth of senior level executive positions, one in four students affairs professionals, 16.8% of presidencies, and 21.1% of full-time faculty (Black faculty representing only 5.7%; Espinosa et al., 2019). Data concerning Black women highlight even wider gaps in representation in leadership.

Data show that Black women earned 57% of bachelor’s degrees awarded to Black students during the 2020-2021 academic year. During the same timeframe, Black women represented 65% of master’s degrees and 59% of doctoral degrees earned by Black students. Further, Black women continue to comprise a larger share of total degrees awarded annually, particularly at the master’s and doctoral levels (United States Census Bureau, 2022). Despite

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<sup>1</sup> We use African American and Black interchangeably throughout the article.

this growth in the number of Black women obtaining degrees, they remain grossly underrepresented in senior administrative positions in higher education. Compared to the student population from the same group, they occupied 6.7% of senior-level administrator (management) roles in higher education in 2019 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). This disparity presents a void in the ability of Black women to assist with the academic and professional development of all students and African American women students in particular (Bartman, 2015). As the student body of institutions of higher education increase in diversity (Bischel & McChesney, 2017), so should the professional staff (West, 2020).

Black women in higher education are faced with a rather inauspicious destiny in the workplace (Rusher, 1996). The various factors that have influenced the career progression and ascension of middle to senior-level Black women are well documented (e.g., see Alexander-Lee, 2014; American Association of University Women, 2016; Catalyst, 2004; Hylton, 2012; Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009; Main & Gregory-Smith, 2018; O'Callaghan & Jackson, 2016; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Institutional and organizational barriers, including racism, sexism, issues with salary, implicit/unwritten codes, isolation, exclusion, negative stereotypes, fit, lack of mentors, emotional tax, unclear succession plans, and non-existent pipelines toward advancement have all been noted as obstacles which hinder Black women from reaching the senior-most levels of organizations (e.g., see Betters-Reed & Moore, 1995; Catalyst, 2004; Cotter et al., 2001; Haslam & Ryan, 2008; Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009; Leon, 2014; Main & Gregory-Smith, 2018; O'Callaghan & Jackson, 2016; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

Their underrepresentation can be explained through the term *glass ceiling*, referring to a transparent barrier that keeps women from rising above a certain level professionally *solely* because they are women (Morrison et al., 1987). Further, the intersection of gender and race brings its own set of unique challenges for Black women throughout the workforce. Black women face more disadvantages and discrimination based on what Crenshaw (1989) coined as *intersectionality* – the ways in which racism and sexism intersect or overlap with other forms of oppression (e.g., classism, homophobia) and simultaneously and uniquely marginalize Black women in society.

Research in industry suggests that gender and ethnically diverse companies are more likely to outperform their peers because diverse teams are more innovative and productive, and the same is true for institutions of higher education (Bischel & McChesney, 2017). Within this article, we bring focus to student affairs. Within higher education, the area of student affairs was constructed as an environment for learning outside of the classroom to promote student learning and development (Long, 2012). Today, the field of student affairs includes national professional organizations, produces literature and publications, and graduate degree programs for prospective practitioners on college campuses worldwide (Schwartz & Stewart, 2017). Student affairs divisions are normally led by senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) and there is an undeniable underrepresentation of Black women serving in these roles. A 2014 report by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators noted Black women represented 7% of SSAOs (as cited in West, 2020).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to contribute to and advance the research concerning the lived experiences of African American women in SSAO roles at public four-year postsecondary institutions. Specifically, this study focused on Black women in SSAO roles across historically White institutions<sup>2</sup> (HWIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities<sup>3</sup> (HBCUs). Previous studies on college administrators have primarily focused on

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<sup>2</sup> Historically White institutions (HWIs) are defined as institutions with “a history, demography, curriculum, climate, and a set of symbols and traditions that embody and reproduce whiteness and white supremacy” (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022, p. 2).

<sup>3</sup> Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are defined as “institutions established before the Civil Rights Act with the sole purpose of educating African Americans” (Patterson et al., 2013, p. 154).

Black women's underrepresentation in faculty and academic administrative positions, on staff of color generally, or on Black men administrators in higher education (for example, see Davis & Brown, 2017; Holmes et al., 2007; Jones & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013; Steele, 2018). Fewer studies have focused solely on Black women student affairs professionals (e.g., see Anderson, 2014; Burke & Carter, 2015; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Mitchell, 2018; Twale & Jelinek, 1996; West, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020; Yakaboski & Donahoo, 2011), particularly concerning their experiences as SSAOs (e.g., see Breedan, 2021; Brooks, 2022; Hylton, 2012; Jenkins, 2019; Scott, 2003; Sobers, 2014). In addition, Black women's experiences as SSAOs are rarely highlighted in peer-reviewed journal publications (Breedan, 2021).

Given the dearth of literature on Black women in SSAO roles and the importance of their representation in these roles, within this study, we explored Black women's experiences as SSAOs across HWIs and HBCUs using multiple-case study. We explored what these women experienced as barriers and as successes, the issues they faced as they ascended to their roles, and strategies and recommendations for the future leadership pipeline of the field. The following research questions guided the study: (1) What are the work experiences of Black women in senior leadership positions in student affairs? (2) What barriers/issues to obtaining senior leadership positions in student affairs are identified by Black women? (3) What do Black women senior student affairs leaders attribute to their success? (4) What recommendations and/or strategies do Black women senior leaders suggest improving the leadership pipeline in student affairs as it relates to other Black women obtaining such roles?

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study is guided by Black feminist thought (BFT; see Collins, 2000) and representational bureaucracy (see Kingsley, 1944; Mosher, 1968). BFT specializes in articulating the distinct and self-defined standpoint of African American women by African American women (Collins, 2000). BFT also seeks to honor Black women's lived experiences as a marginalized group within traditional scholarship and in academic settings. Collins (2000) described such marginalization as intersecting oppressions of racism, sexism, and classism, among other forms of oppression. These intersections lead to a rather peculiar positionality that she describes as an "outsider within" (Collins, 1986, p. 11), referring to a status in which Black women have been invited into a space or setting occupied by the dominant group, but remain on the outside, having no voice and being deemed invisible.

The second framework guiding this study, representative bureaucracy, has its origins in public administration. Mosher (1968) describes representative bureaucracy as an institution being representative to the extent that the social background of the representatives mirrors the social backgrounds of the represented. Meier and Stewart (1992) conducted one of the first studies linking demographic representation to policy outcomes. They found that the increased presence of African American bureaucrats (i.e., teachers) had a significantly favorable effect on policy outcomes related to African American students. The concept of a representative bureaucracy is that agencies (e.g., colleges and universities) are better situated to serve their constituents (e.g., students) when the bureaucrats (e.g., administrators) reflect the social background of the population they serve. Together, Black feminist thought and representational bureaucracy shaped our study.

## **Method**

We employed a multiple-case study research design. Generally, a study using a case study research design analyzes a bounded system over time using multiple data collection methods (Yin, 2014). The bounded system within the present multiple-case study were Black

women serving as SSAOs. More specifically, a multiple-case study is centered around one issue or concern, with the researcher(s) selecting multiple cases to illustrate that issue or concern (Yin, 2014).

### Sample and Criteria

We selected the participants using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is a strategy that deliberately selects individuals from particular settings in order to gather information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each participant met the criteria set forth by the purpose of this study: they all identified as an African American/Black woman willing to detail her experience as an SSAO and who was employed at a four-year HWI or HBCU. We included a purposeful selection of five administrators within the study.

### Participant Recruitment

We received Institutional Review Board approval prior to participant recruitment. Our effort to obtain potential participants was twofold. First, TC, who served as the first author, examined databases of student affairs and higher education websites in search of SSAO appointees or seasoned SSAOs in the news. These included *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education's* African American and women's sections, the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education's* appointment and HBCU sections, *INSIGHT Into Diversity's* latest news section, and *U.S. News' 2020 HBCU* list. Additionally, TC checked the student affairs pages of the various HWI and HBCU websites. Second, TC posted recruitment fliers, which detailed the study and request for participants, on various social media sites. From this recruitment process, we interviewed five participants. We assigned participants and the institutions they represented pseudonyms to protect their identities.

### Participant Demographics

We gathered data from five Black women SSAOs employed at four-year public and private HWIs and HBCUs in the Midwest, Southeast, and Northeast regions of the United States. Participants ages ranged from 40-59 years old. Three participants served at HWIs, and two participants served at HBCUs. Four participants held doctoral degrees as their highest degree obtained, and one held a master's degree. Table 1 provides more demographic details about each study participant.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym*	Institutional Pseudonym**	Age Range***	Institution Type	Institution Size	Years in Student Affairs	Highest Degree Obtained
Whitney	Herron Velma University	N/R	HBCU	5,001-10,000	>21	Ed.D.
Toni	Harden University	50-59	HBCU	2,000-5,000	>21	Ph.D.
Anita	Bush University	40-49	HWI	>20,000	16-20	M.A.

Pseudonym*	Institutional Pseudonym**	Age Range***	Institution Type	Institution Size	Years in Student Affairs	Highest Degree Obtained
Jill	Lawson College	50-59	HWI	<2,000	11-15	Ph.D.
Janet	King University	50-59	HWI	<2000	>21	Ph.D.

*Note.* \* Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect their identity

\*\* Each institution was given a pseudonym to protect its identity

\*\*\* Participant did not respond

## Data Collection

Yin (2014) refers to six forms of data collection – documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts – that contribute to “high-quality” (p. 105) case studies. We collected data for this multiple-case study using three forms of data collection. During the first phase of the study, we gained background information on each participant by collecting relevant documents (e.g., CVs and resumes) and reviewing them. Data for the second phase included a participant demographic questionnaire, followed by conducting one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with each participant. During this phase, we also incorporated artifact elicitation to generate conversation and develop an understanding of each participant’s perspective of a physical representation of success. Each data collection method is explained in detail in the following sections.

**Document review.** Prior to her interview, each participant emailed a copy of her resume or CV, and TC researched the institution’s website, national journals, and news outlets for archival records related to the participants (i.e., press releases, articles). TC reviewed every document to learn more about each participant’s professional (and in some instances personal) background; these documents served as contextual content relevant to each case and research site.

**Participant demographic questionnaire.** We sent a link to a demographic questionnaire to each participant in the invitational email. Since one of the primary criteria for participation was to self-identify as Black or African-American, the questionnaire asked participants to indicate their race and ethnicity; list their highest degree earned; their previous work experience at both HBCUs and HWIs (if applicable); their length of time in their current role and in student affairs as a whole; the size of their institution; the titles of their direct reports; the title of their immediate supervisor; the size of their institution; and details regarding their salary range.

**Interview process.** As participants completed the demographic questionnaire and granted consent to participate, TC began scheduling interviews and conducted the interviews. We conducted the interviews through videoconferencing or phone since we collected data during the COVID-19 pandemic. We audio recorded and then transcribed each interview. The interviews ranged from 60-120 minutes long. After we transcribed each interview, we emailed a copy of each participant’s transcript for them to review. We asked them to confirm that the transcript accurately reflected their responses and gave them the opportunity to request any portion of the interview be omitted or to add any additional information they wanted to share. The questions asked during the interviews are included in Appendix A.

**Artifacts.** The final source of data collected for this study was artifacts. Miles et al. (2014) suggest incorporating artifact elicitation into a study in an effort to elicit responses and

make meaning of the topic being studied. We used artifact elicitation as a part of the interview process to evoke information, feelings, and memories as to what each participant considered to be a physical representation of her success. While the specific introductory question related to the artifact was focused on the study topic, the majority of follow-up questions were open-ended and based on the artifact. We asked each participant to be prepared to show their artifact during the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

We analyzed the data by providing narratives, or case introductions, of the participants. The narratives were formed using each of the data collection methods to help introduce the reader to each participant. In addition to the case introductions, we used initial and focused coding processes to develop themes and subthemes across the cases. We layered our analysis process, reviewing the data independently of each other at various stages of the process. During the initial coding process, TC coded the data using in vivo coding or “verbatim coding” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 106) using the participant’s own language from the data collected as codes to honor their voices. The codes were crosschecked by DM (the second author), and were either agreed upon, discussed, or rejected, and finalized. During the second cycle of coding, we reorganized and reconfigured the larger mass of codes generated in the first cycle using focused coding (Saldaña, 2016). At this phase, we searched for the most frequent or significant codes to develop major categories from the data by connecting and condensing the codes into categories (Saldaña, 2016). Like the first round of coding, the focused codes were crosschecked by DM. Finally, we assigned themes and subthemes to the data. Theming the data involves assigning an “extended phrase or sentence” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 298) to explain what a particular unit of data is about or what it means. The themes and subthemes were constructed by TC and crosschecked by DM.

### **Trustworthiness**

Ravitch and Carl (2016) suggest many different methods to improve the trustworthiness of qualitative research. They use the criteria credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to improve trustworthiness and we employed these criteria for the study (for full explanation of each criterion, see Ravitch and Carl, 2016). To improve the trustworthiness of the study we: (1) triangulated the data by collecting various forms of data and comparing and contrasting the data to existing scholarship; (2) conducted member checks to ensure the transcripts were accurate and to ensure the findings matched the participants lived experiences; (3) used thick, rich, context-relevant descriptions to ensure there was evidence to support the proposed themes and subthemes; (4) reviewed the data independently at various stages of the process to reduce bias and to honor the voices of the participants; and finally, 5) provided rich detail of the study so that it could be replicated. Another way to improve the trustworthiness of a qualitative study is for researchers to acknowledge their positionalities, or how they are situated in relation to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). What follows are our positionality statements.

### **Researchers’ Positionalities**

TC: I entered this research as a Black woman mid-level administrator in student affairs aspiring to be a senior leader. All my professional student affairs experience has been as an employee at HWIs. From the onset, I shared at least two commonalities with the study sample. While I did not have a personal



relationship with any of the participants, I found that we did indeed share some commonalities in terms of both professional and personal experiences. My experiences and positionality led to a certain connectedness with the participants, which I had to acknowledge and account for as we moved through the study.

DM: I entered this research as a scholar who studies race and racism, gender and sexism, and identity intersections and intersectionality within higher education contexts. While I have never worked in a student affairs division, I have taught various courses in higher education and student affairs preparation programs, so I was familiar with the field, have prepared professionals entering the field, and advocate for diversifying the field. Although I am compelled by Black feminist thought and intersectionality as articulated by Black women, I understand I can never fully understand their lived experiences as a Black man and deferred to my co-author as necessary as we analyzed the data.

## Findings

The focus of this section of the study is two-fold: (1) to introduce, in detail, the profiles, including the background and current leadership experiences of the participants, and (2) to illustrate the themes and subthemes that emerged across the cases. Prior to introducing readers to the findings, we would like to highlight the salience of racism, microaggressions, oppression, marginalization, and tokenism the participants experienced, and appears across the themes and subthemes presented.

As the literature suggests (e.g., see Breeden, 2021; Constantine & Sue, 2007; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; West, 2015) the overt and subtle forms of racism Black women experience in the workplace were experienced by the five participants. Participants recalled many instances of unwelcoming and hostile work environments, including seeing racist imagery on campus or in the surrounding town, having racist remarks directed towards them, and getting pushback on projects or programs designed to address diversity and inclusion.

Further, being one of few in their institutions in general, and certainly one of few in leadership positions, the participants were by default labeled tokens. Lewis (2016) attributes being a “numerical few” (p. 110) as a direct result of the skewed leadership compositions of HWIs (by race, gender, and their intersections) and HBCUs (by gender). The women in the study felt the outcomes of being one of these few, affirming the fact that because they are one of only a few, they have a higher degree of visibility and have been called on to speak universally on behalf of Black women. And being one of a few was often magnified by the microaggressions they experienced while at work. Still, the women relied on their varied forms of networks to counter the marginalization.

## Participant Profiles

While the participants were all Black women currently working as SSAOs, it is important to note they are not a monolith. While each of the women did share some similarities with other participants, their individual upbringings, backgrounds, length of years in the field, career progression, leadership styles, and experiences as minoritized leaders at their respective institutions varied.

**Case One: Vice President Jill**

Vice President (VP) Jill's higher education trajectory spanned over sixteen years, beginning during her tenure as an academic adviser at an HWI public, four-year university, and extended to her most recent appointment as VP for student life of Lawson College. Lawson was a residential, four-year, private, liberal arts HWI in the Midwest. Like many student affairs professionals, VP Jill's academic trajectory did not begin with student affairs or higher education as the goal. Instead, VP Jill earned a bachelor's degree in arts and sciences and a doctorate in higher education leadership. VP Jill held various roles outside of higher education, working in the nonprofit and government sectors, ultimately returning to the university setting as an academic adviser. VP Jill attributed her success as a student affairs professional to the foundation that was laid by her mother, noting that her mother was the catalyst who urged her to enter the field of education. She submitted a photo of her doctorate degree as a physical representation of success.

**Case Two: Vice President Whitney**

Vice President (VP) Whitney's higher education trajectory spanned over twenty-one years, beginning with her tenure as the associate director for the African American center at a public, four-year HWI. Her current appointment at the time of the study was vice president for student affairs at Herron Velma University. Herron Velma was a four-year, residential, public HBCU located in the mid-Atlantic region. VP Whitney earned a bachelor's degree in psychology, a master's in criminal justice, and doctorate in urban educational leadership. VP Whitney attributed her success as a student affairs professional to her spirituality, specifically to this mantra that her great-grandmother repeated as early as high school graduation: "To whom much is given, much is required."

**Case Three: Vice President Janet**

Vice President (VP) Janet's career in higher education spanned more than twenty-seven years, beginning during her tenure as an admissions representative for a system of private, for-profit colleges scattered throughout the United States. Following that role, VP Janet held various student affairs positions at a private, four-year HBCU in the south, initially as a career counselor, and ending her tenure as the dean of students, serving there a total of twelve years. VP Janet served as the vice president for student life and dean of students at King University, a small, private, four-year HWI in the Midwest. VP Janet earned a bachelor's degree in arts and sciences, a master's in counseling, and a doctorate in organization and management. When describing her success, she linked her accomplishments to the matriarch of her family, her mother. She sent pictures and snapshots from various international travel excursions as her artifacts.

**Case Four: Vice President Toni**

Vice President (VP) Toni's higher education trajectory spanned more than twenty years, which began with her tenure as director of student affairs at a regional campus of a large, public, four-year HWI, and extended to her appointment as vice president for student affairs at Harden University, a small, private, four-year HBCU in the south. VP Toni held a bachelor's degree in the social sciences, a master's in educational administration, and a doctorate in higher education. VP Toni's commitment to providing students with the resources and tools necessary to gain quality educational experiences was evident in her depiction of success. She shared two

artifacts: one was a handcrafted wooden board gifted to her by former students and another was a particularly special award she received as a student working in student affairs.

### **Case Five: Vice President Anita**

Vice President (VP) Anita began her career in higher education with her role as a residence hall director at Bush University, a large, public, four-year HWI. After spending two years in housing and residence life at another institution, VP Anita returned to Bush University, serving in multiple capacities, beginning as assistant director for residence life, then as director of the multicultural center, associate vice president for student affairs and enrollment services/interim vice president for student affairs and enrollment services, and finally, twenty years later, Anita was appointed to the role of vice president for student affairs at the institution. VP Anita earned a bachelor's degree in journalism and a master's degree in higher education student personnel. When speaking about success, VP Anita spoke of her familial relationships and her ancestry.

### **Themes Across Cases**

While the themes are the foundation of our findings, each overarching theme has accompanying subthemes that add to the detail of the study. We provide representative quotes rather than quotes from each participant to substantiate each theme and subtheme; however, each theme and subtheme does represent each of the five cases.

### **I Have a Right to be Here**

A major component of this study was to identify barriers and successes that each participant identified as influential in their career progression. Theme one, "I have a right to be here," developed as the women overwhelmingly spoke about feelings of isolation and exclusion. Through this theme's subthemes, the participants discussed how they navigate their work environments as Black women, vying to be seen, heard, and valued both by colleagues, students, and other members of the university community. These subthemes include belonging, fit, my Blackness, imposter syndrome, and code-switching.

**Belonging.** When asked about the barriers that they faced, the participants shared feelings of isolation instigated by being one of few Black women on campus, particularly in senior-level roles. These feelings often resulted in participants feeling disengaged from other administrators and happenings on campus. Vice President Janet gave credence to this, stating,

It has been a struggle for me, being an African American administrator or senior cabinet member at a predominately White institution ...It is a struggle as an African American woman to work at a majority institution, it is on both sides, from the faculty and staff as well as the students.

Participants cited having a sense of belonging as a significant contributor to their persistence when they often are the minority in the workplace based on race, gender, or both. The participants talked about belonging both in a relational sense (i.e., developing social relationships at work; McClure & Brown, 2008), and feeling valued and appreciated for their contribution to the institution and the expertise that accompanies them (Filstad et al., 2019).

Vice President Janet expanded on this concept of belonging in a relational aspect, stating:

It's just a handful of us, and I mean, literally just a handful. And not that I wanted us to cling together because we are the same skin color, but I mean that's a part of it, that we need to support each other.

Vice President Jill spoke about how she felt a contrast in sense of belonging with how relationships among colleagues played out in terms of disputes or misunderstandings with other minority professionals versus majority:

In our community we always say, there are the ones that's going to run to HR, where nine times out of 10, we're going to squash it within us. Might be mad, might mumble some stuff but...we come back the next day, we get work done. Over here, this one is going to run to HR, and now we either in a situation, I'm written up or whatever, and I ain't got time for that.

It was evident that the women felt that a sense of belonging was both relational and situational. Reciprocity was essential to feelings of belonging to their institution and being more granular to their department. Participants described having a sense of belonging as being a fundamental need in their role, a motivator to achievement and essential to their level of satisfaction as a SSAO.

**Fit.** For many of the vice presidents, the often-obscure meaning and use of the term "fit" was noted as a barrier that they have faced throughout their careers. Vice President Toni spoke about experiences with fit as related to the hiring processes, both that she has been a part of and as a candidate herself. She referred to the selection as follows: "We hire who we like, as opposed to hiring the people that are best suited, needing to do or perform a given role." Vice President Anita spoke about fit during an encounter she had with colleagues while a member of a search committee:

When we got to the interview stage, there was a lot of words of being polished and stuff that were being thrown around. And so, for me, what I did was I spoke to the chair of the committee privately about my concern over the use of those terms and how we were using it as a criterion. I certainly understand what the intent is, but let's look at the impact because what I see is that most of the people being described as not polished as we finish our interviews, happen to be the one or two candidates of Color in some aspect and that is problematic because we have decided that's a criteria and we've equated it with that that means... I want you to talk about the skills. I want to talk about the experience, and I wanted to be able to explain your talk, because that is code word for, they don't fit. And we also will not talk about fit. There's no fit...Let's call a spade a spade and a club a club, what is it you want and you're looking for.

The participants also noted that fit is reciprocal. When asked about leadership and the attributes that have made them successful and their recommendations, the participants agreed that individuals should decide if the institution is a fit for your needs and wants. VPSA Janet gave this advice to aspiring Black women senior student affairs officers: "Understanding who you are and what your role is or what you want to be and what's the best fit." VPSA Toni echoed, "We're mayors of little cities or big cities... Understanding where you fit in the organization is important."

Institutional fit has various implications. The cultural norms and values shared by a particular institution may not necessarily match those of the administrators selected to work

there, and this reality should be acceptable, as each individual in a senior role brings a different set of values, experience, credentials, and leadership qualities to the position.

**My Blackness.** To understand the factors that may influence the lived experiences of the participants, it is important to note that each participant indicated that her race was central to her identity. Each participant spoke about feeling reminded of her race in ways that White colleagues rarely were. When asked to describe her identity, above her degrees, job title, religion, class, etc., each participant led with a variation of identifying as a Black woman, seeing her dual identity as a Black or African American woman as significant to how she sees herself and how she leads. Vice President Whitney simply stated, “I do really value my Blackness, my history, my foundation, and everything that comes with that as well as being a woman.”

The VPs also spoke at length about the concept of authenticity and what it means to bring your authentic self to work. Vice President Janet spoke about the struggles of being an African American woman at an HWI. She talked about her desire to support both students and staff, some who were supportive and receptive to her leadership and others who would “overlook my role...and go to the White administrators.” From her stance, this made her both reflect and become even more determined:

It makes me go hard, it does. But I will admit it does make me reflect...So first of all, I am the first African American in this role. They have never had an African American at the senior cabinet-level. This school's been around for over one hundred years. So, I think for a lot of people that was a shocker as well. So, I think about that in terms of, okay, so, how do I keep moving and how do I be a bit stronger and a little bit more aggressive? But not aggressive in a bad way, but aggressive in terms of, “I'm here, I have a job to do, and most of all, I'm here for you and I want you to succeed.” So, it just pushes me to do more.

The participants also spoke about creating a welcoming and comfortable environment. Specifically, the importance of allowing a space for Black women to be seen, heard, and comfortable in their workspace was paramount to the concept of authenticity. They cited that at the most basic level, institutions and those working in them should focus on creating nonhostile work environments. There was a connectedness among all the participants to their Black identity. While their identity is multifaceted, being a Black woman was at the forefront for the women in terms of how they positioned themselves in relation to the institutions and their work.

**Imposter syndrome.** Imposter syndrome, an internal feeling of incompetence, feeling fraudulent and undeserving of achievements, can be attributed to an individual's self-doubt, anxiety, and isolation (Bothello & Roulet, 2019; Chrousos & Mentis, 2020). When people internalize these feelings, they tend to ascribe their achievements and accomplishments to luck or coincidence instead of to their personal and distinct skill and merit (Bothello & Roulet, 2019). Participants expressed similar sentiments when recollecting feelings of imposter syndrome, echoing what Clance and Imes (1978) described as “an internal experience of intellectual phoniness which appears to be particularly prevalent and intense among a select sample of high achieving women” (p. 241). While imposter syndrome is common in many professions, the caveat of this phenomenon being associated with women, high achievers, and women of Color is more prevalent (Chrousos & Mentis, 2020). Vice President Jill reflected on receiving signals of imposter syndrome as a child:

From when I was younger, the message you should be seen and not heard. Like oh you're beautiful, so be seen. You're not intelligent enough, so don't be heard,

you just need to be quiet cause you really don't know everything, so you just need to sit there and observe and listen. And so, I'm still trying to, to navigate that.

Afterwards, she reflected on how this mindset manifested itself in her adult years, adding that despite being a high-achiever, "when I was coming in as an associate dean, I thought there would be no way that I would get the job," speaking of the interview process at a former institution.

Self-doubt and feelings of not belonging were also cited as factors prompting feelings of imposter syndrome. The idea that Black women lack professionalism is culturally biased, and these thoughts hold people from marginalized backgrounds to much higher expectations than others. Vice President Toni recalled being in the presence of other highly skilled and educated Black women at professional conferences during which discussions of rising to the ranks of vice president were met with trepidation:

The one statement that they made consistently is that we don't apply. As women, we want the VP roles, but we never apply or we want a critical role, we want to be in a space, but we never raise our hand, we never say I would like to do that.

The participants noted that these feelings and behaviors were in part a result of the bias that is prevalent in work culture and what is valued by the majority. The experiences that Black women encounter such as unequally high-performance standards, being compared to the majority standard of professionalism, and systemic bias and racism are contributors to feelings of being an imposter in a White majority field.

**Code-switching.** Making behavioral adjustments in the workplace, or code-switching (Boulton, 2016; Hall et al., 2012) was a phenomenon experienced by all the participants. Modifying their speech, appearance, expressions, and mannerisms to acquiesce in various environments, and in the presence of interracial audiences, was noted frequently. Participants noted code-switching for a myriad of reasons. Vice President Janet code-switched (both consciously and unconsciously) to talk more like those around her:

So, I've had to code-switch in two different roles. As a Southerner, because I will get real southern and say y'all, and talk real slow. So, I have to remember I'm in the Midwest. I have to be mindful of that.

Vice President Jill talked about inadvertently slipping into "hip or young language" with the president of her institution, and then immediately thinking, "that's the president, should I have said that? So yeah, I guess to a certain extent, yeah, I code-switch."

Code-switching can also be activated to protect oneself against stereotype threat, or the perceptions of negative stereotypes of one's entire race. Vice-President Anita described having to oscillate back and forth, depending on the audience or setting, as an unfair burden:

It's absolutely not right. It's not right and it's not fair. Every Black female is supposed to come here and be judged on who they are, that's the way it should be. But in reality, do I know that's how it's going to be? No, more than likely not. So, there is that responsibility and burden.

The women also expressed the toll that code-switching had on them. Vice President Anita noted, "You just want to explode, externally you have to be poised. There is no place for

that to happen. It makes me exhausted.” Still, in the end, code-switching did not completely strip the participants of their perceptions of themselves and how they navigated mostly White spaces.

Code-switching was used by participants as a mechanism to succeed. Participants noted that while they did employ code-switching to balance the double discrimination of racism and sexism (Crenshaw, 1989), it did not rid them of their authenticity to themselves, but rather was often unconsciously or consciously strategic to help them reach their goals or operate effectively in their respective SSAO role.

## Creating Networks

In addition to identifying the barriers that participants experienced, we also sought to identify the factors that participants attributed to their success. The participants strongly promoted the importance of creating and maintaining strong relationships with other professionals and administrators in the field and gleaning resources along the way. The women ultimately leveraged these networks to aid them in decision-making, to help them understand institutional norms, to serve as advisers and individuals who could assist with brainstorming and problem-solving, as well as mentors who could advocate and support them as they advanced and navigated throughout their career. Three subthemes were derived from this theme: mentor support, presidential support, and networking.

**Mentor support.** When asked what they contributed to their success, all participants responded that mentor support was one of the most influential contributors. Mentors were listed as an invaluable support to participants at various stages of their career trajectory, and “having a good support base” was of utmost importance to VP Janet regarding her success as an administrator. When asked about her academic path, VP Anita attested to the importance of a multifaceted network consisting of mentors, allies, and champions:

I need mentors and allies, and I need champions, and I need advocates, my network needs all of those. It can't just be mentoring. It has to be all of those aspects; I think that has helped me to get where I am.... Not only do you have to have the education, but you need to have champions out there who are creating space because there's only so much knocking down the doors you can do on your own. Sometimes you have to understand the value of champions who are in this space and have the ability to open the door, as opposed to me, straining myself and knocking down the door.

Mentoring was listed by VP Toni as one of the top three attributes to being a successful senior student affairs officer: “Mentoring, supporting, and ensuring that we create spaces for Black women to be successful.” She went on to talk about the role of cross-cultural and across gender mentors throughout her tenure as an administrator:

Yeah, I've got a series of mentors. I've got male mentors, I've got female mentors, I've got White mentors. I have more than one, and I have them for very different reasons. They all bring a different expertise to the area. I've got someone who specializes in law in higher education. I've got a mentor who was the first Black vice president at [names institution], so she can talk about what that experience means. I've got White women who support me and can help me think through situations that look very political, and that I need to figure out how to navigate differently. I've got folks who are LGBTQ mentors...So I've

pretty much got a mentor for everything because everybody has their own personal experience that they bring to the table.

All the participants reflected on former or current mentor relationships that they have had over the years, some dating back to when they were undergraduate students. The mentor support proved to be an invaluable asset to the participants in their ascension to leadership. Participants described having a mentor as essential because doing so provides access to networks to which they otherwise may not have been privy, increases their job prospects, enhances their promotion possibilities, and serves as a source of advice and insider information. The participants also stressed the importance of mentoring being reciprocal, adding that they, too, serve as mentors to other professionals, mainly younger, African American women.

**Presidential support.** All the participants reported directly to the president of their institution. Participants spoke about their relationships with the president in terms of their decision-making power and their ability to maintain a good relationship with the president, the leadership team, and other stakeholders. These dynamics proved to be important factors in terms of retention and level of institutional support felt by participants. Vice President Whitney reiterated the importance of having a supportive president who trusts your leadership and decision-making skill:

I think that is so important, the type of relationship you do have with a president because I've been in situations or I've had people around me who experienced something totally different. When we're at the table making decisions, it's real transparent. We know each other at the table and you can say, "Well Whitney, this is going to impact students, what do you think we need to do?" And I'm very firm when things are happening, he's calling to say, "Is this right? What's the word on the street? What do you feel?" It is a good feeling.

Vice President Toni felt supported by her president and added, "He, in essence, makes sure that everybody is heard at the table." The pattern of being at the table was an advantage that VP Jill believed was most valuable as well:

My former boss was an African American male; he let me be at the table. He let me have my ideas, and if my ideas were crazy and not in line with maybe some other things, we would talk about it and he would never make me apologize or even take them off the table, he would just talk like, let's have a conversation, you know, why do you feel that way? And I think that helps me in my job now as vice president. So, in my job now as vice president to be comfortable to say things at the president's table because my former VP had allowed me that in the relationship.

As administrators who reported directly to the president of their institution, all five participants cited that they felt respected and that their relationships with the president were trusting and open. They all also said that their decision-making power was satisfactory, which is important as the SSAO is an influential position that should be entrusted with making decisions on behalf of the students and changing and helping to shape progression of the university.

**Networking.** The participants emphasized that to stay competitive and current with the everchanging dynamics of the industry, constant networking is critical to senior student affairs professionals. The participants reinforced that notion, sharing insights into specific ways that they have broadened their networks. Building relationships with other professionals in the field was emphasized. Vice President Whitney offered a nice summary of networking: "It's not what



you know, it's who you know. But you've got to know something." She stressed the importance of developing a network while in pursuit of professional development:

Being strategic, always still being a part of professional organizations. You have to, unfortunately to stay relevant, stay on top of things, because again, the barriers...Networking is so, so critical. I can't tell people that enough. Go to the things you just don't want to go to. Networking is so critical because now, I know the VPs at different HBCUs and I still am intentional about reaching out to other vice presidents at [HWIs].... I think a degree says a lot, but you have to get all that you can, and then once you get it, you have to join professional organizations and be active. Don't just put it saying I'm a part of NASPA. You have to do something in these professional organizations because, again, I think that's how it builds networks.

Involvement with professional organizations and affiliations associated with them were strategies for success for several participants. Vice President Toni was clear that to grow in student affairs and ascend to the senior level you need to "get involved beyond your institution, professional associations are key." She was encouraged to by a mentor to join the board of directors for the regional governing association for higher education in her state and also served as a reviewer for the accreditation board that her institution reported to, adding that these experiences led to her "being in the room with some great presidents, vice presidents for academic affairs, business and financial leaders, and pretty much every area imaginable on a college campus."

Intragroup networking among other Black professionals was also cited by participants to build alliances, engage in shared dialogue, and be in community. Vice President Jill discussed internal intragroup networking that was a staple with colleagues at her institution:

We get together, we used to do monthly get togethers at people's places. Now, we have a think called wind down Wednesdays over here at our restaurant. We go over there and sit in the lobby. I mean we take over the lobby to where the tourists that were coming in there at the hotel would be like, what is this, a Black convention? So, we are a very tight support group.

The networks gained by the participants were crucial to advancement. Participants described networking as being both strategic and intentional. Networking occurred in many forms, including informal networks with other SSAOs, formal networks via professional conferences, intragroup or affinity group networking with other Black SSAOs, and through other professional or social events.

### **No Straight Line to the Top**

Each participant took a different path to the vice-presidency. Their ascension to leadership was nonlinear and did not follow a logical and predictable route. In their ascension to leadership, they have faced different demands and had to adjust their leadership style and professional interactions accordingly. Three subthemes emerged because of how participants' various educational and professional experiences led them to where they are today. Those subthemes included: I fell into this field, active representation, and leadership.

**I fell into this field.** The women all held different roles before ultimately landing a SSAO position. Their career trajectories spanned decades and included work across multiple industries, from corporate boardrooms to law and government, philanthropic organizations,

and education. All of the participants shared that a career in higher education was not necessarily their goal, and many had other aspirations and started out in fields quite distant from education completely; however, in some shape or form, their desire to change the face of higher education by having a voice and seat at the table was the catalyst to their careers.

Vice President Jill shared that low salary expectations (in educational fields) led to her wanting to be an entertainment lawyer, but ultimately, after a conversation with her mother, that vision changed: “I remember us arguing, because education doesn’t pay well and it doesn’t treat its folks well...So, I really wasn’t going out to try to be a Black person in education, especially higher ed.” She was recruited by a large HWI to work as an academic adviser and eventually ascended to an associate director position before finding her way back to her alma mater. It was a mentor who helped her make meaning of the move: “He goes, we are our student voices, you might be on this island by yourself, but you have got to make sure that the students stay in the center of all of this.”

When recalling her entry into student affairs, VP Janet said, “I fell into it,” initially having ambitions of being an actress:

I was not going into higher education at all. So, get this, I was going to be an actress, and I’m not kidding, I had an agent, my undergraduate degree is in drama and communications. I did local plays, I did commercials, I did all kinds of things. I got into higher ed because I needed a job. I needed to work. I got a role in career services and I started working with students and then I was like, I like this, I like connecting with students. I like helping them identify who they are, what they want to be, and the impact they want to make on the world. And that’s how I got into this.

While each one of the VPs took a different path to land in student affairs, their educational tracks were similar. All but one of the participants held a terminal degree, and they all agreed that their master’s program helped to prepare them for a career in student affairs.

**Active representation.** The underrepresentation of Black women in collegiate leadership is evident. The participants acknowledged that too, speaking collectively about how the lack of representation manifested in their lived experiences as SSAOs at both HWIs and HBCUs. When asked how they represent their constituents (their students), all participants replied that they were active in the ways that they showed up for students and their interests. Vice President Whitney described her involvement as “an active advocate” for students.

The lack of Black administrators on campus illustrated the problem of representation on campus for VP Janet and influenced her quest to fill the gap:

There’s still challenges, particularly in terms of diversity and inclusion, not only for our students but for our faculty, staff, and for myself. I look at our board of trustees. There’s one person of color and I think there’s about 52 people on the board. So, think about that, okay. You’re recruiting students of Color, not just African American students, but your leadership doesn’t represent what you’re trying to make your institution look like.

Vice President Jill said that she views herself as an active representative but acknowledged the role that being a passive presence has for students as well:

So yes, there’s my face as the vice president for student affairs, an African American woman. But I’m also very engaged with students. I insert myself...So we’re going to have a training coming up here soon, as soon as we can bring

our students back. I have always inserted myself in those trainings so that I can get to know all the students that work for us in student life. But especially our African American students.

Each participant commented on the importance of active representation. They were deliberate in their actions to engage with students and advocate on their behalf. They realized that their presence played a critical role in the development of students of color *and* White students on campus. The participants strived to be relatable and assessable to all constituents, including students and their families.

**Leadership.** The participants discussed the barriers as well as the successes that they have encountered as SSAOs. Throughout the interviews, the various ways in which their identity influenced their approach to leadership was evident. When asked to share which leadership attributes or characteristics have proved to be successful in her career, VP Whitney asserted that being a servant leader was primary:

I've always been the type that if I ask you to do it, it's because I've done it, or I will do it. I think some VPs on campus would get mad at me, if I'm going to a meeting, I'm going to post a flyer on the way. You have people that do that, yes, but why can't I? I think servant leadership is very important to me because I think people have to know that you're going to do the work alongside them, and then again, if they see you doing the work, it's easy for them to follow you.

Vice President Janet described her leadership style as being inclusive and called attention to all the constituents that she serves:

I always say that I work primarily work for three people. I work for my students. I work for my president and I work for my board of trustees. And each of those three components expect and need something different from me, and I have to always be ready to respond and understand what the differences are with responding to the questions and their needs, or just giving them updates.

Vice President Toni took a more holistic approach to leadership:

Being a person of integrity and good character, having worked in pretty much every role in student affairs...My decisions are never really about me. I'm going to promote a vision and an idea, but I'm also going to have people at the table that help me to look at the holes in the vision and idea... I've always fought to have some degree of autonomy, but now I've reorganized, because I'm a little more seasoned. It's good to have autonomy, but it's better to have collegiality at partnerships and a team of people who are working to make the best possible experience for the students, faculty, staff, alumni, and guests.

Each participant employed a different leadership strategy. As senior leaders, their positions were considered prestigious and influential. Their presence in these roles had implications not only for the staff and students that they currently served, but for future African American women in the workforce as the next theme describes.

## **I'm Thinking about the Black Girls Coming Behind Me**

The final theme, I'm thinking about the Black girls coming behind me, is focused on the suggestions and recommendations that participants had for Black women aspiring to be SSAOs. The participants reflected on the personal practices that drew them into the field, their future aims and efforts that institutions and individual departments should focus on when trying to recruit Black women to senior leadership positions. Two subthemes emerged from this theme: aspirations and advancement and pipeline practices.

**Aspirations and advancement.** Despite the barriers to the advancement of Black women leaders in higher education, the participants are a testament to perseverance and fortitude. Each participant shared the individual goals and aspirations that she was considering for her next steps. Many would consider college presidency as being a natural progression for SSAOs; however, the participants were evenly split on the matter. Vice Presidents Jill and Janet were clear about wanting to secure a presidency role following their tenures as VP. Vice President Jill had plans to stay at her current institution until the sitting president leaves, and then she said she would like to “go and work at an HBCU, whether it's in the presidency position or the vice president,” before ultimately coming back to be the president of her undergraduate alma mater, where she was employed during the study. When asked about her next steps VP Janet simply said, “I'm going to be a president one day soon... Yeah that is my goal. I'm hoping for that within the next year and a half, two years, max.”

While she acknowledged that a natural next step would be president, VP Whitney was uncertain with that being her next move, and for her that was “okay for the moment to not know.” Instead, she is debating and has considered doing something with a professional higher education organization such as her regional accrediting body or NASPA. What she knows for sure is: “In the next year, it will be something different. I just don't know what that is yet.”

Vice President Toni was also not convinced that moving into a president role was next for her, rather, she was considering a career in fundraising as a potential next step. She stated, “I don't aspire to be a president. I feel like I'm where I'm supposed to be, and until the good Lord tells me I am supposed to be somewhere else, I will be right here.” Vice President Anita shared those sentiments: “I fundamentally believe that I am where I'm supposed to be.” She shared that she has no desire to be a president of a university, instead she had her sights on being faculty stating, “When I retire, when I earn my doctoral degree, I want to teach in a student affairs program.”

**Pipeline practices.** The women contended that more attention needs to be focused on how institutional practices either help or hinder professionals of color, specifically Black women, in reaching the ranks of SSAO. African American women face markedly different barriers to advancement. While more women are “breaking the glass ceiling” (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, p. 172), as Vice President Janet notes, higher education as a whole “is still a predominantly male and White led field.”

The participants each offered their suggestions for other Black women aspiring to be SSAOs, as well as recommendations to improve the leadership pipeline in student affairs. Vice President Anita suggests being intentional about taking opportunities that are given. She noted:

If I'm going to be given a space at the table, I'm taking the opportunity. I may not know what it would bring, but it's the opportunity. Because you may think what does that have to do with me? Why would I do that? But what I have found is that when you get into that space, people get to see your work and your skill and your talent... Then when it gets to that opportunity, they'll say, “Who is the person that we think would have the ability to do it?” And that's what it comes down to.

Vice President Whitney agreed, with VP Anita's comments on intentionality, stating, "You have to just always stay sharp on your skillset because you can get so involved and bogged down with your day-to-day and your professional things that you want to aspire to just go to the side." She also noted being provided opportunities as critical.

Vice President Janet recommended these efforts be intentional and referenced a program that she participated in specifically designed for elevating African American women in higher education:

There is a barrier, there is a wall, there is a block. So, this program, [names program], was designed specifically to open doors and it's not just for letting Black people in because you're Black, you still need to be qualified and have what it takes, but it's giving you an extra push to get yourself seen. That's the main thing I think once we're seen, we can sell ourselves. It's just getting someone to look at us.

She went on to say that she felt she has a personal responsibility to mentor and be a role model to support and help other African American women as they move forward in their careers, doing what she can to be an example, adding, "I'm thinking about the young Black girls that's coming behind me."

As a current VP at an HBCU, Toni offered her unique perspective on succession, which speaks to the concept of fit and also reinforces the idea that HBCUs are less than:

If you're working at an HBCU, you need another reference besides a Black person, if you're trying to apply at [an HWI] because nobody cares...I've got a friend I'm trying to help right now, she's brilliant...But nobody cares, when she's interviewing at these [HWIs], about that experience, because she doesn't have not one White reference in the bunch, that can speak to her ability to relate and quote unquote be the right fit for the institution.

In sum, the participants offered their thoughts on how institutions can remedy, and address barriers Black women face when aspiring to be SSAOs, as well as ways to overcome them.

## Discussion

Within this study, we explored the lived experiences of Black women serving as SSAOs at four-year institutions. Moreover, we documented the experiences of Black women in SSAO roles at both HWIs and HBCUs. With their stories, they expressed the self-definition and self-valuation Collins (1986, 2000) presents in her articulation of Black feminist thought.

As noted earlier, active representation is derived from the theory of representational bureaucracy. This theory has its origins in politics and has mainly been used in research related to different levels of government (Kingsley, 1944; Mosher, 1968). The participants in this study were able to demonstrate its relevance to higher education, specifically the ways in which Black women administrators take an active role in representing their constituents (i.e., students). While they were representatives for many, their stories also remind the reader that there is still work to be done.

One highly promoted finding was the presence of a strong network. The women cited having a solid network of supportive mentors, having the respect and confidence of their president, and collaborating with other Black professionals as contributors to their success as SSAOs. In alignment with collaborating with other Black professionals, West (2017, 2018, 2019) has found spaces created for Black women are even more critical for their success. While

the participants echoed West's findings, mentoring in general was by far noted as the most vital for learning, thriving, and progressing in the field as each of the participants attributed her relationship with either former or current mentors to her overall success.

In 1980 Moses posed the question, "Are Black women administrators in higher education an endangered species?" (p. 295). She posed the question because of Black women being tokenized in higher education, and because of reports of Black women feeling overworked, underpaid, isolated, and unsupported, which the literature and the present study still indicate is the case. The participants had suggestions on both granular-and-macro levels that institutions and student affairs leaders should heed to improve the pipeline from entry or mid-level administrator to SSAO. They also recommended that other Black women professionals maintain and work on building their network of mentors and champions. Their recommendations inform our implications for practice.

### **Implications for Practice**

African American/Black women face challenges and barriers as they navigate the field of student affairs that are often unacknowledged and that their white colleagues are immune from withstanding. Participants described feeling multiple forms of oppression and discrimination simultaneously, and it manifested into imposter syndrome, hypervisibility due to lack of diversity, and feeling the need to code-switch in certain settings.

To combat these barriers, many of the participants sought out professional spaces that would put them in community with other Black women leaders to motivate one another, share resources, and offer advice. Black women who are outnumbered by White colleagues need support spaces. Institutions of higher education should commit to structurally and financially supporting affinity spaces such as employee resource groups specifically for Black women; developmental and coaching opportunities, such as the African American Development Officers Network (n.d.) at the Georgia Institute of Technology; and participation in professional organizations for Black women such as the Association of Black Women in Higher Education (2021) or the Faculty Women of Color in the Academy National Conference hosted by Virginia Tech. There is a genuine commitment to retaining Black women leaders and helping them advance in their respective careers as well as unmatched support within these spaces (West, 2017, 2018, 2019). These spaces also serve as an outlet for Black women and help to alleviate the emotional tax they often experience (Travis et al., 2016).

### **Recommendations for Ongoing Research**

Higher education has a demand for increasing Black administrators at both HWIs and HBCUs, an observation that Moses made in 1980 that continues to be relevant today. This research explored the barriers and successes that Black women described via their lived experiences as SSAOs. We recommend three suggestions for future research.

First, we suggest future studies focus on the recruitment and retention of Black women SSAOs to address their underrepresentation in the field. Second, we suggest future studies explore more broadly the underrepresentation of other chief officers within higher education. Minoritized representation is low in executive positions across higher education (e.g., development, public relations, libraries, facilities, business, athletics, and finance; Bichsel & McChesney, 2017). To address the equity of the profession, the diversity and representation in the positions mentioned above and roles should be examined.

Finally, we recommend that more research be done on pipeline practices. For many SSAOs, a terminal degree is a gateway to obtaining these positions. West's (2020) study of Black women senior student affairs officers (N=401) found that while 13% of the participants

held doctorate degrees, only 3% were employed in SSAO roles. A closer examination of the current positions that African American women doctoral degree holders in student affairs occupy is warranted.

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## Appendix A

Research Questions	Interview Questions
What are the work experiences of Black women in senior leadership positions in student affairs?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How would you describe your identity?</li> <li>2. Describe your current role?</li> <li>3. What does it mean to be a Black woman at a HBCU/PWI?</li> <li>4. Describe the academic and professional path that led to your current administrator role.</li> <li>5. Describe the hiring process for your current role?</li> <li>6. How would you describe your decision-making power in your current role? Is it satisfactory?</li> <li>7. For those that have worked at both HBCUs and PWIs as SSAO, how would you compare the two?</li> <li>8. Describe your perception on how you as a Black woman in leadership represent your constituents (the students on your campus)? (Lead with brief description of representational bureaucracy theory)</li> </ol>
What barriers/issues to obtaining senior leadership positions in student affairs are identified by Black women?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. What barriers or challenges do you face in your current role?</li> <li>10. Can you identify some challenges/barriers which you know other Black women SSAOs have faced during their ascension in leadership?</li> <li>11. Have you ever felt the need to “code switch” to change who you are, your behaviors, suppress your identity to acquiesce to a certain professional or social setting? Please describe that experience and how it made/makes you feel?</li> </ol>



### Author Note

Tamekka L. Cornelius, Ph.D., is a diversity, inclusion and belonging professional in Louisville, KY, USA. [cornelius.tamekka@gmail.com](mailto:cornelius.tamekka@gmail.com)

Donald “DJ” Mitchell, Jr., Ph.D., is vice president for diversity, equity and inclusion at Molloy University in Rockville Centre, NY, USA. [dmitchell1@molloy.edu](mailto:dmitchell1@molloy.edu)

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Tamekka L. Cornelius. Email: [cornelius.tamekka@gmail.com](mailto:cornelius.tamekka@gmail.com)

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