

**The ‘Imperative’ of Informal Mentoring to Subvert Gender Role Incongruence Among  
Women in Higher Education Leadership: A Qualitative Study**

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### **Abstract**

Women make up most higher education administration and faculty positions, but they are concentrated at the lowest echelon of the academy. As women attempt professional ascension, they face a double bind whereby there is incongruence between the social expectations assigned to women and the perceived attributes of an ideal leader. A review of the literature revealed a gap examining how women in higher education leadership engage in informal mentoring relationships to address gender biases. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how women in higher education leadership use informal same-gender mentoring to supplant biases and barriers related to patriarchal role congruence expectations. The theories of relational leadership and role congruity provided the theoretical frameworks for the study. Data were collected from 16 participants through a recruitment questionnaire, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and field notes. An inductive thematic analysis of the data was conducted with the support of NVivo for keyword analysis, coding, and identification of themes. Results of the study confirmed women continue to experience a tremendous burden due to sexism and gender bias. Women also find great value in informal relationships where they serve as both mentee and mentor. These relationships give rise to opportunities for women to experience representation, share experiences, give and receive support, and empower and elevate women's voices. Recommendations include further research using an intersectional perspective and a call for leaders in the academy to use woman-informed policies and processes to advance equity and gender parity.

*Keywords:* educational leadership, female leadership, gender bias, gender gap, higher education, informal mentoring, leadership development, peer mentoring, relational leadership, role incongruence, same-gender mentoring, and women.

**Dedication**

“We still think of a powerful man as a born leader and a powerful woman as an anomaly.”

—Margaret Atwood

This dissertation is dedicated to the incredible women in my family who have loved me, counseled me, and helped me grow and evolve – my grandmother, Rita; my mother, Cheryl; my sister, Laura; and my chosen sisters, Angela and Raechel.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Over the last 60 years, women have made substantial gains in educational attainment, workforce participation, and professional experience (U.S. Department of Labor, 2020). Despite their achievements and growing presence in all sectors, women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions (American Association of University Women, 2016; Badura et al., 2018). In higher education, women make up most of the workforce, but they are clustered in entry and mid-level positions, while men hold most presidencies, tenured faculty positions, and senior leadership roles (Madsen & Longman, 2020; O'Connor, 2018). The underrepresentation of women in leadership has been shown to correlate to persistent role congruence demands (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Chrobot-Mason et al., 2019; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Goethals & Hoyt, 2017; Madsen & Longman, 2020). When individuals behave outside the social expectations of their role, there is a perceived incongruity, leading to negative impressions and decreased opportunities (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Professional women, including those in academia, have had to develop structures to help them navigate the barriers of working in male-normed environments (Statti & Torres, 2019). One such tool women have reported as being especially critical to their success is mentoring (Ginsberg et al., 2019).

While mentoring relationships can be formal or informal, informal mentoring is especially powerful as the practice often leads to longer-term relationships (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Cross et al., 2019; Ginsberg et al., 2019; O'Connor, 2018). Informal mentoring opportunities arise during organic relationship development and can occur top-down, bottom-up, or laterally, relying primarily on shared understanding and experiences (Harris & Lee, 2019; Madsen & Longman, 2020; Yip et al., 2020). There is also a dearth of available senior women who can serve as formal mentors due to the leadership gender gap, which necessitates informal

mentoring relationships among women (Brower et al., 2019; Cross et al., 2019).

This basic qualitative study was an opportunity to better understand how women in higher education combat role incongruence by exploring the experiences of women who have engaged in informal mentoring relationships. The benefits of this study included developing a greater understanding of the role congruity challenges women in higher education experience and how informal mentoring relationships help subvert gender-related biases and barriers. The background of the problem is outlined to contextualize and summarize what is known about the topic. The statement of the problem provides a summation of what is unknown and identifies a gap in the literature and the resulting research questions. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how women in higher education leadership use informal same-gender mentoring to supplant biases and barriers related to patriarchal role congruence expectations. A rationale for the research in alignment with the problem statement is identified and includes research methods, the target population, data instruments, goals, and objectives. In the significance of the study, a discussion is provided about how the study has advanced understanding of the problem and may lead to improved leadership outcomes for women, organizations, and society. The research questions and an introduction to the theoretical frameworks of relational leadership and role congruity are reviewed. Terms emerging from the literature review and used through the study are listed and defined. Assumptions, scope, delimitations, and limitations are provided to frame the study appropriately. A summary of Chapter 1 and an introduction to Chapter 2 concludes the chapter.

### **Background of the Problem**

While women have outpaced men in degree attainment and come close to equalizing workforce participation, there continues to be a considerable leadership gender gap (U.S.

Department of Labor, 2020; Warner et al., 2018). The disparity in the number of women working in higher education versus those who hold the top leadership roles in the academy is especially stark (Johnson, 2017; O'Connor, 2018). Women fill the ranks of entry-level work, absorbing most of the teaching and advising roles, while men enjoy most prestigious leadership and research positions (Hannum et al., 2015; Subbaye & Vithal, 2017). The imbalance women experience in the academy aligns with the disadvantages women experience due to stricter social role expectations.

Socially dictated roles define an ideal leader as having inherently masculine traits, leaving the conception of a leader at odds with the caretaking and relational roles assigned to women (American Association of University Women, 2016; Goethals & Hoyt, 2017). The disparity in what defines an ideal leader, and an ideal woman has created a role incongruence resulting in diminished opportunities for women to ascend in their professional careers (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women who defy gender role expectations and display agentic qualities associated with leadership are viewed as suspect and unsuited to leadership, just as women who exhibit the feminine qualities expected of them (Bierema, 2016). This double-bind places women in a no-win situation and leaves them to navigate the professional world without a roadmap of how to achieve the goals to which they aspire.

Without clear direction, women have used their relational skills to build networks of other women who can provide guidance, support, advice, and opportunity to one another (Harris & Lee, 2019; Hollander & Yoder, 1980; Madsen & Longman, 2020; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Yip et al., 2020). These networks support an environment where informal mentoring relationships can develop and thrive. Mentoring has been an essential tool women have used to not only understand how to navigate a complex professional landscape but also to diversify leadership

and create representation, challenging outmoded ideas of what a leader and a woman look like (Brue & Brue, 2018; Ginsberg et al., 2019; Moreland & Thompson, 2019; Statti & Torres, 2019). Informal mentoring has become a necessity as the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions has created a deficit of available mentors (Brower et al., 2019; Cross et al., 2019). Informal mentoring is also just as effective as formal mentoring (Early, 2020) and especially powerful as women are agents in the relationships they create, leading to greater satisfaction and longer-lasting relationships (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016).

The research identified the gender leadership gap in higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2019), the negative influence of role incongruity on the leadership aspirations of women (Eagly & Karau, 2002), and the importance of informal mentoring relationships (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Early, 2020; Hollander & Yoder, 1980; Statti & Torres, 2019). A gap in the literature existed in examining how women in higher education have used informal mentoring relationships to address limitations resulting from role incongruence. In the study the experiences of women in higher education leadership who had engaged in informal mentoring relationships and how those relationships may have contributed to the subversion of gender role bias was explored (Kapareliotis & Miliopoulou, 2019).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem was a lack of understanding of how women in higher education have used informal mentorship to supplant barriers caused by ongoing bias and role congruence expectations. Women comprise more than half of the academy's workforce (American Association of University Women, 2016). Despite this, men hold most presidencies, senior leadership roles, and tenured faculty positions (Cañas et al., 2019; Johnson, 2017; O'Connor, 2018). Women and men aspire to leadership equally, and women are as qualified as men to hold



leadership, having served in the workforce for decades and outpacing men in degree attainment (David, 2015; Hannum et al., 2015). However, the academy was conceived for and by men and has remained blind to its patriarchal biases, assuming it to be gender-neutral despite evidence to the contrary (Ford, 2016).

The male-normed environment of higher education contributes to the weight of social role expectations women already face as they balance career ambitions with the demands of femininity (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Koenig, 2021; Hochschild & Machung, 2012). Deeply ingrained stereotypes insist women must be warm and selfless caretakers, while leaders must be independent, agentic, and aggressive (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hollander & Yoder, 1980; White & Burkinshaw, 2019). Eagly and Karau's work found that women face an impossible situation, as adherence to traditionally feminine roles does not allow them to be seen as leaders, while defiance of gender roles is not tolerated and creates disadvantages. A famous and contemporary example is the treatment of senator and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, who faced a barrage of attacks for being perceived as both too masculine and not agentic enough (Nawabdin, 2021).

As women contend with the conflicting demands of their gender and career ambitions, they are left with little understanding of how to navigate what Carli and Eagly (2016) referred to as *the labyrinth*, a system of patriarchal norms and exclusionary practices leaving women at a perpetual disadvantage. In response, women have exercised their relational proclivities to form support networks (Moreland & Thompson, 2019; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Through these networks, women develop informal mentoring relationships, which provide an opportunity to explore and combat biases, accelerate representation, and participate in relationships guided by understanding and reciprocity (Jian, 2021; Manzi & Heilman, 2021; O'Connor, 2018; Roberts & Brown, 2019;

Searby et al., 2015; Sklaveniti, 2020). Little research explored informal mentoring relationships and how women in higher education leadership have benefitted from the practice as they contend with role congruity challenges (Deanna et al., 2020; Meschitti & Lawton Smith, 2017). The study addressed a gap in the literature about how women in higher education leadership experience these informal mentoring relationships and to what extent the relationships create opportunities to subvert gender bias barriers

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how women in higher education leadership use informal same-gender mentoring to supplant biases and barriers related to patriarchal role congruence expectations. There is ample research affirming the underrepresentation of women in leadership, including in the higher education sector (American Association of University Women, 2016; Badura et al., 2018; Johnson, 2017; O'Connor, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2019; Warner et al., 2018). Role congruity theory asserts women struggle to ascend in leadership due to a disparity between the expectations of a woman's gender role and the qualities by which an ideal leader is socially defined (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women, including those in academia, have leaned into their relational strengths and noted the importance of mentoring to their professional success (Hollander & Yoder, 1980; Moreland & Thompson, 2019; Uhl-Bien, 2006). While formal mentoring can provide benefits, a lack of available women in senior leadership to serve as mentors has led to the emergence of informal mentoring relationships, which have proved equally beneficial to professional women (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Brower et al., 2019; Cross et al., 2019; Early, 2020). How women in academia experience these relationships and leverage them to subvert barriers related to role incongruence remained largely unexplored.

This study was necessary to understand the informal mentoring experiences of women in higher education leadership, especially as they relate to supplanting role incongruity biases. A basic qualitative design allowed for rich data collection through a questionnaire, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and field notes. A sample size of 16 participants was used and allowed for saturation to be reached in this basic qualitative study (Guest et al., 2020; Kostere & Kostere, 2021). Participants were recruited through professional social media platforms, including the researcher's LinkedIn platform with nearly 700 direct connections and thousands of secondary connections, and the Academic Mamas private Facebook group for women in academia with over 12,000 members. Exploring the informal mentoring relationships of women in academic leadership and how they have been leveraged to navigate, overcome, and dismantle role congruence expectations allowed for a deeper understanding of the experiences of women and the tools they use to address gender bias in the workplace. Enhanced knowledge of the intervention strategies women employ through informal means was uncovered and provided an opportunity to identify interventions promoting more inclusive environments responsive to women's actual needs versus their perceived needs (Wynn & Correll, 2018).

### **Significance of the Study**

The study advanced the understanding of how women in higher education have created informal mentoring relationships to help navigate the gender biases and barriers they face as they pursue their leadership aspirations. The gender leadership gap disadvantages women in many ways. Not only does the leadership gap obstruct the career ambitions of women, but it also perpetuates the normalization of environments ill-suited to the realities women face as they balance personal and professional pursuits (Bierema, 2016; Brower et al., 2019; Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; O'Connor, 2018; White & Burkinshaw, 2019). Attempts to improve support for

women through programs, such as paid family leave, do little to address the systemic and pervasive nature of gender bias and may even perpetuate bias (Eagly & Koenig; Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018). Rather than prescribing a remedy, understanding the needs of women as expressed through trusted mentoring relationships has provided deeper insight into how to combat bias effectively.

While the social justice imperative toward equity is at the heart of the drive for gender parity in leadership, organizations also stand to benefit from a more egalitarian environment (Catalyst, 2020). Closing the gender gap in leadership ranks is associated with higher individual and team performance, greater employee morale, increased profits, and an improved bottom line (American Association of University Women, 2016; Bierema, 2016; Gloor et al., 2020). Finally, there is a significant social impact to closing the gender gap. When women can achieve their professional aspirations, the result is greater national wealth, fewer workforce reductions, more philanthropy, and improved corporate social responsibility (American Association of University Women, 2016; Gloor et al., 2020; Goethals & Hoyt, 2017; Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018).

The study explored a notable but not well-understood tool many women rely on for personal and professional support and to identify and create opportunities. The study examined how women experience informal mentoring relationships and leverage them to negotiate obstacles related to gender bias, providing an opportunity to develop more inclusive environments and practices. Inclusive practices and gender parity benefit not only women but families, organizations, and society.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how women in higher education leadership use informal same-gender mentoring to supplant biases and barriers related

to patriarchal role congruence expectations. The specific context for the study was higher education, a sector where women are well represented in the workforce but underrepresented in leadership (BlackChen, 2015; Johnson, 2017). The following questions guided this basic qualitative study:

Research Question 1: How have women in higher education leadership experienced informal same-gender mentorship as a tool for managing role incongruence?

Research Question 2: In what ways do women in higher education leadership positions feel called to mentor other women?

The target population for this study was women in the higher education sector who have served in a leadership role at a public or private non-profit college or university in the United States. Using snowball sampling, a questionnaire gathered initial information from potential participants to ensure they met the criteria for the study (Naderifar et al., 2017). A total of 16 qualified women applied to participate in the study and engaged in in-depth semi-structured interviews. Interview questions were field-tested and aligned to the research questions to allow robust data collection and reduce researcher bias. The research questions were also guided by the theories of role congruity and relationship leadership which provided the theoretical framework for the study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was guided by the theories of role congruity (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and relational leadership (Hollander & Julian, 1969; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Role congruity theory revealed the persistent discrimination women in leadership face as a result of the incongruence of their gender role with the socially prescribed masculine traits associated with leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Role incongruity has contributed to the dearth of women in leadership roles despite their

increasing representation in the workforce and their educational and experiential qualifications (Carli & Eagly, 2016; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Social roles can and do change which means greater representation and a deeper understanding of the needs of women and the benefit they bring to leadership can drive a reimagining of what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a leader (Wang et al., 2019; Yip et al., 2020). Mentorship has been an important tool to further these aims, as it is well suited to the relational nature of women (Goethals & Hoyt, 2017; Hollander & Yoder, 1980; van Gils et al., 2018).

Relational leadership theory focuses on the reciprocal nature of leadership as a mutually beneficial experience between leaders and followers (Hollander & Julian, 1969; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Relational leadership explores the individual and organizational dynamics between people and the social structures within which they exist (Webb, 2021). Leadership rooted in relationships relies on trust, understanding, and empathy, which can challenge biased constructs, including those related to social role expectations (Jian, 2021). A relational style of leading is a natural complement to mentoring and coaching, which women find particularly valuable as they pursue professional goals and contend with barriers and biases (Ginsberg et al., 2019). While institutions have not successfully addressed gender bias, women have created strategies for overcoming barriers which often center on relationship-building, including informal mentoring (Roberts & Brown, 2019). Role congruity and relational leadership theories are appropriate frameworks for understanding the emergence of relationship-building among women to address and subvert gender role expectations in a higher education setting. These theories provided the framework for the study and research questions. Definitions of key terms are provided to aid in understanding of the research.

### Definitions of Terms

Defining key terms used throughout the study allows for a more thorough understanding of the research. The following terms and their noted meaning provide a standard vocabulary for understanding concepts in the study:

*Academy* refers to higher education institutions, including colleges, universities, and community colleges. The term's origins trace back to Plato, who established the academy as a place for intellectual and philosophical discourse and named it for its meeting place outside Athens, the Akadēmeia (Trelawny-Cassity, 2019).

*Gender gap* documents the underrepresentation of women in leadership across all sectors (American Association of University Women, 2016; Badura et al., 2018). The gender gap cannot be traced to workforce participation, educational attainment, career aspirations, or qualifications and is the result of long-standing social structures disadvantaging women (Cañas et al., 2019; David, 2015; Hannum et al., 2015).

*Higher education leadership* refers to roles encompassing president, provost, vice president, director, dean, and tenured or tenure-track faculty (American Association of University Women, 2016; Hannum et al., 2015; Madsen & Longman, 2020; O'Connor, 2018; Subbaye & Vithal, 2017).

*Ideal leader* is a social construct defining the qualities most associated with ideal leadership, as those most ascribed to men, such as aggression, independence, and decisiveness (White & Burkinshaw, 2019). The ideal leader persists as a stereotype despite little evidence that the identified qualities result in effective or desirable leadership (Brower et al., 2019; van Gils et al., 2018).

*Informal mentoring* refers to organically developed relationships and networks involving individuals interested in the advancement and career development of one another (Early, 2020; Higgins & Kram, 2001). Mentoring is generally defined as a relationship where a protégé receives counsel, advice, and professional development opportunities from a senior leader (Early, 2020; Madsen & Longman, 2020). Informal mentoring relationships can exist among individuals in top-down, bottom-up, and lateral positions (Harris & Lee, 2019; Madsen & Longman, 2020; Yip et al., 2020). In the context of this study, the mentoring relationships being explored are between women.

*Role congruence* is the degree to which individuals act within their predefined social roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Social roles assign attributes and stereotypes to individuals based on group membership (Eagly & Koenig, 2021). The study is specifically interested in the socially prescribed role of women as gentle, communal caretakers, which is at odds with the ideal leader who has masculine qualities such as aggression and independence (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hollander & Yoder, 1980). Incongruence with socially mandated roles is intolerable and met with disdain and negative perceptions (van Gils et al., 2018). As a result of the disparity between the traits assigned to women and those assigned to leaders, women are in a double bind where they are too feminine to be an ideal leader or too agentic to be an ideal woman (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Goethals & Hoyt, 2017).

### **Assumptions**

Identifying assumptions is an important step in ensuring transparency in the research process and ethical procedures (Levitt et al., 2018). The study assumed many women in higher education leadership have knowingly experienced some degree of role incongruence related to their gender. Further, there was an assumption participants would be able to identify certain



professional relationships as informal mentoring as defined by the study. Research by Searby et al. (2015) found while women define mentoring broadly as anyone who has helped them, the mentor may be unaware of the relationship. Finally, the study assumed participants would provide thorough and truthful responses on the questionnaire and during interviews.

Requisite steps to ensure the accuracy of assumptions were taken. The questionnaire (see Appendix A) included specific language to ensure participants understood questions related to gender biases and how informal mentoring was defined for the study. An interview script (see Appendix B) was also prepared to reiterate these concepts and provide participants with an opportunity to ask clarifying questions. Informed consent procedures noting ethical practices used throughout the study, including the voluntary nature of participation and attention to privacy, were intended to put participants at ease and cultivate an environment where they felt comfortable sharing their experiences.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of the study was focused on women who have previously or were currently working in senior leadership positions at a public or private non-profit higher education institution in the United States and who have engaged in informal mentoring. Delimitations are boundaries established by the researcher to ensure research goals are attainable (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). Delimitations for the study involved recruitment strategies and participant sample size. These decisions were informed by the limited number of potential research participants, considerations related to COVID-19 health and safety concerns, and confidence in achieving saturation with the appointed sample size.

A specific site or locale was not selected as the population for the study was anticipated to be limited as women are underrepresented in higher education leadership (American

Association of University Women, 2016; Badura et al., 2018). Further, as an inside researcher, it was possible some potential participants would be known to the researcher, which could have presented a conflict or given rise to an increased possibility for bias (Saidin & Yaacob, 2016). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated, and normalized video conferencing as social distancing mandates and recommendations persisted throughout the study. Video conferencing for interviews facilitated participation from women in different regions of the United States, enhanced flexibility, and produced research results on par with in-person interviews (Gray et al., 2020).

Reaching professional elites for research participation can also be challenging, so recruitment involved snowball sampling using social media spaces where professional women in academia may be more accessible (Maramwidze-Merrison, 2016). A total of 16 participants were identified for in-depth semi-structured interviews. Had the recruitment questionnaire resulted in more eligible participants than necessary, purposive sampling would have been used to identify subjects for the study. While 16 is a numerically small number of women, studies affirm most new information in qualitative interviews is disclosed in the first 5 to 6 interviews, and nearly all data sets are revealed within 12 interviews (Guest et al., 2020; Kostere & Kostere, 2021). The scope and delimitations of the study provided an achievable framework for the collection of robust data and allowed for the realization of the study's research goals.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are external barriers and constraints imposed on a study for which the researcher has little control (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). Common limitations in qualitative research include sample size, participant attrition, and the breadth of information provided by participants during interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kostere & Kostere, 2021). The

specific attributes required for participation in the study may have made the selection pool relatively small. The eligible participant group was further reduced due to the facilitation of the study by an inside researcher, which may disqualify several participants, and the willingness of busy professionals to volunteer their time. Removing regional barriers and recruiting in social media spaces targeting potential participants addressed the possible sample size limitations.

There was the possibility that participants would not disclose information to the depth or extent required for rich data collection. Several provisions were implemented to circumvent potential issues related to superficial data disclosure. Informed consent (see Appendix A) was provided and reaffirmed throughout the research process to provide participants with assurances regarding their voluntary participation, ethical practices, and protection of their rights and privacy (Weerasinghe, 2018). While limiting the potential pool of applicants, an inside researcher helped establish trust and understanding with interview participants (Saidin & Yaacob, 2016). The use of bracketing (Tufford & Newman, 2010) and member checking (Cypress, 2017) helped address bias which can be a concern with an inside researcher. Interviews were semi-structured and involved open-ended questions to allow probing and additional lines of inquiry to delve more deeply into the expressed experiences. Interviews also included a time buffer, so they were able to be extended for the four participants whose interviews lasted more than the allotted hour.

While limitations are a natural part of research, steps were taken to address potential limitations and decrease their impact (Kostere & Kostere, 2021; Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). Thoughtful consideration was given to possible research constraints to allow for implementation of proactive measures. The limitations anticipated for this study were navigable and did not hinder reliability or validity.

### **Chapter Summary**

An introduction to the persistent underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles in higher education and the influence of gender role incongruence was presented in Chapter 1 (American Association of University Women, 2016; Badura et al., 2018; Eagly & Karau, 2002). The importance of mentoring, including informal mentoring, to professional women was also discussed (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Cross et al., 2019; Ginsberg et al., 2019; O'Connor, 2018). An explanation of the research problem and purpose focused on understanding how women in higher education leadership experience informal mentoring as a tool to subvert gender role incongruence was provided. The significance of the problem was included, as was an assessment of the potential to broaden understanding of the gender incongruence experiences of professional women to improve practices supporting gender parity. Research questions aligned to the study's problem and purpose were presented and will act as a guide.

An introduction to the theoretical frameworks of role congruity and relational leadership was included to support an understanding of the study. Definitions of terms used throughout the study were provided to aid in clarity. Assumptions, scope and delimitations, and limitations were primarily related to common concerns in qualitative studies such as participant recruitment, sample size, and acquiring rich data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kostere & Kostere, 2021; Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). These matters and efforts to minimize the effect were reviewed to contextualize the study and aid in transparency. The foundational information for the study presented in Chapter 1 will be followed by a review of the literature in the next chapter.

Chapter 2 includes the literature search strategy and a thorough review of the literature relevant to the study. Role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and relational leadership theory (Hollander, 1992; Hollander & Julian, 1969; Uhl-Bien, 2006) provide the framework for

the study, and their history, evolution, and appropriateness are discussed at length. The literature review covers topics of importance to the study, including the gender leadership gap, role congruence expectations, and the forms and significance of same-gender mentoring among women. Counterarguments involving opportunity scarcity and the limited scope of mentoring are reviewed. Chapter 2 concludes with the identification of a gap in the literature, necessitating further research addressed by the study.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Despite a strong pipeline of women with the educational attainment and professional experience to fill senior leader roles at colleges and universities, less than one-third of these positions are filled by women (Bartel, 2018). Though structural barriers persist, women are seeking ways to overcome systemic biases hindering their professional advancement. The problem addressed in this basic qualitative research study was a lack of understanding of how women in higher education have used informal mentorship to subvert barriers caused by ongoing bias and role congruence expectations. A basic qualitative research approach was most appropriate for this study as the focus was on exploring the experiences of women in higher education leadership who have engaged in informal mentoring relationships with other women and how those relationships have served to supplant gender biases. The complexity of how women help each other overcome structures designed to prevent them from reaching their potential and goals can be best expressed by the women themselves. Jian (2021) further noted sharing experiences is fundamental in invoking empathy and understanding, which are important for facilitating positive social change.

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how women in higher education leadership use informal same-gender mentoring to supplant biases and barriers related to patriarchal role congruence expectations. Successful leadership has long been associated with agentic traits, focused on assertiveness, independence, and ambition – traits socially connected to masculinity (Manzi, 2019). This is in stark contrast to the social expectations of femininity, which insist women must be sensitive and deferential caretakers (Koburtay et al., 2019). For women, ascending in leadership requires grit, determination, and often some measure of reciprocity with other women who can relate to their challenges.

The advancement of women in higher education is not only important to the goals and aspirations of women or for social equity, but there are practical benefits to institutions with greater leadership parity (Bierema, 2016; Catalyst, 2020; Post et al., 2019; White & Burkinshaw, 2019). Organizations with diverse and balanced leadership have been found to have better outcomes and greater social responsibility (American Association of University Women, 2016). However, as higher education institutions maintain they are trying to eliminate the gender gap, they persist in upholding patriarchal standards privileging men and disadvantaging women by adhering to standards and customs out of sync with the realities women experience (David, 2015). Through a hushed understanding, women know they must work harder, calculate more, and resist and persist, pulling up other women with them. This sisterhood leads to trust, relationship building, and mutuality and is a natural breeding ground for informal mentoring as women process dilemmas and goals through a common lens (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016). The study will contribute to the knowledge base by exploring ways in which women in higher education experience informal mentoring relationships with one another to address gender bias related to role congruence expectations.

Included in Chapter 2 is an introduction to the problem and the purpose of the study, literature search strategy, and theoretical frameworks. This section is followed by a literature review containing three thematic subtopics – gender leadership gap, role congruence challenges, and mentoring as subversion, as well as addressing counterarguments and identifying a gap in the literature. The chapter concludes with a summary and a brief introduction to the next chapter.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The exploration of relevant literature associated with the study of informal mentoring as a tool experienced by women to overcome obstacles of gender bias in leadership began with an

understanding of the terminology used to discuss such issues. The research was bisected into two main components—the biases women face as leaders and the role of same-gender mentoring in leader development. Decades of research exists monitoring women’s progress toward professional parity, so there was ample opportunity to engage with the evolving topic of gender discrimination trends (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Gloor et al., 2020; Goethals & Hoyt, 2017). From this analysis, role congruence continued to emerge as a primary obstacle women face as they attempt to become senior leaders, becoming the area focused upon for this study.

Research on existing literature was collected primarily from peer-reviewed sources published within 5 years of the current study using the American College of Education library, Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis Online, EBSCO, and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC). Research conducted outside the 5-year window was necessary to understand the evolving nature of gender bias, the professional advances of women over time, and the development of relational leadership theory as well as role congruence theory. Additionally, a review of recent dissertation work about the professional development of women through mentorship was conducted to identify emerging thought and possible gaps in the literature. Research was collected, saved to the Mendeley reference manager, and organized according to themes to aid synthesis and analysis.

Throughout the literature review process, search terms evolved to accommodate a comprehensive review of relevant literature and identification and understanding of the primary themes involved in this study. Key search terms guiding the collection of research for the literature review include but are not limited to: *agentic leadership*, *educational leadership*, *female leadership*, *feminist leadership*, *formal mentoring*, *gender*, *gender bias*, *gender gap*,



*gender parity, gender pipeline, glass-ceiling, glass-cliff, higher education, informal mentoring, leadership development, leadership traits, leaky pipeline, lean in, peer mentoring, queen bees, relational leadership theory, role congruence, role congruity theory, role incongruence, same-gender mentoring, second shift, sexism, social identity, women, and women empowerment.*

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was guided by the theories of role congruity (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and relational leadership (Hollander, 1992; Hollander & Julian, 1969; Uhl-Bien, 2006). As the social role of women has evolved to encompass greater participation in the workforce, the traditional caretaking expectations and social identity of women have not changed (Diekmann & Goodfriend, 2006). Though women have the education and experience to assume senior leadership roles, they continue to be underrepresented in virtually every professional sector as patriarchal notions of the ideal leader persist (Bierema, 2016). Role incongruence deems women neither suited for leadership nor able to display the traits considered necessary for leadership without suffering the consequences of not complying with expectations of femininity (van Gils et al., 2018). While institutions lag in successfully addressing gender bias, women have created strategies for overcoming barriers centered on relationship-building, including informal mentoring (Roberts & Brown, 2019). Role congruity theory and relational leadership theory were the appropriate frameworks to understand the emergence of relationship-building among women to address and subvert gender role expectations in a higher education setting.

### **Role Congruity Theory**

There has been a significant increase in women's participation in the labor force since the 1960s (Goethals & Hoyt, 2017). Though women possess the skills, education, and experience to be effective leaders, they are significantly underrepresented in leadership in all professional

sectors (Badura et al., 2018; Koburtay et al., 2019). While social roles were studied at length throughout the early twentieth century, social roles related to gender were largely unexplored (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Beginning in the 1970s, Alice W. Eagly began to study sex, gender, and social roles in earnest, eventually bringing forth social role theory which argues gender stereotypes are a natural byproduct of societal expectations around the division of labor associated with gender (Eagly, 1987). Eagly's research found gender roles related to biological suitability for labor—men as physically dominant and women as caretakers—established social norms around perceived suitability for broader roles.

The developing research by Eagly and her collaborators focused on how roles related to gender appear in organizations, where women and men are beholden not only to their social roles but to organizational roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Eagly's role congruity theory concluded women in leadership experience persistent discrimination resulting from the double bind they face as their prescribed gender role is incongruent with the socially prescribed traits associated with leaders. Women are communal relationship-builders who are deferential nurturers. Leaders, and men, are agentic, assertive, ambitious, and decisive. Even as organizations commit to advancing women in leadership and gender equality, the ideal leader as inherently male persists. Studies by Hollander and Yoder (1980) demonstrated gender expectations are so strong, well-qualified women would defer leadership to a poorly qualified man to avoid gender role incongruence. Central to understanding the role incongruence women in leadership experience is discerning how the ideal leader as male developed and has persisted.

Role congruity theory not only explained how gender expectations naturally disadvantage professional women because they are not expected to possess the qualities associated with leadership but provided evidence women are discriminated against when they exhibit ideal

leadership qualities (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Men have the agency to fully commit themselves to their work and organization because their familial role is secondary (Bierema, 2016). Men can deprioritize their domestic role because women are expected to subjugate their professional aspirations in service of their family responsibilities, leaving men free to focus on their career pursuits. Deviations from these expectations are socially intolerable (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Goethals and Hoyt (2017) cited multiple studies demonstrating women who display strength, dominance, and independence are viewed negatively as a result of their non-conformity with the demure social expectations of femininity. According to role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), professional women have been placed into a lose-lose situation where they are not agentic enough to be viewed as successful leaders or they are not feminine enough to be viewed as ideal women. van Gils et al. (2018) conducted a multi-source field study with 214 participant groups of leaders and followers from German organizations and demonstrated role incongruence leads to negative perceptions of female leaders by their peers, their followers, and themselves—they are neither suitable for leadership nor suitable representations of womanhood.

Even though women are well qualified for leadership roles and evidence supports improved outcomes for organizations and teams with gender parity, role congruence expectations remain pervasive. Women have significantly outpaced men in educational attainment, earning more bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees for decades (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Women have also been well represented in the workforce, with 57.1% of women employed outside of the home compared to 69.1% of men suggesting women have both the required educational qualifications for leadership and are experienced workers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). This is further reflected in research showing female leadership is associated with better organizational outcomes, improved worker experiences, and more ethical

practices (Goethals & Hoyt, 2017). Despite the evidence, persistent biases against female leaders have resulted in women being scantily represented in the higher echelons of management, on corporate boards, as elected officials, and in virtually every other leadership space (Carli & Eagly, 2016).

Despite the challenges identified by role congruity theory, social roles can and do evolve over time. As society begins to see more women successfully navigating leadership and as it becomes more apparent emotional intelligence and communal practices lead to improved outcomes it is possible the social roles assigned to women and leaders will shift to allow for greater representation (Wang et al., 2019). Women seeking to ascend in leadership or who generally wish to see greater gender parity in leadership may find the lessons of role congruity theory valuable as they consider how to move the needle not only toward gender equality but to a new vision for what the ideal leader looks like.

### **Relational Leadership Theory**

Leadership as a relational proposition first gained traction in the mid-twentieth century through the research of Edwin P. Hollander. Hollander and Julian (1969) theorized leadership is a transactional relationship between leader and follower in pursuit of mutually beneficial ends. Unlike traditional leadership frameworks of the time, which focused on legitimate or even coercive leadership, relational leadership was concerned with the emergence of leadership power as referent and as an exchange of rewards between leaders and followers (French & Raven, 1959; Hollander, 1992). The ability to build and navigate successful relationships and teams is central to effective leadership. The leader and the those who are led are engaged in an exchange of power and esteem through the relationships they build with one another.

Understanding relationships, their development, and their interdependence is complex, and thus, relational leadership theory cannot be simply defined. Mary Uhl-Bien (2006) provided critical thought leadership in organizing relational leadership theory and furthering understanding of how relationships interplay with self, others, and social networks. Within relational leadership theory, there are two predominant perspectives which often do not view relational work through a shared lens—the entity perspective and the constructionist perspective (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). In the context of this research, both entity perspective, which contends relationships are formed by knowing individuals and are relative to their interactions and perceptions of one another, and constructionist perspective, which asserts knowledge is formed or constructed through a process of relating, provide compatible frameworks and are explored (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Relational leadership theory, with its focus on cooperation, relationship-building, and understanding, is a natural lens through which women in leadership can be viewed. Women's expected leadership style interweaves with their social role through practices that are nurturing, communal, and relational (Eagly, 1987; Goethals & Hoyt, 2017; Hollander & Yoder, 1980; van Gils et al., 2018). Additionally, forming relationships is central to moving from managing to leading; effectively, leadership is a relational proposition (Branson & Marra, 2019). If the premise of leadership as inherently relational and women as communally oriented are believed, it is reasonable to presume relational leadership theory provides an opportunity for women to assert their qualifications not only to lead but to redefine what it means to be an ideal leader. Reimagining the ideal leader requires an understanding of leadership as reciprocal and depends on the mutuality between the leader and the follower, allowing for the formation of new

interpretations of what these roles mean and how women can inhabit both spaces with authenticity and authority.

The definition of what it is to be a leader and a follower has naturally morphed since Hollander's early work in relational leadership. Effective leadership necessarily goes beyond a hierarchical structure and is reciprocal in nature. Leaders lead, not only through their positional authority but also through their influence (Early, 2020). The ability to view one another as reciprocal counterparts is an extension of the *I-Thou* paradigm Buber (1970) described whereby dialogue, or relationships, are formed between two individuals. Within this structure is a natural give and take where influence and authority are shared (Webb, 2021). The shared focus on empowerment of the participants' relational leadership advances is a companion to the importance of mentoring and coaching. Further, when considering the reciprocal nature of relational leadership, frameworks of who serves as the mentor and who acts as the mentored can be expanded to include hierarchical definitions of mentoring and lateral and reverse mentoring (Early, 2020). These relationships form a framework by which role congruence can be examined and evolved or dismissed.

Relational leadership theory is, by its nature, interested in navigating individual and organizational considerations and the social structures within which they exist (Webb, 2021). Organizations and individuals do not exist in a vacuum but function within social constructs dictating ideal norms and behaviors. When what we know is at odds with what we expect, the biases and stereotypes of our expectations often prevail (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Relational leadership provides an opportunity to disrupt and redefine expectations. Relational leadership is grounded in building understanding, which generates empathy, and empathy can be a strong catalyst for challenging biased constructs (Jian, 2021). Relational leadership and the mentor

construct it enables creates a sense of responsibility beyond the self and the organization. There is an opportunity to break down biases and stereotypes by providing a direct and empathetic view of what leadership looks like from a perspective beyond the currently accepted ideal (Yip et al., 2020). Same-gender mentoring provides an opportunity for women to help one another develop their leadership competencies and achieve greater professional status (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016). This, in turn, provides a greater representation of women in leadership, which chips away at the notions of what a woman should be and what a leader should be. Thus, women engaged in mentoring relationships with other women can be viewed not only as agents of direct reciprocity but as working toward the subversion of role congruence demands.

Role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and relational leadership theory (Hollander & Julian, 1969; Uhl-Bien, 2006) provide a framework for understanding the barriers women in leadership experience and a mechanism for coping with and supplanting biases. These theories work in tandem to illuminate a significant structural reason women experience bias in their professional lives and a potential avenue for supplanting those biases. Role congruity theory and relational leadership theory are woven throughout the research literature review as theoretical guideposts illustrating the scope of the problem.

### **Research Literature Review**

A review of the literature revealed three primary themes informing the study examining the experiences of women in higher education as they relate to role incongruence and same-gender informal mentoring. These themes include a persistent leadership gap (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Chrobot-Mason et al., 2019; Fetterolf & Eagly, 2011; Goethals & Hoyt, 2017), the detrimental impact of role congruence expectations on women's leadership aspirations (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly et al., 2003; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Wood, 2012; Hollander &

Yoder, 1980; Madsen & Longman, 2020), and the critical role mentoring has played in the professional experiences of women (Jian, 2021; Manzi & Heilman, 2021; O'Connor, 2018; Roberts & Brown, 2019; Searby et al., 2015; Sklaveniti, 2020). Research in the field of women in leadership has long indicated an underrepresentation of women in senior roles across virtually every industry and sector (Badura et al., 2018; Madsen & Longman, 2020). Even in higher education, an industry often thought of as espousing and promoting progressive ideals, the leadership gap is marked with men holding more full professor positions, presidencies, senior administrative roles, and out-earning women at every level (Johnson, 2017). Women encounter a plethora of barriers as they pursue leadership. One of the most persistent and prevalent is role congruence, wherein women are deemed neither agentic enough to be leaders nor feminine enough if they display traits associated with leadership (Bierema, 2016; Dzubinski & Diehl, 2018; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Schein et al., 1996). As women struggle to break free from the stereotypes and biases preventing them from ascending to the higher echelons of leadership, they must look for ways to subvert barriers and assert their suitability and competence as ideal leaders. One way women can shift the needle and change perceptions of ideal leadership is through greater representation. Mentorship, especially informal mentoring relationships, creates opportunities for women to collaborate, strategize, and advance other women's goals, deconstructing sexist notions of the ideal woman and the ideal leader (O'Connor, 2018).

The literature review provides an assessment of research identifying and providing a historical overview of the leadership gender gap, including within higher education. An exploration of the metaphorical reasons why women are underrepresented, including the leaky pipeline, sticky floor, glass ceiling, glass cliff, and labyrinth, is included (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986; Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Ysseldyk et al., 2019). Also documented



is a review of literature related to role congruence expectations of leaders and women and the biases and barriers in society and the self. The literature review concludes with an evaluation of mentoring as a subversive tactic used by women to deconstruct gendered leadership expectations and achieve a common goal of greater leadership parity. A review of the literature identified a gap examining how women in higher education leadership engage in informal mentoring relationships to create career opportunities for themselves and one another through a dismantling of societal norms around leadership and femininity.

### **The Leadership Gender Gap**

Beginning in the 1960s, the underrepresentation of women in the workforce started to diminish as more and more women began to pursue paid work (Goethals & Hoyt, 2017). According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2020), 56.2% of women are participating in the labor force compared with 67.7% of men. Projections for the end of the decade show a slowly diminishing workforce participation gap. Despite these gains, progress seems to have stalled as women continue to be underrepresented in leadership across all professional and political sectors (American Association of University Women, 2016; Badura et al., 2018). Women make up only 10% of top managers and 19% of board members in S&P 1500 companies, and they are only 26.5% of executive and senior managers and 11% of top wage earners (Warner et al., 2018). In the United States, the gender gap is not expected to close until 2095 (Bierema, 2016).

Higher education is no exception to the leadership gender gap. Women hold more faculty positions in general, but men hold most prestige faculty positions, such as full professorships and tenure (Johnson, 2017). Men also make up most of the senior administrative ranks in the academy, including deans, provosts, chancellors, and presidents (O'Connor, 2018). An examination of the literature and trends related to the gender gap in higher education notes

numerous challenges for women, especially the perpetuation of a male-normed environment in the academy.

### ***Underrepresentation of Women Leaders in Higher Education***

College and universities have long been considered social justice centers, moving in pursuit of progressive ideals (Kornbluh et al., 2020). However, when advancing gender leadership parity, higher education continues to lag along with other professional sectors (BlackChen, 2015). While women are well represented in entry-level higher education positions, they become less so at every step of the proverbial ladder. Men hold more tenure and full faculty positions, and when women do hold full professor or tenure positions, they are paid less than their male counterparts (Johnson, 2017). Men also account for 70% of college presidencies, a rate which increases to 90% for doctorate-granting institutions (O'Connor, 2018). Cañas et al. (2019) conducted an *ex-post-facto* study of 424 chancellors, vice chancellors, provosts, associate, assistant, and divisional deans in the University of California system, finding the underrepresentation of women is not because women have lower career aspirations or are less qualified than men but because they face systemic barriers. These findings affirmed previous studies indicating women are equally qualified and eager to lead but shut out of leadership by longstanding biases disadvantaging them (David, 2015; Hannum et al., 2015).

Academia was conceived of by and for men and has been blind to its biases, assuming its traditions are gender-neutral when they are inherently patriarchal (Ford, 2016). Following role congruence trends (Eagly & Karau, 2002), women are overburdened with academia's caretaking, such as teaching, advising, and student services work, while their male counterparts are allowed time to focus on prestige work such as research and academic leadership (Hannum et al., 2015; Subbaye & Vithal, 2017). Hannum et al. (2015) conducted a study of 35 senior women leaders in

higher education using semi-structured interviews, which suggested women are relegated to corners of the university where invisible work occurs and do not have the opportunity to focus on the type of work garnering recognition, accolades, and promotion. The structures reinforcing patriarchy perpetuate biases as men, particularly white men, continue to saturate the most senior positions in higher education (Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Cañas et al., 2019; David, 2015; Madsen & Longman, 2020; O'Connor, 2018; Odell, 2020). Further, evidence shows while men find women to possess the traits required of successful leaders, they are blind to the barriers women face and feel they are part of an unbiased meritocracy with ample opportunity for everyone (Wong et al., 2018). The persistent imbalance leaves women without representation or adequate advocacy and left to wonder if they belong in senior leadership roles in academia (BlackChen, 2015; Cañas et al., 2019; Ford, 2016; O'Connor, 2018; Redmond et al., 2017).

Male normed environments perpetuate social expectations, furthering role incongruence experienced by women (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Sufficient adjustments have not been made in home life or work life, creating what has been dubbed a second shift for women, whereby they must keep up with professional demands and the brunt of household demands (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). Role incongruence and the prevalence of patriarchal home and work expectations have created systemic barriers impacting the ability of women to achieve professional goals and institutions from reaping the benefits of gender parity in leadership (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly et al., 2003; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Wood, 2012; Hollander & Yoder, 1980; Madsen & Longman, 2020; Wong et al., 2018).

Numerous studies have been conducted to understand the leadership gap, indicating various conditions inhibiting women's leadership potential (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Chrobot-Mason et al., 2019; Fetterolf & Eagly, 2011; Goethals & Hoyt, 2017). The research repeatedly

indicates the primary source of disruption to women's leadership aspirations is rooted in social roles and the stereotypes they advance. Social roles not only see leadership as inherently *male* but also demand women sideline their career aspirations to serve as the primary household and family caretaker (Eagly & Koenig, 2021). Fetterolf and Eagly (2011) conducted a study of 114 undergraduate women in the Midwest employing the possible selves method and found even among ambitious young women, there is an understanding their husbands will out-earn them, and they will by default have to take on more of the housework and child-rearing and sacrifice their professional pursuits to do so. Regardless of their choices, aspirations, or qualifications, women are constrained by social expectations that seep into organizations, individuals, and women themselves. The consequences of the leadership gap for women are tremendous and include a loss of social, economic, and political capital (American Association of University Women, 2016; Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018).

The persistent leadership gender gap in higher education and across all professional sectors is so prevalent numerous metaphors have been adopted to explain the myriad inequities women face in their professional pursuits. These comparisons seek to tell the story of the systemic barriers and maltreatment women experience throughout their careers and are applicable to virtually any industry, including higher education. Most of these metaphors point back to the debilitating experience of navigating gender role congruence expectations as a primary obstacle in professional ascension, though few offer solutions (Barnes, 2017; Eagly & Karau, 2002; O'Connor, 2018; Ryan & Haslam, 2007). However, as women attempt to bridge the leadership gap, these metaphors provide a common language to share the challenges they encounter. The leaky pipeline, sticky floor, and glass ceiling illustrate the underrepresentation of

women, while the glass cliff represents the tendency to appoint women leaders to organizations in crisis, and the labyrinth explains the complex obstacles unique to women in the workplace.

***The Leaky Pipeline, the Sticky Floor, and the Glass Ceiling***

While women continue to make enormous strides in academic representation as students and graduates, these gains have not translated to greater representation in senior leadership roles (O'Connor, 2018). In higher education, the highest concentration of women exists at the lowest levels of the professoriate and administration (Cañas et al., 2019). While the pool of talented and qualified women grows, women are still vastly outnumbered in leadership roles, remaining cloistered in entry-level and middle management roles. In fact, the only place in academia where there are more women than men are at the lowest instructional levels—lecturers, instructors, and assistant professors (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). This phenomenon is known as the leaky pipeline (Madsen & Longman, 2020) or the sticky floor (Subbaye & Vithal, 2017). Both describe barriers preventing women from reaching the highest levels of leadership.

The glass ceiling refers to the invisible barrier keeping women from ascending to the highest leadership positions (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). Coined nearly 40 years ago, the relevance of the metaphor persists. Despite workforce gains, women continue to be underrepresented in senior leadership roles and board positions across all industries and paid less than men for comparable work (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Higher education is no exception to this disparity. Only 30% of university presidents are women, and significantly more men hold tenured faculty positions at every type of institution (Johnson, 2017).

Much has been made of the reasons for the disparate representation of women. Some even consider the economic and professional gains women have made over the last several decades to mean we are beyond biases and have entered a period of post-sexism (Flippin, 2017).

Men especially have reported gender bias in the workforce is minimal or non-existent, pointing to parental leave policies and a greater network of female colleagues (Wong et al., 2018; Ysseldyk et al., 2019). Others assert the gender gap is self-imposed as women elect to leave the workforce or eschew more demanding leadership roles to focus on building and attending to their home life (Ford, 2016).

Studies demonstrate little variance between men and women regarding career aspirations (Cañas et al., 2019; Fetterolf & Eagly, 2011). The significant number of women pursuing higher education and attaining degrees points to this as well. Instead, women are finding they are held back by systemic barriers (Cañas et al., 2019; Ford, 2016; Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018). Demands for role congruence continue to result in women taking on a much more substantial portion of parenting and household responsibilities than their male partners. Horne et al. (2018) conducted a quantitative analysis of Canadian men and women at three developmental stages (age 25,  $n = 168$ ; age 32,  $n = 337$ ; age 43,  $n = 309$ ) to explore the division of housework and found at all stages, women performed more housework than men. Recent studies of dual-income households corroborate this continues to be true not just for physical tasks but also for the emotional labor required to manage and tend to a family's needs (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018). When this occurs, women are more likely to lower their career aspirations or temporarily drop out of the workforce to focus on family and caregiving responsibilities (Ford, 2016; White & Burkinshaw, 2019; Wong et al., 2018).

In academic settings, this reprieve from work-life often coincides with the timing associated with promotion and tenure (O'Connor, 2018; Surawicz, 2016). The result of capitulating to the demands of family life imposed on women is women leak from the pipeline at the most critical moments for their future career growth (Bierema, 2016). Through a qualitative

study of seven women who left academic leadership, Redmond et al. (2017) found disruptions to the careers of women academics are typical, and success requires grit and persistence. When women do return to the workforce, they may advancement has become even more challenging as they are so far behind their male peers, leaving them stuck in lower-level positions (Brown et al., 2020; Subbaye & Vithal, 2017). While the system may claim gender neutrality, it is designed for men who do not encounter the same expectations and obstacles as women (Ford, 2016). When women are included in leadership, it is common for them to be placed in precarious positions, which is described by the glass cliff metaphor (Ryan & Haslam, 2007)

### *The Glass Cliff*

The glass cliff refers to the phenomenon of selecting women to lead failing organizations in a tenuous position. According to Ryan and Haslam's (2007) research, opportunities for top-level women were consistently tied to organizations in crisis, creating an additional obstacle for women. Placing women in precarious leadership positions damages the individual woman's reputation and perpetuates the notion that women are not suitable for top leadership positions because it associates them with failure (Barnes, 2017; O'Connor, 2018). A recent qualitative study by Glass and Cook (2020) included 33 senior leaders across sectors in the United States and demonstrated women feel compelled to accept glass cliff appointments as a calculated risk necessary for career advancement where opportunities for them are few. The risk of failure, though high, is no worse than languishing in middle management. The glass cliff phenomenon, as well as the leaky pipeline, sticky floor, and glass ceiling, are only a small handful of metaphors used to describe the multitude of challenges faced by women. These metaphors, and countless others that have been used, are symbolic of a greater phenomenon professional women face—the labyrinth (Carli & Eagly, 2016).

***The Labyrinth***

As women navigate the leadership hierarchy, they are not presented with the same ladder as their male counterparts but rather a labyrinth of barriers, obstacles, and challenges (American Association of University Women, 2016; Carli & Eagly, 2016; Ford, 2016; Goethals & Hoyt, 2017). Women can and do reach the pinnacle of leadership. Still, they are less likely to do so because their journey is littered with overt and insidious biases and expectations, creating a litany of expected and unforeseen twists and turns (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Madsen & Longman, 2020). The labyrinth is defined by patriarchal norms and traditions, perpetuating the exclusionary practices resulting in an underrepresentation of women across industries, including higher education (BlackChen, 2015).

**Role Congruence Expectations**

Role incongruence poses a significant challenge to the career aspirations of women in reaching the highest levels of leadership (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly et al., 2003; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Wood, 2012; Hollander & Yoder, 1980; Madsen & Longman, 2020). The expectation women will display traditionally feminine traits such as warmth, caretaking, and communal interest is at odds with the expectation of a leader to be aggressive, independent, and agentic (American Association of University Women, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Goethals & Hoyt, 2017). Deviations from social role expectations are punished, leaving women in a double bind where they are violating the expected norms of femininity by being a leader, or they are not exhibiting the traits necessary for leadership by being feminine (Bierema, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women who adhere to stereotypes of femininity are emotional, weak, and needy; those who display accepted leadership traits are shrill, bossy, and demanding (Goethals & Hoyt, 2017).



Through biological imperative, traditionally meaning women bear children and feed them from their bodies, women have been associated with the caretaker role. As social constructs deferred to women as the caretakers and men as the breadwinners, notions of the ideal leader took shape (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018). With women absent from the picture, notions of the ideal leader emerged as inherently masculine, and workforce systems developed around male norms (Goethals & Hoyt, 2017; Meister et al.). Despite the heightened prevalence of women in the workforce over the last 60 years, the think manager, think male (Schein et al., 1996) trope continues to persist, and women continue to take on the lion's share of family responsibilities even when they work outside of the home (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019). While women experience a leadership advantage as employees seek a more relational leadership model that women are especially adept at, the advantage is eclipsed by the penalty for role incongruence (Hollander, 1992; Post et al., 2019). However, challenging notions of the ideal leader and creating more representative work environments are essential to providing women with professional parity and improving organizational outcomes (Catalyst, 2020; Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018).

A review of the literature concerned with gender role congruence reveals four significant themes warranting exploration for the purpose of this study. First, the crux of role congruence theory asserts women are inherently placed into a double bind, putting their career aspirations at odds with family responsibilities (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Second, the professional environments remain oriented toward masculinity without evolving to be inclusive of the influx of women (Bierema, 2016; White & Burkinshaw, 2019). Third, the role expectations of the ideal leader remain male-normed to the detriment of women (Bierema, 2016; Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Gloor et al., 2020). Finally, role congruence expectations are harmful not only to women but to organizations as there are improved outcomes associated with gender parity (Catalyst, 2020).

*Family Versus Career*

The first contributing factor to role incongruence experienced by professional women is discordance between family and career. A study by Ciciolla and Luthar (2019) demonstrated women report being responsible for 70-88% of the physical and emotional (or invisible) labor required for family life. Well-educated and highly paid women tend to take on even more of the household and parenting labor share to correct role incongruence between their gender and career (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019). Studies reveal even in dual-income households, women experienced significantly more work-home conflicts than men, and women spent more of their time on housework, whereas men spent more time on leisure (Bierema, 2016; Cañas et al., 2019). Research has found when career and family responsibilities were combined, women spent an average of fifteen hours more on work than men each week (Statti & Torres, 2019). A survey conducted by Meeussen and Van Laar (2018) involving 169 mothers in the United States and the United Kingdom found women believe motherhood is one of the most dominant and demanding social norms women face, and failure to adhere to expected caretaker behaviors can come with personal and professional consequences. Societal expectations and the continued wage gap contributing to men out-earning their wives in 71% of marriages often lead to women sidelining their career aspirations in service to the demands of their families (American Association of University Women, 2016; Brower et al., 2019; White & Burkinshaw, 2019).

Assigning the family caretaker role to women by default damages women's professional aspirations in myriad ways. Motherhood is associated with unreliability, lack of commitment, and lower competence, yet fatherhood carries no such bias and is associated with higher salaries (American Association of University Women, 2016). Regardless of how a woman behaves or the quality of her work, role congruence expectations are so strong her identity is altered in the

workplace, and it is rarely positive (Meister et al., 2017). In academia, this association of women with mothering often sees women relegated to less prestigious academic work associated with caretaking, such as teaching and advising students, while men are allowed the time to devote to research (Brabazon & Schulz, 2018; Macfarlane & Burg, 2019; Subbaye & Vithal, 2017).

Women also sacrifice career advancement as a result of motherhood. At a time when geographic mobility matters most, especially in academic careers, women are often amid the most demanding childbearing and child-rearing years, making relocation more difficult (O'Connor, 2018). When they do relocate, women are more likely to do so in service of their husband's career than their own (American Association of University Women, 2016). In academia, the years most crucial for advancement and tenure coincide with periods when women often leave the workforce or limit their engagement because of the demands of motherhood (Burkinshaw & White, 2017). Often, they cannot recover from this professional lapse (Surawicz, 2016), which perpetuates the leaky pipeline where women leave the workforce entirely (Madsen & Longman, 2020) or the sticky floor where they remain stuck in lower-level positions, unable to make the timely progress required for promotion and career ascension (Subbaye & Vithal, 2017). Even though women may not want to opt out of ambitious careers, they are blamed for their departure from the workforce, which is characterized as an individual choice rather than a systemic failing (O'Connor, 2018). This phenomenon is exacerbated by work environments created at a time when men dominated the workforce (Bierema, 2016). Male-normed environments perpetuate bias, promote a meritocracy, and seek to advance gender parity through initiatives designed to fix women to fit into masculine environments instead of dismantling exclusionary patriarchal structures (Bierema, 2016; O'Connor, 2018; White & Burkinshaw, 2019).

*Environments for and by Men*

Work expectations were designed around the ideal (male) worker who has no caretaker responsibilities and can devote himself to work, putting it above family and self (Bierema, 2016). Excellence, which is rewarded with promotion and pay, is defined by long hours, visible busyness, and the organization of all aspects of life around the needs and demands of work (Bierema, 2016; White & Burkinshaw, 2019). Women are necessarily excluded from excellence both because they are expected to provide family caretaking to meet social role norms and because of the flexibility they need to meet those role expectations is associated with a lack of commitment and availability (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018; White & Burkinshaw, 2019). In male-normed environments, there is little impetus to change notions of the ideal worker or excellence as they benefit men (van Gils et al., 2018). The male community of practice polices itself and continues to affirm the rightness of the existing structures and undermines or feigns ignorance at the barriers it creates for women (Burkinshaw & White, 2017). One way this is expressed is through the ongoing biases women face in the workforce.

**Bias Against Women.** Women not only face the challenges of meeting the caretaker social role expectation and working in systems designed for and by men, but they face constant bias, both overt and implicit. Between FY2015 and FY2020, 148,520 sex-based discrimination cases were filed with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (n.d.). Roberts and Brown (2019) conducted a qualitative descriptive multiple case study involving six Canadian women on boards and found most of them reported experiencing sex discrimination, ranging from microaggressions to overt acts. Women tend to minimize or rationalize acts of discrimination to tolerate behaviors that cannot seem to be fixed (Madsen & Longman, 2020). Discourse about women leaders from the dominant group perpetuates negative stereotypes, such

as the notion women have ‘slept their way’ to the top or they are in their role because they are ‘filling a quota,’ allowing men to assert the legitimacy of their power while questioning the competency of women (Bierema, 2016). The biases faced by women have been compounded by a system built on a meritocracy devoted to recognizing the achievements of men and devaluing those of women (Cañas et al., 2019).

**Meritocracy.** Workplaces, including and especially universities, embrace the notion of a meritocracy and fail to challenge the systemic bias upon which merit is assessed (Brabazon & Schulz, 2018; Cañas et al., 2019; Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018; O’Connor, 2018; Wong et al.). In an environment designed to recognize and reward masculinity, it is to be expected that men will be the heroes and women will struggle to keep up (Cañas et al., 2019). Though there is a continued expectation women will do not only the home caretaking but the office caretaking, they are blamed for their underrepresentation (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018). Any attempt at parity is deemed a threat to meritocracy, rewarding the individual for knowledge, competence, and ambition (O’Connor, 2018). Women recognize these structural barriers exist on a cognitive and experiential level but are often powerless to mandate change in a system continuing to insist women are the problem (Brabazon & Schulz, 2018; O’Connor, 2018; Wong et al., 2018). Instead, women have become comfortable being led by men while men resist women’s leadership (Brower et al., 2019). When women do ascend to senior leadership, they must take care to put everyone at ease because the inclination remains to believe they have somehow not earned their position of power since power rightfully belongs to men (Burkinshaw & White, 2017). Further, when organizations recognize a disparity in representation instead of addressing biases and systems disadvantaging women, the focus is on how to develop women, so they understand how to work within a flawed, sexist framework (White & Burkinshaw, 2019).

**Fixing Women Instead of Work.** As diversity becomes an organizational imperative, a greater focus on advancing more women to top leadership has emerged. However, many attempts to bridge the gender gap focus on how to fix the women instead of changing the patriarchal system in which they are attempting to work (White & Burkinshaw, 2019). In their study Roberts and Brown (2019) even recommended women address the gender gap by changing themselves to be more in control of their emotions or learn to exhibit the correct balance of male and female behaviors. The problem and the solution both reside with women—if only they would behave more like men, but not too much.

Some workplaces have devised so-called family-friendly policies such as paid parental and family leave. However, these policies are often targeted toward women, which only reinforces gendered ideals insisting that women take care while men take charge (Goethals & Hoyt, 2017; Surawicz, 2016). Even when policies are touted as comprehensive, the expectation is women will use them, and use comes at the expense of being seen as lacking commitment and stamina for work (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018; White & Burkinshaw, 2019). Diversity initiatives targeted at advancing women also may tokenize women and perpetuate the belief they have been given a position they did not earn (Eagly & Koenig, 2021). Organizations would do better to consider the cultural expectations they set around work and restructure those to encourage work sharing, work-life balance, and relational models of leadership women prefer (Madsen & Longman, 2020). In academia, changing the tenure system to place greater emphasis on teaching and fields where more women work, such as the humanities, art, social work, and healthcare, would also provide a positive place from which to begin dismantling patriarchal structures (Brabazon & Schulz, 2018; Burkinshaw & White, 2017; O'Connor, 2018; Subbaye & Vithal, 2017; Surawicz, 2016). Instead, the focus continues to be on how to make women adapt to sexist

environments, which ultimately leads to disenchantment and the abandonment of the leadership aspirations of many well-qualified women (Longman et al., 2019; Madsen & Longman, 2020; White & Burkinshaw, 2019). Challenging the male-normed environments in which women work is only one part of the necessary equation toward dismantling role congruence biases. The critical companion to changing the environment is contesting how ideal leadership is defined.

### ***Challenging the Ideal Leader***

The notion of the ideal leader and leadership theory emerged when men made up most of the workforce and when family caretaking was done by women who rarely participated in outside work (Bierema, 2016). Thus, the leader as independent, aggressive, and agentic with a complete commitment to their work-life took shape and has persisted (White & Burkinshaw, 2019). Notions of the ideal leader stand in stark contrast to the lived experiences of women who have entered the workforce while also serving as the primary caretaker for children and home life, effectively working what is known as the second shift (American Association of University Women, 2016; Bierema, 2016; Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Hochschild & Machung, 2012). Though leadership programs offered by organizations and universities generally focus on training women to adapt to male leadership norms, there are compelling reasons to instead change the ideals upon which the vision of the ideal leader is built (Bierema, 2016; Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Gloor et al., 2020).

Rather than judging leadership ability using an essentialism framework that prioritizes traits, it is worth focusing on leadership efficacy instead (American Association of University Women, 2016; Bierema, 2016; Dzubinski & Diehl, 2018). Goethals and Hoyt (2017) asserted both women and men possess the ability to use an androgynous leadership style incorporating traditionally masculine and feminine techniques to achieve the best outcomes. However, while

men and women can and do use an array of leadership techniques, studies show women are more likely to employ relational and transformational leadership styles, both of which are associated with better team dynamics and efficacy (Brower et al., 2019; Goethals & Hoyt, 2017; Post et al., 2019). As relational leadership theory (Hollander, 1992) notes, effective leadership is intrinsically tied to effective followership. Women often employ leadership techniques focusing on democratic decision-making, group cohesion, and interdependence, all of which are associated with better outcomes for individuals and teams (Brower et al., 2019; Goethals & Hoyt, 2017; Longman et al., 2019; Post et al., 2019; van Gils et al., 2018).

Despite the utilization of effective leadership techniques, women continue to be rated lower as leaders than men, especially by men (van Gils et al., 2018). Even when presented with identical credentials, both women and men are inclined to judge an applicant with a male name as more qualified than one with a female name (Brower et al., 2019; Goethals & Hoyt, 2017). Gloor et al. (2020) studied this phenomenon in multiple-source, multiple-wave field experiments in the United Kingdom and Australia involving 426 participants and 32 teams and found changing the group dynamics to include more diverse representation created an environment where women were more likely to be seen as effective leaders. Leaders are also group members, and it is easier to adjust the stereotype from within a group than to change the external definition of the ideal leader, which is somewhat immutable (Gloor et al., 2020). These results align with relational leadership theory, whereby followers grant leaders their authority (Hollander, 1992). Over time, the continuous challenge to leadership stereotypes from within a social context allows the stereotype to dissipate and be replaced with new ideas enabling women to adopt agentic behaviors and men to display communal behaviors and still be seen as effective (Bierema, 2016; Eagly & Koenig, 2021; Gloor et al., 2020; Manzi & Heilman, 2021; van Gils et al., 2018).



Reimagining how ideal leadership looks, so it is inclusive of women, not only helps women, but it also helps the entities employing them because representative leadership has been associated with better outcomes at all levels of organizations (Catalyst, 2020).

### ***Organizational Benefits to Closing the Gender Gap***

Aside from social and individual benefits to women from closing the gender gap, organizations benefit from gender parity in their leadership structures. The transformational leadership style more frequently adopted by women is associated with greater employee satisfaction (Eagly et al., 2003; Wong et al., 2018). Using a cross-sectional quantitative research methodology involving 267 followers in Lithuania, Stelmokienė and Endriulaitienė (2020) found businesses stand to benefit when they have leaders with styles followers prefer because it increases productivity and goal-meeting. Better representation is also associated with a better culture, greater innovation, improved performance, and more leader-follower trust, especially during times of crisis (Bierema, 2016; Post et al., 2019; White & Burkinshaw, 2019). However, businesses should avoid perpetuating the glass cliff phenomenon by only appointing women during crises (Ryan & Haslam, 2007).

In addition to benefits to culture and morale, gender parity is associated with improvements to the bottom line and corporate social responsibility (Catalyst, 2020). Studies show companies with a critical mass of women in leadership experience a better return on investments, higher return on equity, improved return on sales, and overall better profits (American Association of University Women, 2016; Bierema, 2016; Gloor et al., 2020). There are twice as few workforce reductions under women leaders, improved equality and national wealth, greater philanthropic initiatives, and improved organizational ethics (American Association of University Women, 2016; Gloor et al., 2020; Goethals & Hoyt, 2017). In effect,

organizations have a vested interest in embracing practices improving gender parity and erasing outdated think manager, think male notions of leadership.

Organizations have a considerable social and economic responsibility to participate in the dismantling of sexist role congruence norms disadvantaging women (O'Connor, 2018). While progress has been made, it has been slow and inadequate (Badura et al., 2018). In response, women have turned to same-gender mentoring as a method to supplant barriers they have been faced with, creating systems of support, avenues for exploring identity, and greater representation (Brue & Brue, 2018; Harris & Lee, 2019; Madsen & Longman, 2020; Yip et al., 2020).

### **Mentoring**

Mentoring is loosely defined as a relationship where a protégé, or mentee, benefits from a mentor's counsel, authority, and career development (Early, 2020; Longman et al., 2019). From a relational perspective, leadership is not a solo endeavor, but a collective process developed through relationships and shared values (Branson & Marra, 2019; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Sklaveniti, 2020; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Mentorship is especially important to women who aspire to leadership in male-normed social structures and face numerous systemic barriers and challenges (Statti & Torres, 2019). Women university presidents overwhelmingly report they have had a mentor, and the mentoring relationship was integral to their success (Ginsberg et al., 2019). Conversely, studies show a lack of mentorship is a barrier to leadership attainment, career development, and job satisfaction (Cross et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2018). Women are ideally suited to engaging in mentoring relationships because there is a need to work together to combat internal and external biases and barriers, create a broader representation, and engage in the type of relationships guided by empathy and mutuality in which women thrive (Jian, 2021; Manzi &

Heilman, 2021; O'Connor, 2018; Roberts & Brown, 2019; Searby et al., 2015; Sklaveniti, 2020).

The mentoring relationships women enter can be the result of formalized programs or through the organic development of relationships between women (Brower et al., 2019; Cañas et al., 2019; Harris & Lee, 2019; Madsen & Longman, 2020; Yip et al., 2020).

### ***Formal and Informal Mentoring***

Mentoring relationships can be formal, where mentees are assigned a senior leader to be a mentor, or through various informal structures (Brower et al., 2019; Cañas et al., 2019; Early, 2020; Meister et al., 2017). In formal mentoring relationships, the mentor often uses legitimate and positional power to create opportunities for their protégé, which can be especially useful in academia (Harris & Lee, 2019). These types of relationships can open doors and add legitimacy and credibility to the protégé, giving their career a boost (Cañas et al., 2019; Meister et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2018). However, organizations developing formal mentorship programs must recognize the deeper purpose of such programs is to dismantle the very sexist structures upon which they are built (Brabazon & Schulz, 2018). Though formal mentoring can provide benefits, the lack of senior women available to serve as mentors is an impediment to such programs (Cross et al., 2019). Informal mentoring can serve as an important alternative, providing perhaps even more significant benefits to women than formal programs (Statti & Torres, 2019).

Informal mentoring can take many formats. Higgins and Kram (2001) conceptualized developmental networks as any group of people a person considers interested in and important to their career advancement. A qualitative survey study by Searby et al. (2015) included 131 top female administrators at American universities and found women define a mentor as anyone who has helped them and noted the mentor is often unaware of the relationship. Women are not only looking for the advancement opportunity an influential mentor can provide, but they are seeking

social support, advice, insight, and validity provided by anyone who shares an understanding of what they are experiencing (Harris & Lee, 2019; Madsen & Longman, 2020; Yip et al., 2020). The ability to form these types of mentoring relationships is essential to women because there may be a lack of women mentors available from the senior ranks due to the persistent gender gap (Brower et al., 2019; Cross et al., 2019).

Informal mentoring relationships are no less effective than formal mentoring programs (Early, 2020). In fact, these types of relationships can be even more critical than formal mentoring because they create a well-rounded network of support and communities of practice aiding in work sharing, career strategizing, and providing emotional support (Madsen & Longman, 2020; Statti & Torres, 2019). Studies have indicated informal mentoring relationships are even more powerful than formal ones because women participate in the mentor selection process and can find the support of others who share their experiences which leads to longer-term relationships (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Cross et al., 2019; Ginsberg et al., 2019; O'Connor, 2018). A mentoring relationship only needs to develop confidence, promote insightful dialogue and processing, and assist in career development to be effective (Brower et al., 2019; Longman et al., 2019; Madsen & Longman, 2020; Wong et al., 2018; Yip et al., 2020). While mentoring relationships do not have to be between members who share a social identity, women have an advantage when other women mentor them.

### ***Women Mentoring Women***

Mentoring provides a shared experience framework providing a platform for understanding and allowing for necessary but uncomfortable conversations about otherness requiring vulnerability (Cross et al., 2019; Early, 2020; Harris & Lee, 2019; Yip et al., 2020). Through same-gender mentoring relationships, a *we* is created, fostering a sense of inclusion and

belonging women may be missing in a male-dominated workforce (Brue & Brue, 2018). This shared identity leads to greater satisfaction with the mentoring relationship and improves value for both the protégé and the mentor (Ginsberg et al., 2019).

A case study of six female leaders at American universities by Moreland and Thompson (2019) revealed women are seeking mentoring relationships to help them navigate their professional environment from a lens of understanding. Mentors can provide affirmation by sharing their stories and helping their protégé adjust the narrative of their experience by viewing it from the perspective of someone who understands the structural barriers and challenges with which they must contend (Jian, 2021; Statti & Torres, 2019; Yip et al., 2020). The ability to provide psychosocial support and serve as a role model helps women contextualize the environments in which they are working and see the biases they face lay outside of them and within the system (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Cross et al., 2019; Longman et al., 2019; Statti & Torres, 2019). The benefits of mentoring extend beyond the obvious social support of the relationship and provide individual, organizational, and societal advantages (Brue & Brue, 2018; Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Roberts & Brown, 2019; Sklaveniti, 2020; Statti & Torres, 2019).

### ***Benefits of Mentoring***

The manifold benefits of mentoring include providing a path to challenge and subvert systemic barriers preventing women from growing as leaders and reaching their career ambitions (Brue & Brue, 2018). Mentoring allows women to engage in informal social networks from which they have traditionally been excluded because they have been created by and for men (Brower et al., 2019). Mentoring also challenges gender biases and stereotypes existing within organizations and internalized by women due to social role congruence expectations (Ciciolla &

Luthar, 2019; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Roberts & Brown, 2019; Statti & Torres, 2019). When women mentor other women, it creates a more representative vision of what leadership looks like and how women can assume a place within the highest ranks of the system, which is not only empowering and validating but leads to better economic outcomes, promotion, and elevated skills (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Cross et al., 2019; Eagly & Koenig, 2021; Gonzales, 2018; Longman et al., 2019; O'Connor, 2018). Women who are the recipients of mentoring are also more likely to become mentors, throwing open doors to countless other women following in their footsteps and benefitting institutions through the proliferation of knowledge and the reforming of systems toward social justice (Ginsberg et al., 2019; Moreland & Thompson, 2019; Statti & Torres, 2019). Further, women who experience mentoring have shown greater resilience and an improved ability to tackle intrinsic and extrinsic biases (Brue & Brue, 2018; Sklaveniti, 2020).

**Combating Internal and External Biases.** The social expectations of womanhood and leadership are deeply internalized by women who understand one role precludes the other (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Eagly & Karau, 2002). As a result, not only do men prefer male leaders and feel they are more competent, but women also share these sentiments (American Association of University Women, 2016; Bierema, 2016; O'Connor, 2018; Surawicz, 2016). So strong is this tendency both men and women judged the highest performing women only as competent as the lowest-performing men when reviewing CVs (O'Connor, 2018). From adolescence, boys are encouraged to overestimate their value and accomplishments, while girls are taught to demure and downplay their contributions and achievements (American Association of University Women, 2016). Women are acutely aware of the role incongruence their place in leadership creates and experience stress, lack of confidence, decreased ambition, and underperformance as a result of the discomfort of failing to live up to the expected stereotypes of

women and leaders (Bierema, 2016; Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018; Meister et al., 2017). Women understand deviations from the expected, even if they disagree with the role expectations placed upon them, results in being deemed unlikable and seen as neglecting their responsibilities (Goethals & Hoyt, 2017; Kreidy & Vernon, 2018; Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018). Same-gender mentoring allows for a shift in perspective critical to overcoming fears resulting from role incongruence, especially because relationships are central to how the self is viewed (Brue & Brue, 2018; Sklaveniti, 2020). Women in mentoring relationships work together to increase resilience and dismantle stereotypes at the organizational and individual levels (Roberts & Brown, 2019; Statti & Torres, 2019). The subversion of biases encouraged through mentoring can subsequently create a broader representation, providing opportunities to envision a workforce with gender parity (Manzi & Heilman, 2021).

**Representation.** Central to the mentoring relationship between women is the benefit of experiencing representation in spaces dominated by men (O'Connor, 2018). Meister et al. (2017) conducted a phenomenological research study involving in-depth interviews of 21 women leaders and found when visibility is minimal, women in leadership can be viewed as a novelty feeding the women first, leader second narrative contributing to role incongruence. However, repeated exposure to a stereotype-defying phenomenon helps lessen the power of the stereotype and allows individuals to adopt new perspectives (Eagly & Koenig, 2021; Manzi & Heilman, 2021). It is especially important for women to persist in their leadership aspirations as greater representation contributes to the slow chipping away at the gender gap (Badura et al., 2018). When women have greater leadership parity, there is an increase in available female mentors, and women also have role models who help rewrite the script about what is possible and how it can be achieved (Cross et al., 2019; Manzi & Heilman, 2021; Moreland & Thompson, 2019;

Roberts & Brown, 2019). Greater representation leads to an opportunity for women to begin to see themselves as leaders, integrating the feminine role with the leader role and shaping a new identity encapsulating both (Brue & Brue, 2018).

**Integration of Leader Identity.** Role congruence theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) demonstrated the feminine identity is at odds with the leader identity, leading to diminished opportunities for women. To integrate the perceived dichotomous identity of *woman* and *leader*, it is vital women can be seen inhabiting both (Longman et al., 2019; Pascale & Ohlson, 2020; Yip et al., 2020). In accordance with relational leadership theory, leadership is not just positional but must be granted (Early, 2020; Nicholson & Kurucz; Yip et al., 2020). Mentoring relationships allow the leader's identity to be affirmed through verbal confirmation and opportunities to explore and reconcile the new identity with their values and goals (Cross et al., 2019; Yip et al., 2020). Thus, mentoring provides validation and acts as the catalyst for the integration of the identity as a leader and woman (Brue & Brue, 2018). As mentored women become empowered to confidently take their place in leadership, they may be compelled to pay forward the benefits they have experienced by becoming mentors themselves (Searby et al., 2015; Statti & Torres, 2019).

**Mentored Women as Mentors.** As women navigate the systemic barriers obstructing their leadership ambitions, engaging in relationships to develop their leadership identity is an essential component of achieving progress (Early, 2020; Yip et al., 2020). The mentoring relationship allows this to occur not only in the protégé but also in the mentor, who gains confidence through inspiring confidence (Pascale & Ohlson, 2020). Searby et al. (2015) concluded that women are paying close attention to other women's career aspirations and are intentionally engaging in mentoring relationships with each other. Women who have gained



legitimate power understand they can influence the careers of others (Meister et al., 2017). These women who have been mentored understand how to be effective mentors and often pay it forward by mentoring others through formal mentoring programs and informal mentoring relationships (Searby et al., 2015; Statti & Torres, 2019).

### **Counterarguments**

The literature reviewed affirms a leadership gender gap exists, role congruence expectations significantly contribute to the underrepresentation of women, and mentoring is a contributing factor in mitigating intrinsic and extrinsic gender biases (American Association of University Women, 2016; Badura et al., 2018; Brue & Brue, 2018; Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Madsen & Longman, 2020; Statti & Torres, 2019). There are, however, counterarguments maintaining mentorship is not an adequate antidote for leadership disparities related to role incongruence, which will be explored in this study. Concerns about the queen bee phenomenon arising from opportunity scarcity, the potential to use mentoring as a vehicle to fix women instead of patriarchal systems, and the lack of power held by women all emerged throughout the literature and bear addressing during the research process (Allen & Flood, 2018; Brabazon & Schulz, 2018; Early, 2020; Harris & Lee, 2019). Some also argue the only way to affect true change is to mandate the dismantling of sexist systems through legislation (Longman et al., 2019).

### ***Queen Bees***

A recurring counterargument for the use of mentoring as a tool to advance the professional aspirations of women focused on the lack of available leadership opportunities. While mentoring is an important tool for leadership development, especially for women, arguments can be made it is ineffective in subverting and dismantling role congruence

expectations. Staines et al. (1974) conceptualized the *queen bee* phenomenon, which found senior women dissociate from other women to maintain their status in male-dominated environments. Allen and Flood (2018) conducted a qualitative phenomenological study of 51 mid-level female university administrators and found though women engage in less bullying in general, and when they do participate, it is most often directed at other women. Women fear stigma by association, and in a scarcity environment, everyone is competition, especially other women (Allen & Flood, 2018; Gloor et al., 2020; van Gils et al., 2018). Detractors not only noted the lack of opportunity women face but also suggested mentoring falls into the same flawed perspective, asserting it is the women who need to be fixed more so than the system (Brabazon & Schulz, 2018).

### ***Fixing Women***

Mentoring can be used to further the idea that women need to be fixed by teaching them to act like men (O'Connor, 2018). Formal mentoring especially can suggest the environment of the workplace is righteous and noble, and women simply need to crack the code and assimilate to gain entrance to the upper echelons of leadership (Brabazon & Schulz, 2018). In informal mentoring, power is deemphasized, which can help women navigate the system by deciphering expectations, but it does not necessarily change the system or its biases (Cross et al., 2019; Pascale & Ohlson, 2020). Asking women to fix themselves and suppress their natural traits to work within an inherently biased system does not change the system, only the women (Badura et al., 2018). Critics also asserted when women are asked to fix themselves, one another, or the system, there is a reliance on individuals who do not have the social power to make necessary changes instead of demanding those with power thwart the systems empowering them (Early, 2020; Harris & Lee, 2019).

***Mentors without Power***

Same-gender informal mentoring can be viewed as detrimental because it relies on those with less social power who are already stretched thin with the demands of work and home life to try to boost the social power of others (Cross et al., 2019). Protégés in underrepresented groups need mentors who can wield power to advocate for them, disrupt the system, and promote social justice (Early, 2020; Harris & Lee, 2019). Some studies have shown that women with a high-level male mentor experience the most significant impact on their career because of the social power men can exert (Longman et al., 2019). Same-gender mentoring among women can also be viewed as feeding into gender norms of women as communal and nurturing (Breeze & Taylor, 2020). If power is the necessary ingredient to successfully supplant gender bias, then there is some suggestion that the surest path toward parity is through laws and regulations, which have the greatest power to affect change.

***Laws and Regulations***

While mentoring may provide some psychosocial and career support, not everyone has access to these types of relationships, and they may not be enough to promote change without institutional and social restructuring (Longman et al., 2019). Structural changes provide a path toward accelerating the abandonment of negative stereotypes through social support and encouragement (Eagly & Koenig, 2021). O'Connor (2018) noted mentoring leaves gendered structures intact, but regional locations where the leadership gap is smallest are the ones that have advanced legislation demanding parity and protecting families and women.

A review of the literature has revealed evidence of an ongoing leadership gap, including in higher education administration (BlackChen, 2015). Role congruence expectations have contributed to male-normed working environments and diminished opportunities for women to

achieve their professional aspirations (Bierema, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002; White & Burkinshaw, 2019). In response, women often engage informal mentoring relationships to increase social support, opportunity, and representation (Statti & Torres, 2019).

Counterarguments emerged to suggest mentoring does not adequately address leadership scarcity, deconstructing patriarchal systems, and lack of power, suggesting the most appropriate forum for change is through the imposition of laws and regulations (Allen & Flood, 2018; Brabazon & Schulz, 2018; Early, 2020; Harris & Lee, 2019; Longman et al., 2019). During a thorough review and analysis of the available literature, a gap emerged which this study will attempt to address.

### **Gap in the Literature**

A gap in the literature existed addressing how women in higher education administration experience informal mentoring relationships as a tool to subvert role congruence expectations. Further research was necessary to examine how these relationships shift structures in male-normed higher education settings to allow for the advancement of women into the most senior spaces (Bierema, 2016; White & Burkinshaw, 2019). Additionally, the literature did not examine the extent to which women may feel called to participate in same-gender mentoring relationships to aid the careers of other women and further social justice by closing the gender gap (Brabazon & Schulz, 2018). While women have expressed the positive benefits of mentoring, the literature does not provide an examination of the responsibility women perceive themselves to have in dismantling systemic barriers for other women by engaging in mentoring practices (Cross et al., 2019; Harris & Lee, 2019). An opportunity for further research was identified to provide an understanding of how informal mentoring may aid in dismantling sexist norms in academia, and the social responsibility women feel to contribute to that process.

### Chapter Summary

The research problem established in Chapter 2 was a lack of understanding about how women in higher education have experienced informal mentorship to subvert barriers caused by role congruence expectations. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how women in higher education leadership use informal same-gender mentoring to supplant biases and barriers related to patriarchal role congruence expectations. An overview of the strategies utilized to conduct a review of the literature related to the research was provided. Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruence theory and relational leadership theory advanced by Hollander and Julian (1969), Hollander (1992), and Uhl-Bien (2006) provided the theoretical framework for the research. Factors related to the systemic barriers to leadership women face due to role incongruence and the impact mentoring can have on their ability to ascend were assessed in the theoretical framework and throughout the literature review.

The research indicated that women leaders are underrepresented in all sectors, including academia (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Chrobot-Mason et al., 2019; Fetterolf & Eagly, 2011; Goethals & Hoyt, 2017). Role incongruence as a factor in the leadership gender gap was explored. It was clear women experience systemic and personal bias when they attempt to integrate their prescribed feminine role with the inherently masculine ideal leader role (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Informal mentorship between women to subvert bias by challenging structures viewing leadership as male and providing representation and relational support was identified as a pathway to promote greater gender parity (Branson & Marra, 2019; Ginsberg et al., 2019; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Sklaveniti, 2020; Statti & Torres, 2019; Uhl-Bien, 2006). A gap in the literature addressing how informal mentoring relationships between women in male-normed higher education settings are used as a tool to subvert role congruence was addressed in the study

(Bierema, 2016; White & Burkinshaw, 2019). Further, the study also provided an understanding of the extent to which women in academia feel called to serve as mentors to aid in dismantling sexist social structures contributing to the leadership gap (Cross et al., 2019; Harris & Lee, 2019).

Chapter 3 provides the details of the research methodology. Included is the rationale for the selection of a basic qualitative design for the study. The data collection instrument for the study was semi-structured in-depth interviews. Data analysis involved transcription of the interviews and identifying and coding key themes, which were further analyzed to generate a deeper understanding and meaning. Techniques for ensuring reliability and validity will be addressed in the chapter.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The ongoing underrepresentation of women in leadership is a concern, and the issue has been shown to correlate to persistent role congruence demands (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Chrobot-Mason et al., 2019; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Goethals & Hoyt, 2017; Madsen & Longman, 2020). Incongruity occurs when individuals act outside the idealized social expectations of their role and leads to negative perceptions of the individual (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In leadership, Eagly and Karau demonstrated this has been especially detrimental to women as feminine qualities have been viewed as incompatible with the ideal leader visage. In the higher education sector, this is reflected in the substantial numbers of women in entry-level and junior positions, while leadership roles are dominated by men (Madsen & Longman, 2020). Mentoring is important to women seeking to develop their leadership capacity in male-normed environments (Statti & Torres, 2019). An opportunity to better understand how women in higher education combat gender bias was achieved by exploring the experiences of women who have engaged in informal mentoring relationships.

The problem was a lack of understanding of how women in higher education have used informal mentorship to supplant barriers caused by ongoing bias and role congruence expectations. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how women in higher education leadership use informal same-gender mentoring to supplant biases and barriers related to patriarchal role congruence expectations. The following research questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: How have women in higher education leadership experienced informal same-gender mentorship as a tool for managing role incongruence?

Research Question 2: In what ways do women in higher education leadership positions feel called to mentor other women?

The research methodology, design, and rationale are provided. The role of the researcher and research procedures, including population and sample selection, the use of archival data, instrumentation, and data collection, are examined. Data analysis, validity, reliability, and ethical considerations are described. A summary of the chapter and introduction to Chapter 4 are included.

### **Research Methodology and Rationale**

A basic qualitative research approach was most appropriate for this study as the focus was on understanding the experiences of women in higher education leadership who have engaged in informal mentoring relationships with other women. How women may use these experiences to overcome gender bias and role incongruence is most thoroughly expressed by women who have experienced this phenomenon. The study approached the experiences of mentored women from their outward reflections and descriptions, which is best suited to a basic or generic qualitative method (Percy et al., 2015). A constructivist paradigm was used as it focuses on the development of meaning in the context of how individuals interact in their social and historical environments (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A review of the research methodology and the rationale for the research design follows.

### **Methodology**

Qualitative research is concerned with understanding phenomena from the perspective of individuals in interaction with their world (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Qualitative research focuses on the desire to understand how individuals create meaning in a social context through first-person narrative inquiry (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how women in higher education leadership use informal same-gender mentoring to supplant biases and barriers related to patriarchal role congruence expectations.



Investigating the research questions required participants to share their perspectives about the development and effects of these relationships through a social lens. Exploration and research of this type is best suited to qualitative inquiry focusing on the experiences of participants and the meanings derived from those experiences.

### **Rationale for the Research Design**

In considering a research design, basic qualitative was selected as it allowed the data collection and analysis to include multiple methodological tools required for understanding the multifaceted experiences of the participants (Liu, 2016). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), a basic qualitative design is appropriate for understanding how individuals interpret their experiences, construct their worlds, and the meanings they derive from their experiences. The researcher acts as an instrument for negotiating the meaning and producing a descriptive outcome (Merriam, 2002). Understanding the first-person experiences of women who have engaged in mentoring relationships, including how they interact within the higher education setting and a patriarchal social structure, was the cornerstone for gleaning the meaning ascribed to the phenomenon.

Defining the basic qualitative approach necessitates an understanding of how other established methodologies do not adequately allow the researcher to address the purpose of the study (Kahlke, 2014). For evaluative purposes, other qualitative research methodologies, including phenomenology, case study, and grounded theory, were reviewed and ruled out. These methodologies provided valuable tools for gathering and evaluating data, and the study produced more robust information from the inclusion of varied techniques versus the constraints posed by using a single research design. Phenomenology is the methodology most closely related to generic qualitative inquiry (Percy et al., 2015). A phenomenological approach was not

appropriate for this study as the focus of the research went beyond the internal phenomenon of the mentoring relationship and included the social context and external environment (Kennedy, 2016). Case study was also not an appropriate methodology as the research was focused broadly on the mentoring experiences of women in higher education rather than on a specific mentoring program or institution and thus did not include a 'case' (Merriam, 2002; Yin, 2013). Grounded theory was another option unsuited to the study's purpose as it is rooted in gathering and comparing data in a given phenomenon. While this may be part of the analytic process, grounded theory is not the preferred method for understanding the varied experiences of individual participants and the meaning they derive from these experiences (Charmaz, 2014). The process of assessing various qualitative methodologies made it clear the most appropriate option for this research was a basic qualitative study unconstrained by the confines of a single methodology (Kahlke, 2014). The assessment also revealed important considerations about the role of the researcher in conducting the study using the chosen methodology.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative studies, the researcher serves as the instrument for collecting data and should consider their own biases and limitations (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The researcher needs to approach the research from a discovery perspective rather than hypothesizing prematurely (Hill et al., 1997). Adopting a neutral stance requires acknowledging and accepting that as the instrument for data collection, there are a priori assumptions formed through experiences, cultural beliefs, and previous knowledge (Shufutinsky, 2020). The potential for subjectivity or bias to influence the results of the study required the use of techniques for maintaining an objective posture throughout the study. Reflexivity practices were implemented

to control bias and to protect the integrity of the data acquired. Ethical procedures to establish and maintain trust with participants were also put into place.

The researcher's role in the study was to collect and analyze data as well as to establish trust by creating safe conditions for participants and developing processes to protect the integrity of the data. As a professional woman in higher education leadership who has served as both a mentor and a protégé, the researcher met the criteria for participation in this study and may be predisposed to bias. While inside researchers generally have a deeper understanding of the issue and may be able to establish a higher degree of openness with participants, there is a potential for the researcher to be biased and for participants to make assumptions about what the researcher already knows, leaving out important details or requiring a greater depth of probing (Saidin & Yaacob, 2016). Acting as an observer required careful and continuous reflection to reduce bias and maintain a neutral perspective, especially as there were commonalities with participants. Managing bias without interfering with the validity of the research was achieved through reflexivity practices.

Throughout the research process, reflexivity involved the use of three primary strategies. Bracketing is a process in which the researcher examines preconceived beliefs, experiences, knowledge, and thoughts related to the phenomenon being studied to set those potential biases aside during their research (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Bracketing techniques were employed throughout the study and included an initial written reflection, memos during the research phase, and discussions with a neutral peer familiar with qualitative research techniques. A reflective journal was maintained throughout the research process and used as a reference point for the researcher's reflections and to add a layer of clarity to the data (Shufutinsky, 2020). The reflective journal enhanced self-awareness by bringing forward experiences, thoughts, and

feelings throughout the research process, so they were acknowledged and examined. Upon completing data transcription, participants were provided with a copy of their interview transcript to affirm accuracy in representing what was communicated and understood, which acted as an additional measure to ensure researcher objectivity (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Rose & Johnson, 2020).

Establishing trustworthiness was also a primary role of the researcher. A critical component of ensuring reliability and validity in the research is to establish trust with the participants so data collected reflects the genuine experiences, meanings, and understandings intended (Cypress, 2017). Protecting participants is a primary consideration in the research process (Sutton & Austin, 2015). During the recruitment process, individuals interested in participating were directed to a secure link to a questionnaire (see Appendix A), collecting data in a password-protected encrypted file. The questionnaire included informed consent disclosures and required confirmation of participants' understanding and desire to proceed. The two participants from the researcher's current place of work did not have a supervisory relationship with the researcher, nor was there a significant power differential. Previous affiliation also existed between the researcher and two participants. These relationships were disclosed and addressed and did not influence the trustworthiness of the study. Participants were not compensated for participation or penalized for declining to participate or withdrawing.

Interviews took place over the Zoom teleconferencing platform due to ongoing COVID-19 public health concerns. Interviews were recorded on Zoom and transcribed using Otter.ai, and transcripts were provided to participants to verify accuracy. Names of participants, specific institutional affiliations, and other potential identifiers were not disclosed in the study and were only available to the researcher for data analysis. All information was secured in encrypted files

in a password-protected Google Drive with two-factor authentication established specifically for the study. Local files were stored on a password-protected drive on a personal, password-protected computer in a locked personal home office accessible only to the individual conducting research. The role of the researcher to adopt a posture of inquiry, control for researcher bias, and protect participants were essential safeguards in the study. Along with research procedures, the role of the researcher established a foundation for rigor and credibility (Shufutinsky, 2020). Research procedures included an examination of techniques for identifying the population for the study, participant recruitment, sampling method, research instrumentation and field testing, and data collection practices.

### **Research Procedures**

The research procedures section outlines the study's target population and sample selection criteria, including recruitment practices and sample size. The sampling method is discussed. Instrumentation for the study was semi-structured in-depth interviews and a questionnaire. Methods for validating the instruments and procedures for data collection are reviewed in detail.

### **Population and Sample Selection**

The target population for this study consisted of women who have achieved a senior leadership position in public or private non-profit higher education institutions in the United States and have experienced same-gender mentoring. Recruitment occurred through professional connections on the LinkedIn platform, as well as the extended networks of connections using snowball sampling (Naderifar et al., 2017). LinkedIn provided a medium for reaching the most significant number of potential participants who met the professional criteria for the study (Maramwidze-Merrison, 2016). To ensure saturation was reached, recruitment also took place in

the Academic Mamas Facebook group, a platform for nearly 12,000 women in higher education. Verbal permission to recruit was granted by a group moderator, and written consent was also secured (see Appendix C).

### ***Recruitment***

The recruitment plan involved a call for participation using a flyer (see Appendix D) announcing the study and inviting individuals to participate through a link to a secure questionnaire (see Appendix A). The population for recruitment was women who have worked in higher education leadership positions. The target sample size for this study was 18 participants, which falls within the recommended sample size for a basic qualitative study using interviews as a primary data collection tool and the guidelines provided by the American College of Education (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). According to Guest et al. (2020), numerous studies point to most new information arising from the first 5 to 6 interviews, with nearly all new datasets revealed within 12 interviews. A generous targeted sample size allows for substantial rigor while leaving room for some participants to discontinue their involvement in the study. The questionnaire remained open to prospective participants through the data collection phase permitting interview participants to be identified until saturation was achieved.

### **Sampling Method**

Snowball sampling was used for recruitment as this allowed for leveraging social networks to recruit participants who fit the specific criteria of the study (Naderifar et al., 2017). Senior leaders can be somewhat inaccessible for recruitment, but professional social media sites and groups serve as a medium where professionals network and share information, which may broaden recruitment reach (Maramwidze-Merrison, 2016). Successful interviews with senior leaders in higher education often rely on knowing and understanding the participant's

background, which is another potential benefit of snowball sampling (McClure & McNaughtan, 2021). Through snowball sampling, data about participants' educational and professional experience can be gleaned by referencing social media profiles where recruitment efforts are focused.

An initial questionnaire (see Appendix A) acted as a tool for gathering informed consent from potential participants and screening for suitability for the study. The screening portion of the questionnaire was used to identify women who served in the role of director, tenured or tenure-track faculty, faculty or program chair, dean, provost, vice president, c-suite, or president, and who experienced professional mentoring from another woman. The collection of demographic data in the questionnaire was limited to information relevant to the topic and used for additional insights during data analysis (Kostere & Kostere, 2021).

In the case of more participants than necessary responding to the study, a purposive sampling method was planned to select interview participants. A purposive sampling method allows the best candidates to be selected for interviews to aid in the collection of rich data (Bhardwaj, 2019). The questionnaire remained open for potential participant recruitment through the data collection phase of the study. Maintaining the questionnaire throughout the study ensured new interview participants could be identified in the event of participant attrition or to reach saturation. However, saturation was achieved without the need for purposive sampling and is discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

Saturation occurs when no additional codes or themes occur in the data (Saunders et al., 2018). Along with selecting an appropriate sample size and analyzing themes and codes for completeness, data triangulation involving the collection of data through multiple sources was used as a method for determining saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). In addition to in-depth

interviews, additional data were collected through open-ended questionnaire responses and in field notes transcribed immediately following each interview.

### **Data Instrument**

Multiple instruments were used to collect data for this study. Data collection instruments underwent field testing with subject matter experts to gather feedback and validate the instrumentation. Initial data were collected using a questionnaire (see Appendix A). Individuals who completed the questionnaire and met established criteria for participation were invited to participate in a recorded semi-structured interview on the Zoom videoconferencing platform. Field notes were written immediately following each interview to document important details and initial impressions.

### ***Questionnaire***

A questionnaire (see Appendix A) was deployed to obtain informed consent, screen potential participants, and collect demographic and background information to aid in data analysis. Google Forms was the tool used to create the questionnaire. The Google Form was created in a password-protected account with two-factor authentication used only for the study. The file with participant questionnaire data was encrypted to provide additional protection to participants. The link to the Google Form questionnaire was included on a flyer for participant recruitment (see Appendix D). The questionnaire was designed to advance individuals who provided informed consent and met participant criteria. The questionnaire automatically ended for individuals who did not provide informed consent or meet screening criteria, and their data was not stored. The logic built into the questionnaire allowed potential participants to be easily identified and prevented the collection of any unnecessary data about individuals who did not meet the screening criteria.



### ***Interviews***

The primary instrumentation used for the study was participant interviews. Recorded, in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews are the preferred means of data collection in basic qualitative studies (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). Semi-structured interviews allow for rich data collection by ensuring the research questions are addressed while also providing an opportunity for participants to fully explore their feelings and perceptions about the topic (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). A series of questions were prepared in advance (see Appendix E) and included additional prompts intended to garner as much data as possible about the experiences of the participants with role incongruence and how same-gender mentoring relationships have affected those experiences. An interview protocol with a script (see Appendix B) was used at the start of each interview to orient participants by reminding them of their rights and reviewing procedures to expect during and after the interview. The reading of the script and affirmation of understanding by participants was recorded for documentation purposes.

### ***Field Notes***

Field notes were collected immediately following each interview. A template for field notes (see Appendix F) was used for consistency. Field notes included observations, recording of non-verbal communication, and reflections about moments of significance during the interview. The field notes were used in the data analysis process, adding supplemental details to the transcripts. Field notes improve the depth of the data by allowing for an additional observational layer to transcripts not found in verbal communication alone (Phillipi & Lauderdale, 2018).

### **Instrument Validation**

As qualitative research is often focused on the specific experiences of individuals or groups of people, researchers usually create their data instruments to gather research applicable

to the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Questionnaires with open-text responses and Likert-scaled questions were considered but were ruled out because the conversational nature of an interview allows for deeper probing and the collection of richer data (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). Based on these findings, interview questions (see Appendix E) were developed, each with a series of prompts to aid in the interview. The four-phase interview protocol refinement framework (IPR) was used to ensure rigor in developing the instrumentation and to increase the reliability of data collected (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Castillo-Montoya noted phases one and two involve aligning the research questions and constructing an inquiry-based conversation. Fulfillment of these phases was achieved through a question matrix aligning interview questions to research questions. Phases three and four involved receiving feedback on the interview protocol, which was achieved through consultation with subject matter experts.

### ***Question Matrix***

A question matrix was used to fulfill phases one and two of the interview protocol refinement framework. Creating alignment between the interview questions and the research questions prevents the use of unnecessary or leading questions (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). Aligned questions allow the subject matter to be approached with intentionality and sensitivity while also providing an opportunity to gather as much relevant information as possible (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The question matrix was mapped, indicating how the open text questionnaire and interview questions corresponded to the research question. The matrix allowed adequate attention to be focused on gathering data helpful in addressing the study's research questions. Creating the matrix also was an opportunity to design questions written in a manner accessible to participants and encouraging a natural dialogue. Once the matrix was complete, and alignment

was confirmed, a script was developed to guide the interview in a manner driven by inquiry while adopting a conversational tone (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

### ***Subject Matter Experts***

Three subject matter experts were identified to support phases three and four of the interview protocol refinement framework. The subject matter experts were selected based on their expertise with research methods for qualitative studies. Each has a terminal degree, has conducted qualitative research, and has served in a professorial role teaching coursework related to leadership and conducting research projects. The subject matter experts agreed to validate the instrumentation in writing and through discussion (see Appendix G).

The subject matter experts were invited to participate in a phone call or Zoom meeting to review interview protocols and provide verbal feedback as a supplement to their written feedback (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). During the meetings, the subject matter experts provided an assessment of the questionnaire (see Appendix A) and the interview questions (see Appendix E). Interview questions were aligned to research questions via a matrix showing the connection. The subject matter experts' comments regarding the instruments were documented in notes and through track changes made to interview questions (see Appendix H). The most significant recommendation was to narrow the focus of the research to specifically explore informal mentoring relationships as it was determined this would provide richer, more authentic detail and is a lesser-explored phenomenon in research. Interview questions were also adjusted to reflect greater neutrality and enhance feedback opportunities for participants to ensure rich data collection opportunities. The interview protocol script was revised to clarify the types of activities associated with informal mentoring (see Appendix E). All feedback and changes were

recorded and sent to the subject matter experts in writing to affirm the edits accurately reflected their suggestions.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection was primarily conducted through in-depth semi-structured interviews over Zoom once IRB authorization was received (see Appendix I). The first step in the data collection process was the recruitment of participants. Primary recruitment occurred through a flyer (see Appendix D) posted on the researcher's LinkedIn platform with nearly 700 direct connections and thousands of secondary connections, all predominantly from higher education. Permission was also granted to post the recruitment flyer to the Academic Mamas, a private Facebook group for women in academia with over 12,000 members (see Appendix C). A snowball sampling technique was used as this created an opportunity for others to share recruitment among their professional circles, which might otherwise be difficult to identify (Naderifar et al., 2017). Recruitment of professional elites for interviews can be challenging, and LinkedIn is a platform where these individuals and their networks are much more accessible (Maramwidze-Merrison, 2016). LinkedIn profiles include background information about potential participants' education and career history, which can be an important component of successfully interviewing senior leaders in higher education (McClure & McNaughtan, 2021).

Individuals interested in participating in the study were directed to a secure Google Form to complete a questionnaire (see Appendix A). The questionnaire initially screened individuals to determine if they met the criteria for participation. Individuals who met screening criteria were asked to provide informed consent. Anyone who met the screening criteria and provided informed consent was prompted to enter professional background information by answering a series of required questions. Background data collected was relevant to the study and the data

analysis (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). If recruitment resulted in more qualified participants than were necessary for the study, purposive sampling was planned to select subjects for in-depth semi-structured interviews (Bhardwaj, 2019).

Once qualified participants were identified, they were contacted via email to affirm their participation and schedule an interview via a Calendly link requiring an allocation of one hour. Interviews were expected to take 20 to 30 minutes but providing a buffer allowing the interview to be extended up to an hour let participants provide as much information as they felt comfortable sharing. Interviews were not scheduled back-to-back to allow greater flexibility for participants and time to record field notes immediately. Interviews were conducted using the Zoom videoconferencing software. The reason for this choice is twofold. Primarily, it was in consideration of public health concerns due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic carried additional risk for in-person meetings and may have necessitated wearing a mask which is not optimal for gauging non-verbal communication. Videoconferencing also allowed for a broader range of participants outside the local area. Research comparing the quality of interviews in an in-person setting versus over videoconferencing software found not only are online participants more open, but they also prefer this modality for its flexibility (Gray et al., 2020). Interviews were recorded, and the recordings were stored in a password-protected folder on a password-protected computer with two-factor authentication in a locked home office accessible only to the individual conducting research.

Data was also collected using field notes. Field notes capture observations of the setting and other details of significance during the data analysis phase (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). A template for capturing field notes (see Appendix F) was used to allow consistency. Field notes were digitally recorded immediately following the interview to avoid distraction and saved to a

password-protected folder on a password-protected computer with two-factor authentication in a locked home office immediately following each interview (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). Field notes captured initial impressions, nonverbal behaviors witnessed, and other reflections and were integrated with transcripts of the interview to improve the depth of the data (Phillipi & Lauderdale, 2018).

Interview recordings were uploaded to Otter.ai for transcription. Otter.ai's transcription service has a 95% accuracy rate and allows edits to be made directly on its platform. Following digital transcription, a manual check for accuracy was conducted, and additional revisions were made as needed to correct any errors missed by the transcription service. Information from the questionnaire was also added to NVivo to create a comprehensive data collection repository. Member checking was conducted to allow participants to review their transcripts and ensure their perceptions and experiences have been accurately captured (Cypress, 2017). Participants were invited to request modifications, ask questions, and schedule a short follow-up interview if clarification about any information was needed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Once data collection was complete, data analysis began.

### **Data Analysis**

An inductive thematic analysis of the data was conducted. Thematic analysis provides a framework for organizing data into themes and categories to aid understanding (Sundler et al., 2019). An inductive framework for thematic analysis allows the data to be analyzed without preconceptions or predetermination about themes or categories contained therein (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). Open-coding and axial coding were utilized to develop codes, themes, and classifications of the data. Open-coding uses probing questions to delve deeply into the data, resulting in many descriptive codes (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). Axial coding organizes codes into

themes through an iterative process of categorizing, comparing, and refining the data (Williams & Moser, 2019).

Immersion in data is essential in developing perspective and understanding (Maher et al., 2018). Thus, an initial and thorough manual review of the data was conducted. Observations, questions, and meaningful words, phrases, and sentences were noted throughout multiple reviews of the data. The process of denoting important data and then connoting the information into preliminary codes provided a mechanism for initial conceptualization and theme development (Swygart-Hobaugh, 2019).

Following a manual review of the data, an analysis was done with the support of NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) system. Interview recordings, field notes, questionnaire data, and observations from the initial review phase were entered into NVivo. Coding occurred manually and was aided by NVivo through processes such as word frequency analysis, node development, tagging and reference extracting, and thematic organization (Feng & Behar-Horenstein, 2019). An exploration of variables was conducted to examine additional relationship trends, which provided a deeper understanding of the data (Swygart-Hobaugh, 2019). The data analysis resulted in a deeper understanding of how women in higher education leadership use same-gender mentoring to supplant gender biases and the motivations they feel to act as mentors to future women leaders.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Reliability and validity are the cornerstones of rigor for research. Qualitative research relies on trustworthiness as the measure of reliability and validity (Rose & Johnson, 2020). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness can be established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Member checking allows research participants

to review the data collected from their interviews and make amendments or provide clarification (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Triangulation is another tool promoting reliability and validity by collecting data from multiple sources (Abdalla et al., 2018). Using these techniques allowed for the development of trustworthiness and thus reliability and validity.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was addressed in practices intended to ensure the data accurately reflected the experiences and perspectives of the participants (Maher et al., 2018). Snowball sampling enhanced transferability by identifying a uniquely qualified and broadly representative group of participants through sharing the survey (Cypress, 2017). Researcher bias was addressed through the process of bracketing and reflective journaling (Shufutinsky, 2020).

### **Member Checking and Fieldnotes**

Transcripts of interviews were shared for member checking to allow research participants to affirm the accuracy of the transcripts of their interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Fieldnotes created during interviews and reflective journaling documented through the data analysis phase created descriptive and deep interaction with the research (Phillipi & Lauderdale, 2018). These processes resulted in the manifestation of an audit trail, also enhancing credibility (Lemon & Hayes, 2020).

### **Triangulation**

Triangulation was also an essential method for establishing trustworthiness in the study. In qualitative research, method triangulation involves multiple forms of data collection and analysis (Abdalla et al., 2018). Data for this study were collected in a questionnaire and through in-depth semi-structured interviews supported by field notes. Kostere and Kostere (2021) noted a questionnaire could assist in collecting supplemental information alongside interviews and allow



for the development of guiding or clarifying questions during the interview. Field notes were collected to allow for observational data to be documented immediately following interviews (Abdalla et al., 2018). Finally, multiple data analysis triangulation involved iterative manual and computer-aided review processes to identify codes and themes (Lemon & Hayes, 2020; Maher et al., 2018).

Trustworthiness in qualitative studies is the standard by which researchers must operate to produce rigorous research meeting the requirements of reliability and validity (Roberts et al., 2019). Multiple means of data collection, bias assessment, observation, and analysis can establish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Rose & Johnson, 2020). As qualitative research is interested in the human experience, reliability and validity alone are not enough to fully establish trustworthiness. Ethics in conducting research is of the utmost importance.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Qualitative research focuses on understanding social and human problems by acquiring data directly from individuals who share their perspectives and experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The protection of human subjects participating in this study was a paramount consideration. Adherence to the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice outlined in The Belmont Report was prioritized through the research process (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Ethical procedures included providing informed consent, protecting participant confidentiality and privacy, and prioritizing trust and transparency.

The initial research phase began with informed consent. Participants have a right to understand the research, its purpose, and what their participation entails so they may decide

whether to participate exercising full autonomy (Weerasinghe, 2018). One of the first steps of the research questionnaire (see Appendix A) was to review the informed consent statement and guidelines. Individuals who wished to participate affirmatively provided consent by selecting their agreement to participate and electronically signing and dating the document. Individuals who did not consent were able to exit the questionnaire or select the option to decline to provide consent, ending their participation without collecting any data. Participants were reminded of informed consent guidelines throughout the research process, including before scheduling and at the onset and conclusion of interviews. A copy of the informed consent was maintained for each participant's records and may be reviewed at any time.

Because participants were known to the researcher, anonymity could not be provided, though confidentiality was guaranteed. Participants were de-identified using pseudonyms and the generalization of other identifiers such as job titles and workplace names (Tolich & Tumilty, 2020). Pseudonyms were constructed to ensure participant identification could not be determined by anyone other than the individual conducting research. The system of pseudonyms was used throughout data collection practices, data analysis, and storage. All documents, recordings, and other artifacts related to the study were secured in encrypted files located in a password-protected Google Drive designed exclusively for this study. Two-factor authentication and best practices for establishing complex passwords were used. NVivo was downloaded to the researcher's personal password-protected computer using two-factor authentication stored in a locked home office. Records will be retained for 3 years after the conclusion of the study and then destroyed in accordance with Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) guidelines.

Participants were treated with the utmost respect and care. Establishing trust through processes protecting participants allows for authentic dialogue to emerge, aiding in collecting rich data (Sandvik & McCormack, 2018). To maintain credibility, practices to confront bias, such as bracketing and reflective journaling, were employed (Dempsey et al., 2016). While there were no anticipated risks, participants were asked to recall and explain personal experiences related to gender bias and same-gender mentorship as a mentor, protégé, or both. Given the diversity of experiences among participants, the possibility interviews may elicit an emotional response could not be ruled out. Participants were women who have achieved leadership roles and engaged in mentoring to subvert gender bias, creating an expectation of resilience which further minimized risk. The benefit of the research includes a better understanding of how women use mentoring relationships to supplant gender role incongruence, which was the aim of the research study. A deeper understanding of the practices of women in pursuit of professional aspirations provides essential insights for leadership development. The risk to participants was minimal, especially with the ethical procedures and guidelines in place.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter 3 included the problem statement, research questions, and research methodology for this study. A rationale for employing a basic qualitative procedure was provided, along with the role of the researcher as the instrument for data collection. The research procedures involved recruiting women leaders in higher education using snowball sampling on social media platforms. Data collection instruments were a questionnaire, in-depth interviews, and field notes which were field-tested to establish validity. Data were analyzed using a combination of manual review and coding and with the support of NVivo software. Reliability and validity were established by implementing procedures for trustworthiness, member checking, and data

triangulation. Ethical procedures ensuring adherence to the Belmont Report standards, protection of privacy, and the potential benefits of the study were prioritized (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). This includes informed consent, procedures for the protection of participant confidentiality and privacy, and practices establishing credibility. The consideration and establishment of thoughtful research methods created an opportunity for rich data collection and thorough analysis. In turn, a deeper understanding of how informal mentoring has affected the experiences of women in higher education as they navigate complex gender and leader role expectations was gleaned.

Chapter 4 will build upon the research methods outlined in Chapter 3. A discussion of the research findings and an analysis of the data are provided in Chapter 4. Included will be an overview of the data collection practices, data analysis procedures, and a discussion of the results of the data analysis. Reliability and validity are addressed to establish trustworthiness of the study.

### **Chapter 4: Research Findings and Data Analysis Results**

While women make up most of the higher education workforce, they remain underrepresented in leadership (Madsen & Longman, 2020; O'Connor, 2018). Role congruence demands present a significant challenge to women as they aspire to leadership positions (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Chrobot-Mason et al., 2019; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Goethals & Hoyt, 2017; Madsen & Longman, 2020). Role incongruity emerges when women behave outside their expected social role, which conflicts with the masculine attributes assigned to ideal leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002). As women navigate the obstacles they encounter in the male-normed environment of the academy, they have developed methods to subvert gender bias. One tool women have identified as especially important to their success is mentoring (Ginsberg et al., 2019).

While mentoring is an important aspect of women's success in the academy, there is a shortage of senior women available to serve as formal mentors due to the persistent leadership gender gap (Brower et al., 2019; Cross et al., 2019). Instead, women have turned to informal mentoring relations for support and guidance. Informal mentoring arises from organic relationships rooted in shared understanding and experience and can occur top-down, bottom-up, or laterally (Harris & Lee, 2019; Madsen & Longman, 2020; Yip et al., 2020).

The problem addressed in this study was a lack of understanding of how women in higher education have used informal mentorship to supplant barriers caused by ongoing bias and role congruence expectations. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how women in higher education leadership use informal same-gender mentoring to supplant biases and barriers related to patriarchal role congruence expectations. The following questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: How have women in higher education leadership experienced informal same-gender mentorship as a tool for managing role incongruence?

Research Question 2: In what ways do women in higher education leadership positions feel called to mentor other women?

The study was conducted with women who have worked in leadership positions at a public or private nonprofit higher education institution in the United States and have engaged in informal mentoring. Data was collected in a recruitment questionnaire, semi-structured one-on-one interviews, and through the recording of field notes. A review of the data collection practices, data analysis, and results follows. Reliability and validity are discussed, including how threats were addressed to ensure trustworthiness. A summary and introduction to the final chapter of the study are provided.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection for the study began following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to proceed (see Appendix I). A recruitment flyer (see Appendix D) was posted to LinkedIn and was shared on the Academic Mamas Facebook group by the moderator. The flyer included a link to the recruitment questionnaire (see Appendix A). Snowball sampling was used for recruitment allowing the flyer to be distributed through professional connections on LinkedIn and over 12,000 members of the Academic Mamas group, which specifically serves women in academia. Interested individuals were able to complete the questionnaire using a Google Form. The questionnaire screened interested participants for eligibility and gathered informed consent. The target sample size for the study was 18 participants, which is in accordance with research suggesting saturation is generally reached in qualitative studies within the first 12 interviews (Guest et al., 2020).

The recruitment questionnaire remained available for 47 days, which is the length of time between the beginning of the recruitment phase and the conclusion of the final interview. A total of 19 qualified participants were identified, and each provided informed consent through the questionnaire. An email was sent to each participant affirming informed consent and requesting they schedule a one-hour interview block using a Calendly link with available times, including evenings and weekends. A total of 17 participants scheduled interviews, though only 16 interviews were conducted as one participant did not show up and did not reschedule. Additionally, one participant opted out after completing the recruitment questionnaire because she thought she was not a good fit upon further consideration, and one participant who completed the questionnaire never scheduled an interview or followed up.

Recruitment resulted in a total of 16 interviews. While the target sample size was 18 participants, following the eleventh interview, the emergence of new codes slowed, and no new codes were identified in the final three interviews. The absence of new codes and themes in the final interviews indicated saturation had been achieved (Saunders et al., 2018). After the sixteenth interview, the questionnaire was closed, and no additional participants were sought.

Interviews took place over a total of 23 days. Interviews were conducted over Zoom, and the participants were able to join from a location most convenient and comfortable for them. At the onset of the interview, a brief explanation of what would occur was provided. Participants were informed the interview would be recorded, and the Zoom platform provided audible notification recording had begun.

The interview began with a reading of the interview script (see Appendix B) and an opportunity for participants to ask questions. The prepared interview questions and prompts (see Appendix E) were used as a guide for the interview. The use of semi-structured interviews

allowed all questions to be addressed through the natural flow of a conversation in which participants felt comfortable providing rich details about their feelings and perceptions (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 77 minutes, with an average time of 50 minutes. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were invited to ask questions or share additional thoughts not covered during the interview. They were also advised of the next steps regarding member checking, which allowed participants to review their interview transcript and request modifications, ask questions, or schedule a follow-up interview if necessary (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai, a digital application using artificial intelligence for transcription. Participants and their identifying information, such as institutional names and job titles, were de-identified to provide confidentiality (Tolich & Tumilty, 2020). Participants were assigned pseudonyms which were used throughout the data analysis process and in all references to specific participants in the study. Following digital transcription, each transcript file was reviewed while watching a recording of the interview to ensure accuracy and allow for additional engagement with the data. Once an accurate transcript was completed, it was sent to each participant for member checking and to allow for questions, clarification, or the collection of additional information. None of the participants opted to make any changes to their transcript or to meet for a follow-up interview.

Field notes (see Appendix F) provided an additional opportunity for data collection and were also used for bracketing purposes. A template was used for each participant to maintain consistency throughout the data collection process. Bracketing occurred using the field notes template prior to each interview to document preconceptions and set aside judgment, enhancing trustworthiness by addressing researcher bias. Field notes were then collected immediately



following interviews to capture initial impressions and reflections. Field notes included observations of non-verbal communication such as body language and emotional reactions of note, such as laughter and crying, that were not verbally conveyed but provided important contextual information. During the transcription process, further detail was added to the transcripts based on data collected from field notes to enhance meaning and understanding. There were significant events during the data collection process. Noteworthy events and their potential impact on the research are described in the following section.

### **Significant Events During Data Collection**

During recruitment, an unusually high number of faculty in the music discipline was noted. However, the participants from this discipline had varied experiences and were from various institutions across the country. The recruitment questionnaire asked participants to disclose how they had heard about the study, and there was no common source among the participants. The shared discipline may have been a coincidence or the result of snowball sampling.

In addition, four of the participants were known to the researcher. Two were former colleagues who engaged with the study after seeing the recruitment flyer (see Appendix D) on LinkedIn. Two were current colleagues who also engaged through the LinkedIn recruitment posting. A supervisory relationship or relationship with a distinct power differential did not exist among these participants and the researcher. While inside researchers may benefit from a deeper understanding of the issue and the ability to establish a higher degree of openness with participants, they may experience bias or encounter assumptions from participants about what is known (Fleming, 2018). The trustworthiness of the study, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, are addressed later in the chapter and provide evidence of

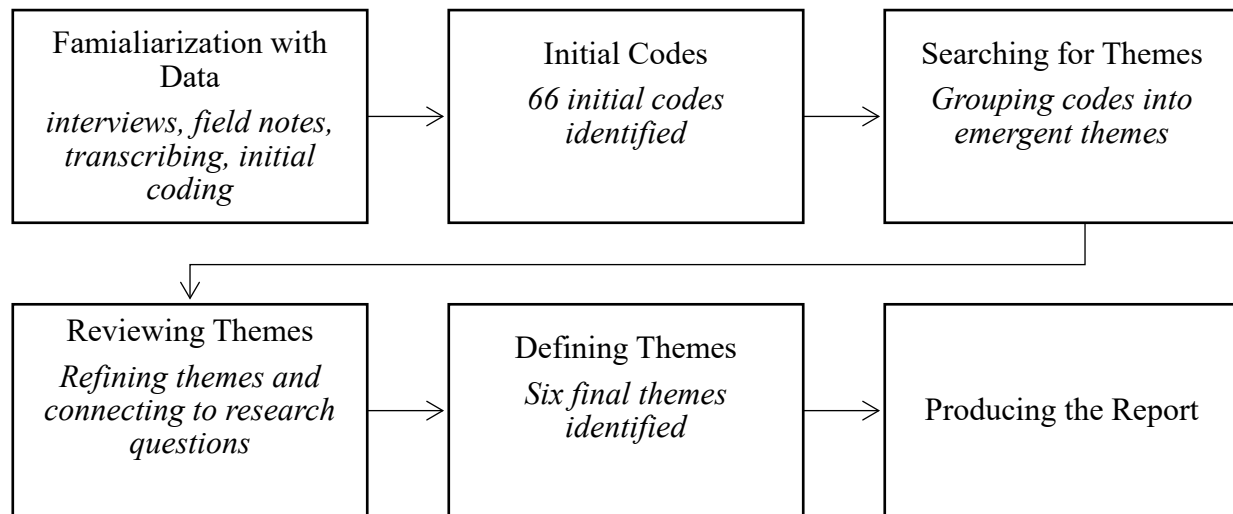
reliability and validity in the collection and analysis of data and demonstrate how bias was controlled during the study.

### Data Analysis and Results

Data analysis for this study was conducted using an inductive thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a tool for organizing data into themes and categories to develop understanding and meaning (Sundler et al., 2019). An inductive framework avoids preconceptions or predeterminations of themes and codes, allowing them to emerge during the analysis of the data (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). As shown in Figure 1, the six-step thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was employed for analysis of the data.

**Figure 1**

#### *Six-Step Process Used to Analyze Data*



Familiarization with the data occurred throughout the data collection process, including transcription. Open coding was used to generate a total of 66 descriptive codes. Axial coding was then used to organize codes into themes through an iterative process of continuous refinement (Williams & Moser, 2019). A total of six themes were uncovered to answer the research questions. Three themes and three subthemes were identified to answer research question 1.

Table 1 displays the final themes and subthemes and the significant codes informing each theme and subtheme for research question 1.

**Table 1**

*Final Themes and Associated Codes for Research Question 1*

Theme	Significant Codes
Representation	Representation Women in Power Role Models
Subtheme: Shared Experiences	Shared Experiences Personal Support How to Navigate Receive Guidance
Subtheme: Authenticity	Perceptions Visibility Adapting Behaviors Appearance Role Congruity Authentic Self
Balance	Balance Boundaries Have it All Work Twice as Hard Service
Empowerment	Lack of Confidence Risk Aversion Confidence
Subtheme: Voice	Career Ascension Belonging Credit for Work Visibility Be Quiet Voice

Three themes and two subthemes were identified to answer research question 2. Table 2 displays the final themes and subthemes as well as the significant codes informing the themes and subthemes for research question 2.

**Table 2**

*Final Themes and Associated Codes for Research Question 2*

Theme	Significant Codes
Shared Experience	Share Experiences Encouragement Provide Guidance Help Navigating
Pay it Forward	Pay it Forward Build Confidence Be a Role Model Help Careers Create Community
Changing Norms	Changing Norms Stereotypes Leadership Imbalance Role Congruity The Only Woman More Women in Power
Subtheme: Empowerment	Empower Women Power in Title
Subtheme: Voice	Amplify Voice Give Credit Perceptions Visibility

A summary of the gender biases experienced and observed by the participants in higher education is provided below. These descriptions support the findings in the literature about barriers and biases women experience due to role incongruity (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly &

Koenig, 2021; Hochschild & Machung, 2012). Contextualizing the environment of higher education for women is necessary to fully understand the themes in the data analysis.

### **Contextualizing the Data: Gender Bias in the Academy**

In addition to the themes that emerged from data analysis, important information was provided by participants to describe the environment of the academy for women. The conditions experienced by the women give pertinent context for examining their mentoring relationships. As participants discussed the biases they faced, patterns emerged characterizing the difficulties they encountered in the academy because of their gender. A review of the most often cited barriers women faced follows to provide additional context for the setting of the study. The primary obstacles the participants described were a motherhood liability, double standards for male and female colleagues, an imbalance of service and secretarial work, and both microaggressions and overt sexism.

#### ***Motherhood Liability***

Ten of the 16 participants discussed their role as both mothers and professionals, noting the risk associated with having children while working in the academy. Motherhood was perceived to be a liability, especially for women aspiring to tenure or senior leadership positions. Bell noted, “It was made very clear that women who had children in academia were unwelcome in the department.” Eleanor recounted an experience with a male mentor early in her career:

I was talked about how to not get pregnant so that I wouldn’t mess up my career rather than talking to me about actual job skills. Like, we’re not talking about something 40 years ago. We’re talking about stuff that’s still going on.

Participants described a culture that made them cautious about revealing their motherhood, fearing they would be perceived as less serious or committed to their work, which could hinder their career progression.

### ***Double Standards***

While participants discussed the liability of motherhood to their careers, some described the opposite effect men experienced related to fatherhood. Alice described a married couple at the institution and the perceptions of the husband when he brought the children to campus, noting:

When her husband is seen with the kids on campus, it's like such a celebration. Oh, look at him. He's being such a fantastic dad... And then and nobody even bats an eye when she has the kids on campus. And in fact, in some institutions, I've seen and heard conversations that were derogative of a mom who brought her child to campus.

In fact, 13 participants discussed double standards they experienced or witnessed. These included the respect given to men's time and decisions, the difference between how assertive men and women are perceived, and how male peers talk to women.

### ***Imbalance of Service and Secretarial Work***

Another way participants described gender bias in the academy was through the work they were expected to do. Tenure track faculty generally have criteria they must meet for teaching, service, and scholarship (Schneider & Radhakrishnan, 2018). Five of the participants noted disparities in the amount of service work women take on, leaving them little time to focus on developing their research and scholarship. Ruth commented, "women go into those service roles, and then get kind of stuck in the service roles and then can't go up for full professor." Other participants commented on how secretarial duties often fall to women regardless of rank.

Women are tasked with things such as taking notes in meetings and organizing social activities. Hillary noted she had observed and experienced these types of bias, but her current role in a unionized faculty offered protection:

I've been thinking about things like service, for example. I think, stereotypically, women tend to take more service than male faculty members. But I feel like here, because we're unionized and our criteria for tenure and promotion are very clear... I feel like that's protected me in a lot of ways from feeling pressure to take on more service.

The disparity in service and secretarial work was more explicitly described by participants on the faculty, though it was also commented on by those in administrative roles who noted similar treatment by male colleagues.

### ***Overt Sexism and Microaggressions***

Gender bias also showed up in more obvious ways for the participants. All 16 women mentioned some form of bias—both microaggressions and overt sexism—they experienced specific to their sex. Some described subtle microaggressions such as being talked over, comments on their appearance, and being addressed using inappropriate endearments such as ‘honey’ or ‘sweetie.’ Others detailed more blatant forms of sexism. Sonia recounted her experience as a dean when a new president arrived:

He said to me, ‘Oh, I want a man to be the dean, so could you step down?’ So, I just kind of laughed a little bit and just ignored him. Because I thought, I don't know what he was thinking. And then he said it again to me the next week.

The sexism the participants experienced, whether subtle or overt, interfered with how others perceived them and how they perceived themselves. These discriminatory actions also made it difficult for women to focus on their work and advance in their careers.

The biases described by participants align with role congruity theory which describes how social role stereotypes lead to decreased opportunity and greater challenges for professional women (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Findings from the literature were also echoed in the experiences detailed by the participants. The women described negative associations with motherhood, double standards, an inordinate amount of service and secretarial work, and instances of sexism, all of which showed up in a review of the literature (Brabazon & Schulz, 2018; Macfarlane & Burg, 2019; Meister et al., 2017; Roberts & Brown, 2019). Ultimately, these characterizations of the participants' work context provided the foundation for understanding how women experienced informal mentoring as a tool to manage gender role incongruence and how they feel called to mentor other women.

### **Research Question 1 Themes**

Research Question 1 was focused on understanding how women in higher education leadership have experienced informal same-gender mentorship as a tool for managing role incongruence. Table 3 includes the thematic findings and evidence from the data analysis related to research question one. Themes from research question one intersected with those from research question two but were described from the perspective of the participants as mentees versus mentors.

**Table 3**

*Research Question One: Major Themes and Subthemes*

Themes	Keywords	In Their Words: Participant Experiences
Theme: Representation	Representation Model Identify Look to	“She was one of my mentors. And I wanted to be like her. Seeing her in her position was formative, for me, hugely influential.”



**Table 3** (continued)

Themes	Keywords	In Their Words: Participant Experiences
Subtheme: Shared Experiences	Share Opportunity Understand Empathy	“Because they understand, you know. There's just that visceral resonance that we have these kinds of shared lived experiences.”
Subtheme: Authenticity	Authentic Truth (In)visible Whole Present Yourself Seen	“So those positive relationships, that positive mentoring that has made me feel seen as a whole person. You know, that's where I start to say, like, oh, okay, I see where I can fit in here. That it is okay for me to be a woman, it's okay for me to be a mother. And in those relationships, I'm not seen as a liability.”
Theme: Balance	Balance Boundaries Limits Time Protect Everything	“So, she was really my biggest mentor, in an informal way. And especially as a woman, it was really helpful to get guidance from her on, you know, advocating for myself, setting boundaries, that kind of thing.”
Theme: Empowerment	Advocate Empower Encourage Confidence	“[Your mentors], they believe in you. It's women trusting in your worth, allowing you to see your worth.”
Subtheme: Voice	Voice Speak Share Heard Express	“I realized that there were a lot of men at the table, and their voices were much, much more pronounced and heard than the few women that were at the table. And so the person that I worked for at the time, who was a woman, she really encouraged me to observe that and to find my place, my voice at the table.”

***Theme 1: Representation***

Participants in the study noted the underrepresentation of women in the academy, especially in leadership roles. Opportunities to see women ascend the leadership hierarchy allowed women to see themselves in leadership roles. Gloria noted, “Once I saw [my mentor] in that role, that made a huge impact. And I started to think, maybe I’m gonna do that.” Through their informal mentoring relationships, especially with women in senior positions, the participants could envision themselves in such roles. As a result, their perspectives about what a leader looks like and their own aspirations toward leadership were changed. Not only did mentoring allow the participants to imagine themselves in leadership roles, but their mentors’ shared experiences also gave them a guide on how to get there, and their support gave the women a chance to be authentic as they followed their aspirations.

**Subtheme: Shared Experiences.** Sharing experiences as women in higher education was an important part of the mentoring relationship. Nearly all the participants spoke extensively about the significance of hearing their mentors’ experiences. The direct lived experiences of the mentors provided the participants with a blueprint for navigating their personal and professional roles and avoiding potential pitfalls. Hillary described her mentor’s support during maternity leave, noting, “She knew what that was like to navigate the university setting with a child, and honestly, I don’t think I would have had as positive an experience as I had with maternity leave.” The empathy and understanding offered by mentors validated the experiences of the participants and provided them with an opportunity to consult with women who had valuable insight and expertise.

**Subtheme: Authenticity.** Nearly all participants felt pressured to adapt their behaviors to fit in or get ahead at work. The performative nature of their work persona included moderating

how they looked, what they said, and how they behaved. Several mentioned the only way to advance was to work within an inherently biased system by adapting to its prescribed roles. The participants described feeling like they could not bring their motherhood or femininity to work if they wanted to be taken seriously. While the participants acknowledged this, they also disliked feeling like they had to change how they behaved to be seen as competent and leaders.

Mentoring served as an opportunity for women to create a community for themselves where they could be authentic. Describing a core group of female mentors at a new workplace, Eleanor said:

So, I think in those mentoring relationships, they knew from the get-go that, okay, in order for Eleanor to be successful in this job, if we want her to stay, then her whole life needs to be successful. She can't just be successful in her job, and everything else is falling apart, right. And so, I think that there's an element of mentorship that sees you as a whole person.

The participants who had experienced both formal and informal mentoring specifically described how powerful informal mentoring was. Whereas, formal mentoring relationships were perceived to distinctly be about professional coaching, informal mentoring allowed the participants to be seen as whole people who needed support and guidance in both their career and personal life. In turn, this allowed women to feel more confident being their authentic selves as they pursued leadership.

### ***Theme 2: Balance and Boundaries***

A significant challenge the participants encountered as leaders in higher education was the feeling that they could not say no and had to work harder than their male counterparts to be recognized. This sentiment was amplified for women who had children and felt a need to

separate their identity as a mother from their identity as an academic. Most of the participants expressed a feeling of tremendous pressure to perform and take on a larger workload than their male peers. Having a mentor who encouraged them to adopt balance in their professional lives and create boundaries was helpful in dismantling the pressure women described as having to “work like you don’t have kids and parent like you don’t have a job,” as Hillary put it. Even for the participants who were not mothers, a recognition of the importance of having a fulfilling personal life was important to their happiness and success. This type of advice from their mentors allowed participants to be more comfortable setting boundaries and striking a personal-professional balance.

### ***Theme 3: Empowerment***

As participants described their experiences with their informal mentors, they all described a process of building confidence and becoming empowered. In the male-normed higher education environment, the women often felt a lack of confidence and an inability to speak up. Their informal mentors gave them regular encouragement and helped them believe they were capable and deserving. Hillary described how her mentor helped her early on in her career:

Because as a new faculty member, I was constantly doubting myself and thinking, you know, I don't know what I'm doing. Why am I here? Why did you hire me? I mean, I didn't say these things to her, but I think she just intuited what was going through my mind. And she was just always great at supporting me, building confidence.

Several women talked about small acts of encouragement their mentors provided, such as writing notes affirming their value or, in one instance, gifting a participant a copy of the book *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg to demonstrate she believed her mentee had the potential to be a leader.

**Subtheme: Voice.** A common theme among the participants was the value of a mentor in helping them amplify their voices. The women described an environment where women were often silenced or discouraged from speaking up. Eleanor explained how being invited to join a leadership committee did not always provide an opportunity to be heard, stating, “Okay, I’ve got this seat at the table now, but am I actually allowed to talk at the table?” The mentoring relationships with other women gave the participants the confidence to begin to speak up. Ruth started a women’s mentoring group on campus and described an upcoming training where “a professor of voice and speech is doing a workshop on finding your voice for women and how to use your voice literally, like through breathing exercises.”

These acts of empowerment not only gave the participants confidence but also helped them ascend in their careers. Of informal mentoring, Cecile noted:

I think it's had a huge effect in terms of my career progression and aspirations. Because without those experiences and that knowledge gained, I don't think I would have had aspirations to pursue further positions and to continue to grow.

Career ascension not only gave the women more professional opportunities, but it placed them in a position where they felt more confident being their authentic selves and speaking up, and it allowed them to be role models for other women. Alice said:

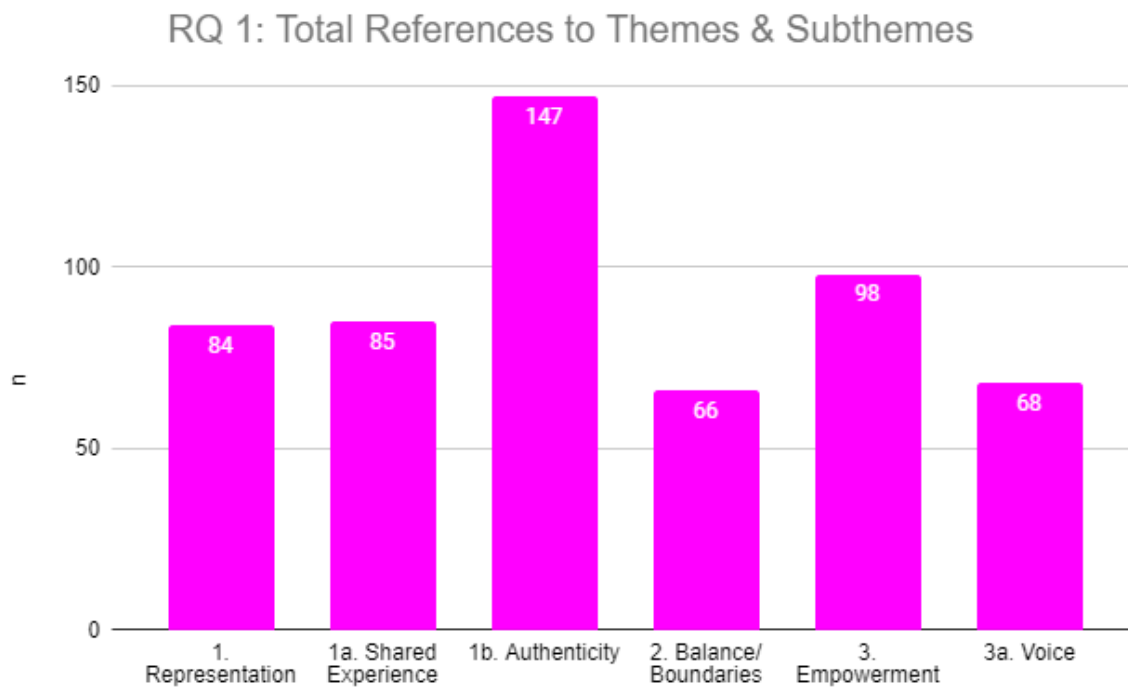
Having tenure has definitely emboldened me. I definitely now know that I have more security with having tenure. So I've definitely taken a few more risks myself in speaking up, in taking a firm position on something, in trying to lead a conversation.

As shown in Figure 2, the participants described informal mentoring as a central support for facing gender biases and role expectations and instilling confidence in them. The wisdom and encouragement of their mentors allowed them to pursue their aspirations as their authentic

selves, dismantling the gendered expectations they encountered. Informal mentoring relationships gave the women a community where they could seek support and counsel and benefit from other women's experiences. These relationships empowered the participants to grow and flourish as whole people with full personal and professional lives.

## Figure 2

*Participant References to Research Question 1 Themes and Subthemes*



## Research Question 2 Themes

While research question one was centered on the participants' experiences as mentees, research question two was focused on their experiences as mentors. Research Question 2 explored how women in higher education leadership positions feel called to mentor other women. Table 4 includes the thematic findings and evidence from the data analysis related to research question two. Themes and subthemes from research question two intersected with those

from research question one but were described from the perspective of the participants as mentors instead of mentees.

**Table 4**

*Research Question Two: Major Themes and Subthemes*

Theme	Keywords	In Their Words: Participant Experiences
Theme: Shared Experiences	Share	“I have that experienced perspective to say, like, ‘you can do this, and you need to do this, and here's why. And I'm going to help you, and I've navigated that process, and I've gone through it.’”
	Understand	
	Help	
Theme: Paying it Forward	Not Alone	“I think just having that reassurance and someone to build the confidence up really helped me remember who I am, what I'm capable of. And since that has been primarily from women, I look at it as an opportunity for me to give that back.”
	Pay it Forward	
	Return	
Theme: Changing Norms	Give Back	“As we teach them...they then further have experiences that they pass on. And we're creating a cycle where I think, bit by bit, we're chipping away at the crap that women have to deal with. And instead, we're changing the norms from the traditionally male-dominated space, and we're opening it up.”
	My Own	
	Change	
Subtheme: Empowerment	Better	“I don't think she really was internalizing how good she is. So, I felt like it was incumbent upon me to really make the point, like, you're amazingly good, your work's really good.”
	Norm	
	Taught	
Subtheme: Voice	Advocate	“I want the conversation to be more equal at the table, and the more voices that we have, and the more different voices that we have, the better off we're going to be as a people.”
	Help	
	Encourage	
Subtheme: Voice	Connect	
	Voice	
	Speak	
Subtheme: Voice	Express	

*Theme 1: Shared Experiences*

As the participants described the importance of having their mentors share experiences with them, they also noted this was a powerful reason they felt compelled to be mentors to other women. Gloria described the motivation to help women by sharing her experiences, saying, “My entire vision of mentoring, the actions I take when I'm working with women, all of it is based on what helped me.” The participants talked about a calling to help other women and to alert them to possible obstacles and barriers, as their mentors had done for them.

In some instances, participants noted their lack of mentoring made them feel strongly about serving as a mentor to other women. They wanted to share their experiences to help women avoid difficulties they had struggled with because no one had warned them to be conscious of certain things. Alice described her motivation to help her mentee by sharing her own challenges as an example of how to avoid problems she encountered related to biased gender expectations:

My first few years, I really didn't have a direct mentor until I built this relationship with another colleague. And as a result, I think I got kind of bogged down in a lot of administrative things that I probably could have handled better. So, you know, trying to [help my mentee] know how to navigate those things, trying to alert her to things to watch out for.

In serving as mentors for other women, the participants described a powerful inclination to share their experiences to ensure their mentees were well-equipped to avoid common impediments women encounter in higher education.



***Theme 2: Paying it Forward***

The experiences the participants had with their mentors were so transformational, they described feeling a responsibility to pay that forward by mentoring other women. Gloria discussed how she incorporated the wisdom of her mentors into the way she mentors other women, saying, “Everything I do, when I mentor women, is related to my own mentorship experiences. And the things that were special to me are the things that I want to pay forward.”

Participants also talked about how, as mentors, they envisioned paying forward what they gained by developing networks and communities where women could come together. Several belonged to mentoring groups for women where they could be mentored and mentor others. Ruth even started a successful mentoring network for women on her campus. She described her role, saying, “That’s what I do in the [mentoring network]. I just try to be a conduit and help you find people.” Passing on the wisdom gained from their mentors gave the participants a powerful sense of purpose.

***Theme 3: Changing Norms***

As the participants described the ways in which they felt called to mentor other women, they imagined a future where gender norms were discarded, and women had equal opportunity in higher education. Some described a slow but constant push toward subverting gender norms. Alice said, “I’m optimistic, but I also think it’s going to be probably another, you know, 20 years before we see really substantive change in roles.” Ruth talked about the importance of mentoring relationships among women as a place to talk about the barriers women encounter to help solve those problems:

So, in the mentoring relationships, where you can talk, honestly, candidly about gender issues... if you can't talk about them, we can't fix them. So, I think that just having those

more intimate, safe places where you can talk one-on-one with a mentor, or in a mentoring circle, about what's being experienced, then you can problem solve [and say], how do we address this?

As the participants talked about gender norms, they acknowledged their prevalence but also felt like mentoring relationships could aid in representation which could then change the perceptions of what a leader looks like and build more equity in the higher education sector for women. By empowering other women and elevating their voices, the participants felt they were actively fighting gender bias and creating a more equitable environment for women in the academy.

**Subtheme: Empowerment.** The participants described feeling called to mentor to help empower women and allow them to ascend in their careers and leadership, bringing more representation to the table. Empowering other women disrupts the leadership imbalance. This disruption allows women to see each other in positions of power and to aspire to higher levels of leadership. Not only that, but the participants also talked about how empowered women are able to empower other women. Maya described this as an opportunity to participate in a social multiplier effect, noting, “They carry that with them and [it’s] empowering them to do the same for others.”

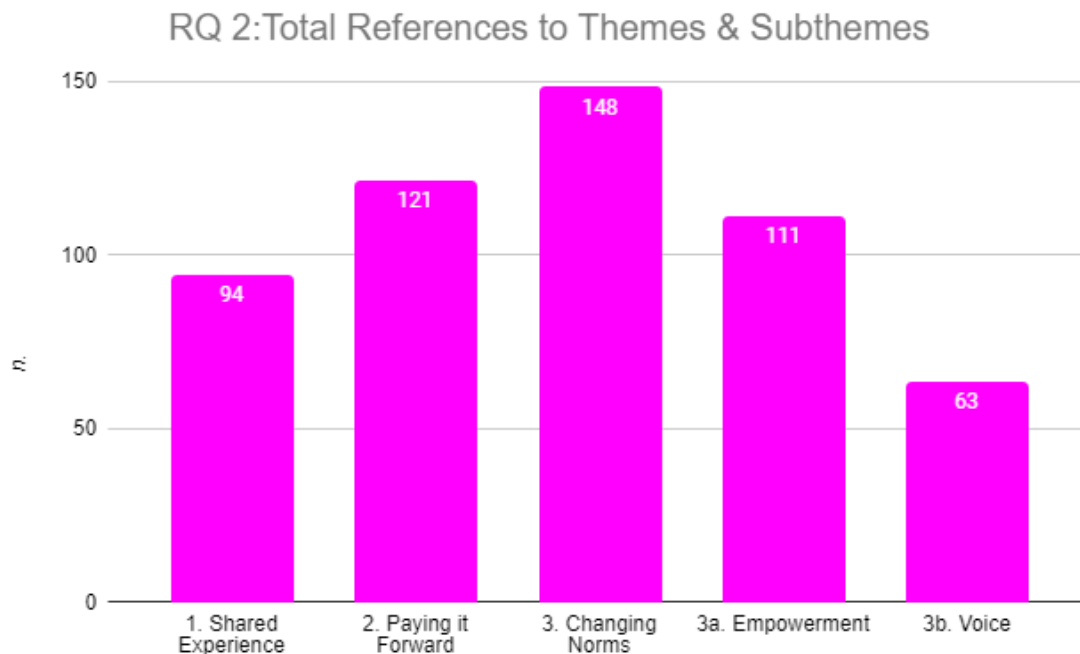
**Subtheme: Voice.** Within higher education, the participants described experiences where they were the only woman in certain departments or on important committees. This disparity in representation made them feel especially compelled to ensure women's voices were amplified. Eleanor described how it felt to be the only woman on some committees, saying, “I am often the only woman on a committee of all men. And so I feel like there is perhaps a self-imposed responsibility to try to adequately voice all of the concerns of all womankind.” As they gained seniority, participants felt it afforded them the opportunity to speak up and highlight the

contributions of other women. Alice noted, “We also have that kind of a professional obligation for one another, to ensure that we’re helping each other get the uplift in the field, and the space to be heard in the leadership roles.”

Figure 3 shows the reasons why the participants made it a point to be mentors and how often the themes and subthemes were mentioned during the interviews. The women described the benefits of informal mentoring, including the organic nature of these relationships and the ability to give and receive support beyond the professional realm. Alice stated, “I think that informal peer mentoring is often more important and critical to success in the academy than formal mentoring.” The realization of how critical informal mentoring had been to them made the participants committed to mentoring other women to share experiences, pay forward the gifts of their mentors, and change norms by empowering women and amplifying their voices.

**Figure 3**

*Participant References to Research Question 2 Themes and Subthemes*



### **Reliability and Validity**

Qualitative research is focused on trustworthiness as the measure of reliability and validity (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Trustworthiness is established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the study, trustworthiness was addressed using multiple techniques. Credibility was addressed through triangulation and member checking. The achievement of saturation, which was confirmed by the emergence of no new codes after the thirteenth interview, also contributed to credibility (Saunders et al., 2018). The recruitment questionnaire contributed to transferability by ensuring participants were well-qualified and included broad representation from different types of institutions, different institutional roles, and varying years of experience. Independent subject matter experts reviewed the interview protocol to verify dependability. Additionally, an audit trail was produced to document processes. Finally, the use of bracketing and member checking controlled for bias and contributed to the confirmability of the data. Further details about trustworthiness components, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, are provided below.

#### **Credibility**

Credibility of the data collection and analysis contributed to the overall trustworthiness of the study. Triangulation was employed to allow for multiple means of data collection (Abdalla et al., 2018). Data were collected from the recruitment questionnaire, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and field notes. The questionnaire provided a vehicle for collecting initial data related to each participant's background. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to answer the interview protocol questions. Field notes were collected immediately following the interview, with an additional opportunity to add detail during a review of the recorded interviews. The field

note template also provided a mechanism for reflective journaling to address any potential researcher bias. Member checking was another important component of confirming credibility. Each interview was transcribed, edited for accuracy, and submitted to the individual participant for review. Participants were invited to participate in member checking and affirm the accuracy of their perspective or provide corrections and additional detail (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Initial data analysis involved manual coding. All data and codes were uploaded to NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program. An iterative process of reviewing codes, identifying emergent themes, and refining themes involved both manual and computer-aided analysis (Lemon & Hayes, 2020; Maher et al., 2018). This included identifying keywords, bucketing codes into themes, and using exploratory tools in NVivo to confirm the accuracy of the data analysis.

### **Transferability**

The recruitment questionnaire provided an opportunity to confirm the transferability of the data. The questionnaire asked potential participants to provide their professional title, institution type, and years of experience. Of the 16 women who participated in interviews, 7 were faculty, 5 were administrators, and 4 held a joint faculty and administration role. This provided representation from across institutions. The participants worked at all institution types identified for this study, with 8 from public 4-year institutions, 2 from public 2-year community colleges, and 6 from private nonprofit institutions. Participants had varied years of experience in higher education, with 2 serving for 1-5 years, 4 serving for 6-10 years, 3 serving for 11-15 years, 4 serving 16-20 years, and 3 serving for over 20 years. The varied profiles of the participants ensured broad representation, which contributed to transferability (Rose & Johnson, 2020).

**Dependability**

The interview protocol was reviewed and amended per the suggestions of three subject matter experts prior to its use in the study. A clear audit trail was maintained to document processes through the data collection and analysis phases to enhance dependability (Carcary, 2020). This includes recordings of interviews, original transcripts, edited transcripts, manual coding, and thematic development. A record of data construction and synthesis was also created to provide documentation of decision-making during data analysis.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability was achieved through practices to diminish researcher bias and document decisions and protocols with transparency (Nassaji, 2020). Bias was addressed through bracketing and reflective journaling, which provided an opportunity to set aside personal experiences and preconceptions. Further, member checking allowed participants to review their transcriptions which were the primary vehicle for data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants were invited to make amendments to their transcript to confirm it accurately represented their perspectives and experiences. Throughout the study, decisions about methodology, data collection, and data analysis have been provided to allow for a transparent and open understanding of the rationale for various processes (Carcary, 2020).

Establishing trustworthiness in the study has demonstrated reliability and validity (Roberts et al., 2019). Great care was taken to ensure representation and accuracy in data collection and analysis. Bias was routinely addressed as part of the data collection and analysis processes. Data analysis included critically examining all the data to generate codes that were then organized into well-defined and supported themes addressing the research questions. Data

analysis was conducted manually and with the support of Nvivo qualitative data analysis software.

### **Chapter Summary**

The results of this basic qualitative study included a description of the data collection methods and processes, including an examination of how participants were recruited and the nature of the semi-structured interviews. An explanation of the data analysis, including the six-step inductive thematic analysis, was shared. The thematic analysis generated 66 initial codes, which eventually coalesced into eight themes. A recounting of the participants' description of the environment of higher education for women was provided to contextualize the thematic findings of the data.

Research Question 1 examined how women experienced informal same-gender mentoring as a tool to manage role incongruence. Participants explained the importance mentoring relationships had in allowing them to see representation of women in leadership, set boundaries allowing them to achieve personal and professional balance, behave with authenticity, benefit from the shared experiences of their mentors, have their voices heard, and generally feel empowered to be successful in higher education. Research Question 2 sought to understand the ways in which women in higher education leadership feel called to mentor other women. Participants described a calling to mentor other women shaped by the desire to share their experiences, amplify women's voices, pay forward the gifts of their mentors, empower other women, and ultimately change the norms that contribute to role incongruity in higher education. In total, three themes were identified to answer Research Question 1, two themes were identified to answer Research Question 2, and three themes applied to both research

questions, though the perspective of these themes shifted depending on which question was being addressed.

The final chapter of the study includes a reflection on the findings from the study. A review of how the study has contributed to closing the gap in the literature is provided. Findings from the study are contextualized through the lens of role congruence theory and relational leadership theory. Limitations of the study are addressed, including those potentially impacting trustworthiness. The chapter concludes with implications for leadership and recommendations for further study around women, mentoring, and higher education leadership.



## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how women in higher education leadership use informal same-gender mentoring to supplant biases and barriers related to patriarchal role congruence expectations. Women are well represented in the academy, but top leadership roles are overwhelmingly filled by men (Allen et al., 2021; Johnson, 2017; O'Connor, 2018). The disparity of women in higher education leadership correlates with role congruity expectations (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Following the framework of relational leadership theory, this study examined the organically formed informal mentoring relationships of women in higher education and noted their importance to professional and personal development.

Research Question 1 sought to understand how women in higher education leadership experienced informal same-gender mentorship as a tool for managing role incongruence. The study's participants revealed their informal mentoring relationships were vital to integrating their personal and professional identities as they pursued leadership in their institutions. The final themes the research revealed pointed to the significant role mentoring played by providing representation of female leaders, helping women understand how to achieve balance and assert boundaries, and empowering women through building confidence and amplifying their contributions.

Research Question 2 explored the ways in which women in higher education leadership feel called upon to mentor other women. All the participants expressed a strong commitment to mentoring other women, some because of their positive experiences with informal mentoring and others out of a desire to fill a gap they experienced earlier in their careers. The final themes identified for Research Question 2 indicated women feel called to participate in mentoring by

sharing their experiences, to pay forward the mentoring they received, and ultimately to change norms related to gender and leadership in the academy.

The study filled a gap in the literature exploring how women in higher education leadership experience informal mentoring relationships as a tool to subvert role congruence expectations and the extent to which women feel called to provide mentoring to other women. Evidence from the study demonstrated the critical role informal mentoring relationships have played for women in higher education leadership. The impact of these relationships creates an imperative to informally mentor other women to dismantle barriers related to gender bias and change norms in the academy.

The findings, interpretations, and conclusions based on the data analysis in Chapter 4 are discussed in this chapter. The limitations of the study are explained, especially as they relate to reliability and validity. A review of recommendations for future research is provided. Implications for leadership are discussed. A summary of key findings related to the study's purpose is included.

### **Findings, Interpretations, and Conclusions**

This basic qualitative study began with an in-depth review of the literature about the experiences of women in higher education as they face role incongruence and same-gender informal mentoring as a tool for supplantation. The theories of role congruity (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and relational leadership (Hollander, 1992; Hollander & Julian, 1969; Uhl-Bien, 2006) provided the framework the study. Following data collection and analysis, findings related to the research questions were established through an iterative process of coding and inductive thematic analysis. A discussion of these findings and how they correspond to the literature and theoretical frameworks follows.

**Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 explored how informal mentoring served as a tool for women in higher education to supplant gender bias related to role incongruity. Participants identified the importance of informal mentoring in their professional development. In an environment where women were significantly underrepresented in leadership, informal mentors provided important representation with which the women could identify. The women who had strong female mentors described the power of seeing other women ascending in leadership and working in positions of power. Women in these positions challenged gender and leadership norms and provided a model for other women to look to when considering their own professional opportunities. Participants who lacked informal mentors in leadership positions noted the absence of such influence and remarked on the benefit having more women in power may have made on them, especially earlier in their careers.

Another important factor in how women experience informal mentoring is through the sharing of experiences. Women encounter gender bias in the workforce as they attempt to succeed in a patriarchal environment that ignores their needs and contributions (White & Burkinshaw, 2019). Building relationships with informal mentors who have encountered similar obstacles provides guidance on navigating challenges and biases in the academy. These relationships also give women an opportunity to be seen as their whole, authentic selves versus just through the lens of their professional identity. The ability to be their authentic selves was especially important to many participants who noted how difficult it was to compartmentalize their identity as they struggled for recognition and respect as professionals. Formal mentors often focused on professional skills and development. However, informal mentors recognized the women as whole individuals who needed comprehensive support and recognition. Being viewed

as more than just their job function, but as complex individuals emboldened the women and provided validation.

One way the women reported experiencing bias was through the assignment of an overabundance of service and secretarial work regardless of their position. Stereotypical views of women as nurturers and performers of invisible labor contribute to the exploitation of women's time (Reid, 2021). At home, women also remain the primary caretakers of aging parents and children. Having a family was often seen as a professional liability, so there was pressure to conceal their home lives. Consulting with their informal mentors who had also experienced these types of challenges allowed the women to understand how to set boundaries for themselves. The participants also noted how important it was when their mentors made their personal lives more visible by talking about their children or families. Acknowledging their lives were multifaceted and included more than their work identity encouraged the women to create a manageable balance between their professional, personal, and family life, leading to greater satisfaction. Meaningfully establishing boundaries about the amount and types of work they were willing to take on allowed the women to advocate for parity for themselves.

Finally, informal mentoring relationships empowered the women to believe in their value and instilled confidence in them. The male-normed environment of higher education made the women doubt their abilities and fall prey to imposter syndrome. The encouragement and validation provided by the women's mentors validated their worth and emboldened them to pursue recognition and advancement. One way this empowerment was especially valuable was in giving the women the confidence to voice their thoughts and opinions. Women describe an environment where they are often silenced, dismissed, and unheard (Black et al., 2019). Informal mentoring relationships allowed the women to recognize the power of their voices and those of

other women and to facilitate opportunities for women to be heard. Reviewing the findings of research question one in relationship to the literature provides an opportunity to synthesize how the study fits into the broader context of research in this domain.

### ***Research Findings and the Literature***

The environment of higher education described by the women was in alignment with the literature. While participants described representation of women at most levels of leadership, they also described a gender gap with men outnumbering women in senior positions even though women overall hold more positions in the academy (Johnson, 2017). The participants also described a myriad of problems related to gender role congruence. These difficulties include phenomena noted in the existing research, such as a large portion of academic caretaking work, more service work and fewer scholarship opportunities, and greater responsibility at home, which women felt pressured to hide to be seen as fully devoted to their professional duties.

Mentoring was described as critical to the success of women, which is supported by the literature. To better understand the view of mentoring by the participants, each was asked to provide her definition of mentoring. The women in the study universally defined a mentor as anyone who has helped them, regardless of whether the person is aware of their impact, which was also described in the literature (Harris & Lee, 2019; Searby et al., 2015). Informal mentoring was described as particularly effective in helping the women contend with the biases and obstacles they faced in their career pursuits. The personal support, advice, and validation the women received from their informal mentors allowed them to feel seen as a whole person. The literature describes informal mentoring as particularly useful as it allows women to be active participants in the selection of their mentors, creates longer-lasting relationships, and aids in the development of trust and understanding (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Cross et al., 2019;

Ginsberg et al., 2019; O'Connor, 2018). The study affirmed these findings in the rich descriptions of the informal mentoring relationships provided by the participants.

One of the counterarguments in the literature did appear in the data for this study. Specifically, some participants described a *queen bee* phenomenon where women were sometimes unwilling to help other women to maintain their own status (Staines et al., 1974). In these scenarios described by some participants, certain women were characterized as especially competitive with other women or standoffish due to a perceived scarcity mentality. However, as in the literature, the women mostly described a compassionate sisterhood looking out for one another and committed to creating a better environment for all women. The findings related to research question one not only aligned with the literature but were also in agreement with the theoretical frameworks guiding the study.

### ***Research Findings in the Context of the Theoretical Frameworks***

The study explored the research questions using the frameworks of both role congruence theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and relational leadership (Hollander, 1992; Hollander & Julian, 1969; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Role congruity theory found women were disadvantaged by stereotypes developed based on long-standing social roles. Regardless of achievement, women are expected to be caretakers while men are leaders. Not only do these long-held gender roles create fewer opportunities by obliging women to behave in a certain manner, but those who seek to defy gender roles are also punished for nonconformity. The study affirmed the findings of role congruence theory, with participants noting the expectation they take on the bulk of caregiving work in the academy. Not only did the women report taking on more service work, but they also mentioned being treated in a secretarial capacity by male colleagues, regardless of rank. Women were assigned to more service committees, made de facto notetakers, and nominated to organize

social events for their departments. Some women were comfortable with this, noting they felt more capable of taking on more responsibilities than their male colleagues. Others, though, resented the additional labor they were expected to expend and intentionally strategized about how to refuse such assignments.

Relational leadership theory is focused on reciprocity and understanding in professional relationships (Hollander & Julian, 1969; Uhl-Bien, 2006). In the environment of the academy, where women were called upon to do more while also being recognized less, mentors became invaluable resources. The participants relied on their mentors for advice about navigating their personal and professional lives and the convergence of both. The informal relationships explored in the study created a natural foundation for trust, respect, and empathy. The participants described these relationships as pivotal to their growth and empowerment. In fact, the realization of the premise of relational leadership theory led to improved notions of role congruity. Their mentoring relationships allowed the women to challenge norms of ideal leadership because they observed their mentors behaving as leaders and exhibiting strength and competence. As a result, they were able to recognize how they, too, could be leaders.

## **Research Question 2**

Research question two sought to understand the extent to which women in higher education leadership felt called upon to serve as mentors for other women. The importance women placed on mentoring was evident by the unanimity of the participants. One participant described mentoring other women as an “imperative.” Even though there are greater demands on women’s time due to substantial personal and professional responsibilities, there is a calling to help other women succeed. The participants described the call to act as a mentor as coming from

a deep need to share experiences with others, pay forward the gifts of their mentors, and ultimately change norms.

The evidence from research question one indicated women felt hearing the experiences of their mentors was invaluable. Understanding this, the women felt it was crucial they share their experiences with their mentees. Helping other women navigate the landscape of higher education ensured they did not experience the same pitfalls as their mentors. Investing in the success of other women was important as increased representation and diversity are associated not only with greater success for higher education leaders and institutions but also for the students they serve.

The participants with strong female mentors viewed their relationships with their mentors as selfless gifts. The women described their mentors' impact in extraordinary terms, crediting them for their aspirations, confidence, persistence, and success. The call to mentor other women was an act of paying forward the power their own mentors imbued upon them. Some women did not have the same foundational experience with a strong female mentor. Those women also expressed the personal responsibility they felt to mentor other women to fill a gap in their own experiences. Whether or not they had a strong mentor, the women felt a personal sense of responsibility to invest in other women and contribute to the individual success of their mentees and the long-term empowerment of all women.

The participants saw the act of mentoring itself as an opportunity to change norms. While several women noted the act of making significant progress in attacking stereotypes and gender norms was a long process, they were nonetheless committed to pressing forward toward social change. Mentoring was an opportunity to empower other women and help them ascend in leadership, creating more representation and greater parity. Many participants talked about being



the only woman in leadership spaces and the pressure they experienced being the sole representative. Mentoring allows women to help position other women for leadership and correct the imbalance. Participants also felt it was critical they amplify the voices of other women as a tool to change the expectation that women will be quiet and deferential. Ensuring women are heard and receive credit for their ideas and work creates environments where women are represented, seen, and valued.

The act of serving as a mentor subverts gender bias by teaching, supporting, and returning confidence to women who have viewed their own value with apprehension because of unchecked patriarchal standards and expectations. As women empower each other, they begin to be better represented in leadership, correcting the persistent imbalance. The ascension of women into more senior ranks in higher education provides representation of what female leaders look like, chipping away at long-held gender biases and correcting sexist gender role expectations. The results of research question two also aligned with and expanded on the existing literature about mentoring among women in higher education leadership.

### ***Research Findings in the Literature***

The literature review revealed women in higher education leadership understand mentoring is critical to their success and the success of other women (Ginsberg et al., 2019). The participants affirmed this and noted an intense calling to provide support and guidance to other women. Through their informal mentoring relationships, women seize an opportunity to collaborate with one another, propel other women toward success, and engage in the subversive work of deconstructing sexist ideas about what ideal women and ideal leaders look like (O'Connor, 2018).

As mentors, the participants described a desire to engage with other women with authenticity and empathy. The literature notes mentors are interested in sharing their experiences as women, professionals, mothers, caregivers, and leaders with other women (Moreland & Thompson, 2019). Women see the opportunity to share their whole selves as a chance to correct the unjust system within which they work and empower women to claim their rightful place as leaders (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Cross et al., 2019; Longman et al., 2019; Statti & Torres, 2019). Women who mentor other women not only provide encouragement, but they receive confidence through the impact they make on their protégés (Pascale & Ohlson, 2020). When discussing mentoring other women, the participants described a phenomenon of empowering themselves through the empowerment of others. They felt purposeful, confident, and impactful.

The counterarguments in the literature review noted limitations of mentoring, and these also emerged in the data. A few participants described women who, through mindsets of scarcity or competition, were reluctant to help other women and even sought to suppress the progress of women. These descriptions were not the norm but could not be ignored. Many participants spoke about having to fit into a sexist culture just to survive. There was a clear component of power influencing how comfortable the women were with challenging norms. In many cases, the ascension to leadership was an opportunity to challenge norms. However, the road to leadership was one where conformance was a necessary evil. The women described strategizing with their mentors and mentees about how to subtly push back against the biases they encountered so as not to damage their reputation or opportunities. As essential as all the participants found mentoring, they also recognized the nuance with which challenging the status quo had to be approached. The findings of research question two were also enhanced by the theoretical frameworks guiding the study.

***Research Findings in the Context of the Theoretical Frameworks***

Role congruity theory was apparent in the findings for research question two. The participants described the academy as an environment marred by long-standing sexist expectations and norms. One important way the women used mentoring to intercept role congruence expectations was by creating representation in leadership and disrupting the *think manager, think male* narrative. The participants also described being intentional about allowing their personal personas to integrate with their professional identity. The women with children wanted their motherhood to be more visible, but they also did not want their femininity to corner them into stereotypical women's work like secretarial duties or an abundance of service work. Letting their caregiver identity be visible was a subversive move to influence what kind of person can be seen as a leader. Empowering their mentees to be their authentic selves was a purposeful step toward shrugging off feelings of role incongruity to reshape the academy outside the bounds of gender bias.

Relational leadership theory was apparent in the results of the study, which demonstrated the strong bonds women form with one another in their professional context. The study participants noted an ardent desire to collaborate with other women and imbue them with confidence and empowerment by providing professional guidance and embracing their whole and authentic selves. The women described long-lasting and transformational relationships with mentees which were guided by a sense of care and an investment in the personal and professional wellness and advancement of the mentees. These relationships were nurturing and communal, focusing on the women they served, the environment of the academy, and the social structures within which the relationships were operating, a hallmark of relational leadership theory (Webb, 2021).

### **Conclusion of Findings**

The findings of the study illustrate a powerful sisterhood among women in leadership in higher education. Women benefit from serving both as mentees and as mentors. These relationships allow women to understand how to navigate within the sexist environment of the academy and position themselves and other women for leadership. The growing representation of women in the highest ranks of higher education acts as a tool to slowly and deliberately alter gender-biased notions of the ideal leader. As women ascend, they are intentional about paving the way for other women by sharing their experiences and counsel with empathy and purpose. While there is recognition of the slow pace of meaningful change, the hum of progress vibrates throughout women in the academy who strive for something better together.

### **Limitations**

Study limitations are external constraints the researcher has little control over (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). Limitations to the study included the relatively small participant pool, which was further reduced by facilitation of the study by an inside researcher. When conducting qualitative research, which often includes fewer participants, it is essential to ensure data saturation to achieve trustworthiness (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). Chapter 4 provides detailed information about how and when data saturation was attained in the study. Another limitation was the exclusion of several potential participants from the study due to the nature of their relationship with the researcher and the potential for bias by the researcher or assumptions about what is known by participants (Saidin & Yaacob, 2016). The scope of the study also did not allow for the differentiation of information based on the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Snowball sampling allowed for an expanded reach in the participant pool with participants from many states, institutions, and types of institutions (Naderifar et al., 2017). There was also representation from women with varying experience levels and faculty and administration. However, several faculty participants were from the music discipline, though they came from different schools across the country. A common source could not be identified in questionnaire disclosures or interviews. The number of music professors could be a coincidence or the result of snowball sampling. Participants, including those from a similar discipline, described different types of institutions in several locations across the United States. Along with thick descriptions, the broad representation among participants, even those with a shared discipline, and data saturation, which occurred after 13 interviews, contributed to the transferability of the findings (Roberts et al., 2019; Saunders et al., 2018).

While credibility was established through data collection triangulation, there were some limitations. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the inclusion of participants from across the United States made in-person interviews impossible. While interviews conducted over videoconferencing platforms are often preferred by participants and provide comparable results to in-person interviews, there was limited opportunity to view nonverbal communication, impacting the depth of field notes (Gray et al., 2020).

While these limitations posed potential challenges, they were overcome through diligent processes to ensure trustworthiness of the study. Snowball sampling resulted in a broad representation of women in higher education leadership, contributing to the transferability of the study results (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Triangulation of data collection and analysis and member checking promoted the credibility of the results (Abdalla et al., 2018). A review of the study instrumentation by subject matter experts and a thorough audit trail documenting data collection

and analysis enhanced dependability (Carcary, 2020). Finally, bracketing, reflective journaling, and member checking ensured confirmability of the study (Nassaji, 2020).

### **Recommendations**

The study illustrated the ongoing challenges women face in attaining their professional goals and aspirations in higher education leadership. It was also clear the informal mentoring relationships women form in the academy are crucial to their resilience, progression, and success. While the study filled a gap in the literature, there are opportunities for future study to better understand different facets of the problem of gender bias in the academy. Additionally, the study elucidated the ongoing challenges women face in the patriarchal environment of higher education, providing an opportunity for the academy to take proactive steps to advance gender equity. The following sections detail recommendations for future research and recommendations for leadership in the academy.

#### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Throughout the data collection and analysis processes, areas of opportunity for future research emerged. The study considered the problem from the perspective of women as a monolith. Demographic data were not collected as disaggregation of participant experiences by race, ethnicity, or age was outside the scope of the study. The need to study the informal mentoring experiences of women of color was evident in the literature (Allen & Joseph, 2018; Townsend, 2021) and surfaced multiple times in interviews with participants. The experiences of women of color are complicated by systemic sexism in the academy and long-standing, persistent structural racism (Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021; Vargas et al., 2021). Further exploration of how women of color work together to address the compounded biases and discrimination they face is not only warranted but essential to progress.

Generational considerations also emerged during the study, though the scope limited exploration of these trends. Further research about how different generations of women experience gender bias in the academy and their experiences with mentoring is recommended. Participants early in their leadership journey and those more senior described generational differences, which also appear in the literature (Curtin et al., 2016; Marine & Martínez Alemán, 2018). Further research about the varied experiences of women in the academy based on age may provide insight into how mentoring, especially informal mentoring, can impact how women approach challenges related to gender bias (Morris, 2017).

Another area where additional research is recommended is the effect of faculty unionization on the experiences of women in the academy. One participant was part of a faculty union and felt strongly about the benefit to women because of the clear guidance about performance and ascension standards unionization provided. The clarity of the expectations outlined through unions removed ambiguity and provided an objective framework for career progression. The account of one individual is not enough to allow for broad conclusions to be drawn, but additional research may illuminate the impact of unionization on gender bias and how unions can support informal mentoring relationships among women.

Additional research will add to the growing body of literature about the challenges women face in the academy and their strategies to combat gender bias. The results of this study also provide the basis for recommendations to leaders in higher education as they work toward inclusivity in the academy. While women rely on mentoring relationships to help them build capacity and resilience, the practices and norms in higher education institutions must evolve and embrace equity for real change to occur. Recommendations for the academy are addressed in the following section.

**Recommendations for the Academy**

The results of the study provide a basis for recommending more attention be paid by higher education institutions to ensuring equitable practices for women and men. The notion institutions should promote equity is not a new concept (Allen et al., 2021; Clavero & Galligan, 2020). However, the study's results indicate a profound lack of understanding about the progress made toward eradicating gender bias, the dearth of support systems in place for women, and the critical nature of informal mentoring. Women are often relegated to the quiet shadows while facing enormous personal, professional, and societal demands (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Ford, 2016; Hannum et al., 2015; Wong et al., 2018). The academy should provide women a platform to be heard and devise real solutions based on their needs instead of the illusory and ineffective policies currently dominating the academy (Brabazon & Schulz, 2018; Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018; Longman et al., 2019; O'Connor, 2018; White & Burkinshaw, 2019). Recommendations for the academy include shifting away from overreliance on the meritocracy, devising policies and programming to promote equity, and providing opportunities for women to engage in relationship building and collaboration. A discussion of how meritocracies disadvantage women and alternative considerations follows.

***Meritocracy***

Most higher education institutions continue to function as meritocracies where the criteria for success and advancement are calibrated toward patriarchal standards (Cañas et al., 2019; O'Connor, 2018). Perpetuating the meritocracy excludes women who may be accomplished and qualified by assigning value to things such as quantity of publications and uninterrupted professional participation. Higher education leaders should consider restructuring how individuals are assessed for promotion with a focused awareness of the professional and social



challenges with which women contend. Not only does shifting away from a meritocracy improve opportunities for women, but it may also encourage men to assume more of a caretaking role in their families if professional performance is not intrinsically tied to a ceaseless demand for presence and quantifiable productivity (Clavero & Galligan, 2021). The academy has an opportunity to participate in the disruption of gender conventions by reevaluating how it describes and assesses success and the steps it takes to dismantle patriarchal norms in service of equity.

While the environment and culture vary significantly from institution to institution within the academy, the notion of merit as a neutral standard by which employees may be judged is persistent. With a scarcity of women in higher education leadership, men often define meritorious ideals according to their own behaviors and privileges (Mijs, 2016; Powell & Arora-Jonsson, 2022). Representative committees should set criteria for hiring and promotion with a focus on outcomes, attainable standards, and consideration of the disparity in opportunity between candidates. The diversity of a candidate contributes to the betterment of the institution and should not be discounted as a criterion upon which they are assessed (Nielsen et al., 2017). The use of rubrics can contribute to gender equity in hiring and promotion and should be considered a standard tool across the academy (Blair-Loy et al., 2022). Rubrics should regularly be evaluated to ensure the promotion of equitable assessment standards and outcomes leading to greater gender diversity in higher education leadership. In addition to implementing equitable practices for hiring and promotion, ensuring policies and programming do not disadvantage women is important to advancing gender equity in the academy.

### ***Policies and Programs***

Higher education institutions should also address how their policies serve initiatives to reduce gender bias and exclusionary practices. The abundance of male voices and opinions can overshadow the experiences of women and create a façade of equity instead of actual, functional equity. For example, family leave policies are intended to address inclusion, but they are most often used by women who are then penalized in a culture where absence or inactivity for any period and any reason are frowned upon (Allen et al., 2021). The academy should invest in a meaningful culture shift and adopt a nuanced and intersectional approach to advancing equity. Policies targeting women alone perpetuate patriarchal structures and the *othering* of women in the academy. Rather, a focus on flexible work schedules for all and a reevaluation of how scholarship funding is appropriated should be undertaken.

While policies whose intended users are primarily women should be reconsidered when they perpetuate bias, it is appropriate to develop policies focused on advancing the needs of women to correct inequities. Institutions must maintain a keen awareness of the impact of social standards and expectations on the advancement of women. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated long periods of quarantine during which women assumed significantly more responsibility for caretaking and educating their children during isolation while also trying to meet their professional obligations (Mooi-Reci & Risman, 2021). As a result, research and publications by women significantly declined while men's research contributions increased (Wright et al., 2021). The academy should implement policies for women to recoup lost opportunities during COVID-19, such as offering additional research funding, reducing administrative and service load, and mitigating negative impacts on assessment criteria resulting from the unequal burden women experienced during the pandemic (O'Connor & Irvine, 2020).

While COVID-19 exacerbated the disparities in household responsibilities between women and men, the additional burden assumed by women is a longstanding social demand. As such, practices contributing to the equalization of opportunity should be standard even in ordinary times, as research shows women take on significantly more household and family labor as a matter of course (Cañas et al., 2019; Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Statti & Torres, 2019).

Equity is the work of the institution, and groups with an overabundance of power must invest in this work and in the intentional disbursement of their power to women and other marginalized groups to create a more diverse and representative academy (Hernández-Johnson et al., 2019; Zembylas, 2018). Programs and professional development for women often focus on fixing women and place the onus of solving gender bias on the women who are the targets of such bias (Ní Laiore et al., 2021). To truly make a cultural shift, the academy must consider how to fix itself and commit to assessing its progress. There is a need for an intentional ideological shift about the pervasive norms the academy has adopted and advanced as neutral despite the privilege they bestow upon men, especially White men. The inclusion of women and other underrepresented groups in the decision-making about policies is critical. Decision-making bodies should strive for parity in representation or convene representative committees with authority to set institutional change agendas and initiatives.

To create a culture shift, a commitment to gender equity should be regularly iterated as an institutional priority. A review of not only hiring and promotion activities but onboarding, professional development, educational conferences, and decision-making should be conducted to ensure equitable practices are prioritized and well-understood by the institutional community. Institutions should also commit to assessing their progress in advancing equity using meaningful quantitative and qualitative tools to capture metrics of parity, understand how the culture is

evolving, and invest in continuous improvement (Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019). This includes gathering data about representation in leadership, scholarship, service, and pay. Further data about thoughts and opinions should be collected through regular surveys and questionnaires whose data is disaggregated for maximum nuance and understanding (Hodgins et al., 2022). Strategic planning should reflect a commitment to equity through establishing institutional goals with measurable outcomes. Though important policies and programming advance gender equity, the academy should also invest in mentoring among women as this type of relationship building is an opportunity for women to give and receive critical support.

### ***Mentoring***

Finally, while the work of gender equity should be embraced by the entire institutional community, mentoring relationships remain pivotal to the success and resilience of women. The academy can contribute to achieving equity for women, but the social norms dictating the role of women may be slow to follow. Women will likely continue to carry a much larger share of family responsibility which they must balance against their professional goals and aspirations. Mentoring is an opportunity for women to connect with others who have similar lived experiences and allows them to build supportive relationships where they are seen as their whole, authentic selves.

Mentoring relationships occur whether or not institutions invest in them, as they are a necessary component of success for women (Cross et al., 2019; Ginsberg et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2018). However, the academy should invest in creating an environment and opportunities for women to network and engage together so they can help one another build confidence and capacity as they face personal and professional demands and challenges. Several participants in the study established networking groups or belonged to such groups. Providing space on campus,

financial resources, and time for women to participate in such groups is an opportunity for institutions to enhance support for women. Mentoring relationships should be valued as critical for the success of women and the institution. As women are already overburdened with personal and professional responsibilities, institutions should assess administrative responsibilities to create capacity for relationship-building among women. Such activities should not be seen as extracurricular but rather as an essential component of regular workplace development and success.

Recommendations for future research and action within the academy may contribute to a better understanding of the challenges women face and the deconstruction of structures exacerbating bias. Expanded awareness and action provide opportunities to contribute to equitable practices and enhance opportunities for women in higher education. In addition to the outlined recommendations, the study illuminated implications for leadership which are discussed in the following section.

### **Implications for Leadership**

The findings of this study indicate the academy is a place of continued and persistent gender bias. Women can clearly and definitively elucidate the contributing factors to the challenges they face as they pursue professional growth and leadership. Informal mentoring provides an opportunity for women to be authentic, receive support, strategize with one another, and give and receive empathy. These relationships build resilience and confidence in women who face a myriad of personal, professional, and social hurdles and barriers in their pursuits. However, mentoring among those who are disempowered does not make the academy more equitable. Rather, it places the responsibility for succeeding in a labyrinth of obstacles on the individuals who have the least amount of power to affect change. Leaders are called upon to not

only provide spaces for women to consort with each other but should also commit to dismantling structures of oppression and patriarchy.

Leaders are tasked with recognizing and responding to the relational needs of women while also meaningfully contributing to eradicating sexist gender role expectations that have systematically disadvantaged women in the academy. A full and critical assessment of the academy's policies, practices, and norms is required to unburden institutions of the blight of sexism. Leaders must address the cultural norms on which they determine the merit, value, and worth of employees in the academy. As centers of social justice and advancement, the academy and its leaders must commit to intersectional perspectives and solutions. Establishing standards and metrics for representation in leadership, scholarship, advancement, committee membership, and other decision-making bodies is imperative. Leadership must include goals toward equity and inclusion in strategic planning with measurable outcomes and metrics to assess progress.

As a first step toward gender equity, leaders should collect comprehensive institutional data about current practices. Understanding where there are shortfalls in representation and pay equity are simple first steps to assessing the institution's current position. Institutions with divisions dedicated to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) should be assessing not only initiatives with the student body, but with faculty, administration, and the board and have goals related to gender. Leaders should invest in convening a committee tasked with reviewing, assessing, and revising institutional policies and procedures related to gender equity. Women are keenly aware of their need to participate in sexist practices to advance their careers. Calling attention to gender bias places women in a position where they face ostracism or career sabotage. As such, the committee should have broad power to suggest and implement necessary changes to promote equity at institutions.

This study demonstrates the social imperative of investing in deconstructing longstanding patriarchal practices. Token policies and training focused on fulfilling legal or superficial ethical standards are inadequate and harmful, as they advance the idea that gender bias is a simple problem or even worse, a problem of the past (Hodgins et al., 2022). Instead, comprehensive change is needed to progress. Gender equality plans are commonly used in European and Scandinavian institutions to outline activities and commitments to achieving gender equality with high levels of success when strongly supported by leadership (Nielsen, 2017). Institutional leaders should investigate and establish gender equality plans with diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals, a committee focused on gender equity, and women in the community. Gender equality plans should be intersectional and address the myriad of needs and obstacles women in the academy encounter. To be effective, the plans should be actionable, and their success should be measurable and public-facing.

The cultural shift required to address gender biases in the academy cannot be imposed through policy and procedure. The academy must adopt a stance of introspection, acute listening, and comprehensive assessment to address structural sexism, patriarchal norms, and the male perspective institutions have long adopted as the default lens by which merit, value, and excellence are defined. Patriarchy harms women and men who may seek similar personal and professional fulfillment but are placed on divergent paths by harmful social expectations. Leaders at all levels must be committed to gender equity and demonstrate intolerance to internal and external systems disadvantaging women through their example and activities.

### **Conclusion**

This basic qualitative study explored the ways women in higher education leadership experience informal mentoring as a tool to subvert gender biases. Results of the study indicated

women find informal mentoring to be a crucial component of their ability to be successful in the academy. Women also feel a powerful call to support other women by providing mentorship.

The thematic analysis of the data in response to the research questions resulted in six significant themes. In response to research question one, participants shared the importance of mentoring in allowing them to see representation of women in power, achieve balance, and feel empowered. The impact of their mentors gave the participants the confidence to set and strive for ambitious goals while also setting boundaries so they could live full lives. As the women experienced empowerment, they felt called to mentor other women. In response to research question two, the participants explained they felt an imperative to share their experiences, pay forward the impact of their mentors, and ultimately attempt to change norms in the academy and beyond.

Understanding how women in higher education leadership experience informal mentoring gives insight into the importance of mentoring to women. The study also affirmed the continued presence of widespread biased practices in the academy. There is an opportunity for institutions to invest in providing a forum where women can continue to develop mentoring relationships. Even more, the academy should critically examine its long-held practices to purge gender bias and sexism from its halls. Future studies should focus on realistic woman-informed solutions to combat patriarchy, the complex prejudices women of color experience in the academy, and generational approaches to gender bias.



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## Appendix A

### Questionnaire

#### Part I: Participant Screening

Individuals who proceed through the following questions meet the initial criteria for participation in this study. These participants will proceed to Informed Consent (see Appendix A). See logic guidelines below each question.

Gender \*

- ☐ Women
- ☐ Man
- ☐ Non-Binary
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Logic: If answer is woman, proceed to next question. All other answers, end questionnaire.

Do you work in higher education? \*

- ☐ Yes, I currently work in higher education
- ☐ No, but I previously worked in higher education
- ☐ I have never worked in higher education

Logic: If answer is I have never worked in higher education, end questionnaire. All other answers, proceed to next question.

What is the most senior level at which you have served in a higher education setting? \*

- ☐ Director
- ☐ Dean or Associate Dean
- ☐ Full Professor
- ☐ Tenured Professor
- ☐ Program or Faculty Chair
- ☐ Vice President
- ☐ Provost
- ☐ C-Suite
- ☐ President
- ☐ I have served in another role equivalent or senior to one of the above options
- ☐ I have served in another role junior to the above options

Logic: If answer is I have served in another role junior to the above options, end questionnaire. All other answers, proceed to Informed Consent.

**Part II: Informed Consent**

Read this consent form carefully and ask as many questions as you like before you decide whether you want to participate in this research study. You are free to ask questions at any time before, during, or after your participation in this research.

**Project Title**

Mentoring as Role Congruence Subversion in Higher Education Leadership: A Phenomenological Study

**Researcher**

Clair Stocks, Doctor of Education Candidate

**Organization**

American College of Education

Ph: [REDACTED] Email: clair.baca2109@my.ace.edu

**IRB Approval**

This research study has been approved by the American College of Education Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB approved this study on February 24, 2022. A copy of the approval letter will be provided upon request.

**Introduction**

My name is Clair Stocks and I am a doctoral candidate student at American College of Education. I am doing research under the guidance and supervision of my Chair, Dr. Joshua Long who may be contacted at [REDACTED]. I am providing information about the project and inviting you to be part of this research. Before you decide, if you would like to contact me with any questions, please feel free to do so. If you have questions about the research process at any time, you may contact me, and I will explain.

**Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this study will be to explore how women in higher education use same-gender mentoring to supplant biases and barriers related to patriarchal role congruence expectations. You are being asked to participate in this research study which will assist with data collection necessary to fulfill the purpose of the research. This is a basic qualitative study which will allow for the exploration and analysis of themes related to the lived experiences of women in higher education as they relate to same gender mentoring and gender bias due to role congruence expectations.

**Research Design and Procedures**

This study will use a basic qualitative methodology and research design. The study will include three potential components for data collection. First, this questionnaire will screen for appropriate participants and collect open text responses. From this, 18 participants will be selected to participate in a semi-structured in-depth interview. These interviews will be conducted via video conferencing using the Zoom platform due to travel limitations resulting from geographic diversity and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Finally, interview participants will be invited to share artifact materials relevant to this study such as resumes, CVs, volunteer organization affiliation, etc.

**Participant Selection**

You are being invited to take part in this research because of your experience as a woman in higher education leadership who can contribute to the understanding of how mentoring plays a role in supplanting gender biases due to role congruence expectations, which meets the criteria for this study. Participant selection criteria include: Must be a woman who is or has worked in higher education leadership and has experienced formal or informal same gender mentoring. Leadership is defined as an academic or administrative role including director, dean, provost, vice president, president, C-level officer, full professor, tenured professor.

**Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate. If you choose not to participate, there will be no punitive repercussions.

**Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

Participation is voluntary. At any time if you wish to end your participation in the research study you may do so by contacting me to explain that you are opting out of the study. There will be no repercussions for leaving the study.

**Procedures**

You are being invited to participate in this research study. If you agree, you will be asked to complete the following questionnaire. You may also be asked to participate in an in-depth video conference interview over Zoom and/or asked to share any relevant artifacts related to the research study. The types of questions you will be asked will range from demographic details to direct inquiries about your experiences with same gender mentoring as it relates to gender biases in a professional setting in a higher education context. Interviews will be recorded for transcription, data collection, and data validation.

**Duration**

The questionnaire portion of the study will require approximately 10-20 minutes to complete. If you are chosen to be interviewed, the time allotted will be 45-60 minutes via video conferencing using Zoom at a time convenient for you. Prior to the interview you will be asked to provide permission to have the interview recorded to allow for the creation of an accurate transcript for data. You will be invited to review and provide any corrections to the transcript.

**Risks**

You will be asked to share personal and confidential information. You may feel uncomfortable talking about certain topics. You do not have to answer any question or take part in the discussion if you don't wish to do so. You do not have to give any reason for not responding to any question.

**Benefits**

While there be no direct financial benefit to you, your participation is likely to help us learn more about the same gender mentoring of women in higher education leadership as it relates to gender bias due to role incongruence. The potential study will aid in understanding the structural gender biases and barriers experienced by women and how same gender mentoring influences those experiences.

**Confidentiality**

Your information and the information you provide will not be shared with anyone. During the defense of the doctoral dissertation, data collected will be presented to the dissertation committee. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of research participants. Specific job titles and institution names will not be

used. Only the researcher will know your identity. Your information will be secured in encrypted, password protected files in a password protected personal computer.

### Sharing the Results

At the end of the research study, the results will be available for each participant. Publication of the results is anticipated so other interested people may learn from the research.

### Questions About the Study

If you have any questions, you may ask those now or at any time during the research process. If you wish to ask questions later, you may contact [clair.baca2109@my.ace.edu](mailto:clair.baca2109@my.ace.edu). The research plan has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of American College of Education. This is a committee whose role is to make sure research participants are protected from harm. You may contact this group with any questions at [IRB@ace.edu](mailto:IRB@ace.edu).

**CERTIFICATE OF CONSENT.** I have read the information about this study. I acknowledge why I \*  
have been asked to be a participant in the research study. I have been provided the opportunity  
to ask questions about the study, and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I  
certify that I am at least 18 years of age. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study. I  
understand that by providing and typing my name, date, and email address, I am electronically  
signing this document.


☐ I consent

☐ I do not consent

**First and Last Name \***


Short answer text

**Question \***

Month, day, year 

**Email Address \***

Short answer text

After section 2 Continue to next section 

**Part III: Participant Professional Experience**

In which sector of higher education do you currently or have you most recently worked? \*

- ☐ Private, non-profit
- ☐ Public 4-year
- ☐ Public 2-year (community college)
- ☐ Other...

In which sectors of higher education have you ever worked? (select all that apply) \*

- ☐ Private, non-profit
- ☐ Private, for-profit
- ☐ Public 4-year
- ☐ Public 2-year (community college)
- ☐ Other...

...

What is your current job title? (note: specific job titles will only be used by the researcher - titles will be generalized in the study) \*

Short answer text

.....

...

How many years have you worked in higher education? \*

- ☐ 0-1 years
- ☐ 1-5 years
- ☐ 6-10 years
- ☐ 11-15 years
- ☐ 16-20 years
- ☐ 20+ years

For how many years have you served in a leadership capacity (Associate Dean, Dean, Provost, Faculty or Program Chair, Full Professor, Tenured or Tenure-Track Professor, Director, Vice President, C-Suite) \*

- ☐ 0-1 years
- ☐ 1-5 years
- ☐ 6-10 years
- ☐ 11-15 years
- ☐ 16-20 years
- ☐ 20+ years

...

How did you learn about this study?

Long answer text

.....

## Interview Phase



Thank you for your participation in this questionnaire. If you are identified as a candidate for an in-depth interview, you will be contacted to discuss next steps and schedule a time to meet. In-depth interviews will take place in a recorded session using Zoom at a time and date most convenient for you. Interviews will be recorded for data collection, validation, and analysis purposes. Your privacy will be ensured throughout this process.

If you have questions about this research study or your participation, please contact me at any time at [clair.baca2109@my.ace.edu](mailto:clair.baca2109@my.ace.edu) or [REDACTED]. Thank you again for your time and participation.



## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Script**

Hi. My name is Clair Stocks and I am a doctoral candidate at the American College of Education. Our interview today should take less than hour. We'll be discussing your experiences with informal same-gender mentoring, especially as it relates to gender role expectations and your professional experiences.

You did previously provide informed consent and my email to you went over what you can expect. But just as a reminder, our interview will be recorded for data collection purposes. Following our interview, a transcript will be generated, and you'll be invited to view that, ask questions, and make any changes to make sure it accurately reflects your perspective.

Your privacy and confidentiality will be safeguarded throughout this process. I'll be using pseudonyms and generalized descriptions of things like job titles and workplace locations. Everything will be secured in a private, password-protected computer with encrypted files. I encourage you to be as detailed and forthcoming about your thoughts and experiences as possible.

As we go through these questions, please consider informal mentoring relationships you've had. These can be relationships where a mentoring relationship is not formalized or even acknowledged as such a relationship by both parties. It can occur with a peer, superior, or subordinate. The relationship doesn't solely have to be focused on strategics and techniques for professional development, but can also include advise, counsel, commiseration, or other support for personal, professional, or educational matters that helps you build professional capacity and resilience.

Before we start do you have any questions?

## Appendix C

### Site Permission

Re: Permission to Recruit

Some content in this message has been blocked because the sender isn't in your Safe senders list. I trust content from [stephanie.varnonhughes@gmail.com](mailto:stephanie.varnonhughes@gmail.com). | [Show blocked content](#)

**SV** Stephanie Varnon-Hughes <stephanie.varnonhughes@gmail.com>  
Mon 11/8/2021 10:05 AM  
To: Clair Baca

**Please be cautious**  
This email originated from outside of ACE organization

This is fine. Let me know when you're ready for me to do it. Usually there is a link to a survey that I can just share with participants, with a *brief* description of the project.

Have a great day! very very best,  
Stephanie

On Thu, Nov 4, 2021 at 6:31 PM Clair Baca <[clair.baca2109@my.ace.edu](mailto:clair.baca2109@my.ace.edu)> wrote:  
Clair Baca has shared a OneDrive for Business file with you. To view it, click the link below.  
[Permission Letter - Academic Mamas.docx](#)

Hi Stephanie,

Thank you so much for meeting with me to discuss my dissertation. I cannot express how very helpful your feedback was. I will be putting together an email that summarizes your suggestions to ensure I have captured everything accurately. I'll also be sending you a synthesis of the changes I made based on your feedback and the feedback I received from other SMEs. If you have any additional comments or feedback based on that, I would absolutely welcome your insights.

I also wanted to thank you for extending an offer to recruit from the Academic Mamas Facebook group you moderate. It sounds like a perfect place to find participants for my research. I am attaching a formal letter requesting permission to recruit in the group for you and the rest of the group leadership to review and approve. I will not begin recruiting until I have IRB approval, which I expect early in 2022. However, having permission to recruit lined up as soon as possible would be very helpful.

If there is anything else you need from me to secure permission to recruit, please let me know. Thank you as always for your generosity with your time and support.

Clair

## Appendix D

## Recruitment Flyer



**Research Study Opportunity for Women in Higher Ed**

**Same gender mentoring as a tool to supplant gender role bias.**

Women continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles, often due to gender role expectations. In response, women often engage in formal and informal mentoring.

This study is seeking to understand the experiences of women in higher education leadership who have engaged in a mentoring relationship with another woman. The study is being conducted in fulfillment of dissertation requirements for a doctoral program.

Participants will not be compensated but will contribute to knowledge and understanding important to professional women, especially those who work in a higher education setting.

Participation will include:

- Completion of a brief online questionnaire
- A Zoom interview expected to last 20-30 minutes with a scheduling block allowing for 60 minutes if necessary
- An invitation to review and provide feedback on a transcript of your interview
- Possible brief follow-up questions if necessary

**Time commitment for this study will be 1-2 hours total.**

**Location**

- Interviews will be conducted via Zoom at a time and date convenient for the participant.

**Are you eligible?**

Eligible participants are women who:

- Are working or have worked in higher education leadership
- Engaged in formal and/or informal mentoring relationships
- Work or worked at a public or private non-profit higher education institution in the United States

**If you have questions about participating, please contact the researcher:**

**Clair Baca**  
American College of Education, Doctoral Candidate

Phone/Text: [REDACTED]  
Email: [clair.baca2109@my.ace.edu](mailto:clair.baca2109@my.ace.edu)

**TO APPLY TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY, PLEASE COMPLETE THE SECURE QUESTIONNAIRE AT THIS LINK:**  
<INSERT LINK>

IRB Approval No.: \_\_\_\_\_ IRB Approval Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix E**

### **Interview Questions/Instrumentation**

#### **Questionnaire Open Text Questions**

- 1) Please describe your professional experience in higher education.
- 2) In your experience, do you feel formal or informal mentoring is more beneficial? Why?
- 3) How has same gender mentoring affected your professional opportunities?

#### **Semi-Structured Interview Questions and Prompts**

- 1) Describe your experiences as a woman working in higher education.
  - a) How has your career progressed?
  - b) How have your professional aspirations and goals evolved?
  - c) What is the environment of higher education like for a woman?
- 2) To what extent have gender role expectations shaped your professional experiences?
  - a) What kind of conflicts have you experienced related to leadership norms versus gender expectations assigned to women?
  - b) Have your goals and aspirations changed as a result of gender role expectations?
  - c) Has your career progression been impacted by gender role expectations?
  - d) What kinds of obstacles or barriers have you had to contend with as a woman?
- 3) What is your definition of mentoring?
- 4) Describe your experiences being mentored by another woman?
  - a) How have your primary mentoring relationships evolved?
  - b) Describe your most significant mentoring relationship?
  - c) How would you characterize the relationship between you and your mentor? Were you peers? Was she your superior? Was it a formal or informal relationship?
  - d) In what ways did you and your mentor address the specific challenges women face in their professional pursuits?
  - e) What affect has mentoring made on your career progression and aspirations?
- 5) How has your experience being mentored influenced the way you view mentoring other women?
  - a) What are your feelings about being a mentor to other women, and how were those shaped by your experiences as a mentee?
  - b) What do you think the goals and limitations of a mentoring relationship are?
- 6) To what extent do you think mentorship between women affects gender role expectations?

- a) How has mentoring influenced the way you think about yourself as both a woman and a leader?
  - b) What affect do you feel mentoring has not only on women in the workforce, but in the way the workplace explicitly or implicitly views the role of women?
  - c) To what degree do you feel mentoring is a valuable tool for addressing the social and professional barriers related to gender roles?
- 7) Is there anything else you would like to add which was not addressed in these questions about gender role expectations or mentoring relationships among women?

**Appendix F****Field Notes Template**

Participant Pseudonym:

Date:

Interview Start Time:

Interview End Time:

**Initial Notes/Bracketing****Question 1: Describe your experiences as a woman working in higher education.****Question 2: How have gender role expectations shaped your professional experiences?**

<b>Question 3: What is your definition of mentoring?</b>
<b>Question 4: Describe your experiences being mentored by another woman?</b>

<b>Question 5: How have your experiences being mentored influenced the way you view mentoring other women?</b>
<b>Question 6: To what extent do you think mentorship between women affects gender role expectations?</b>



<b>Question 7: Additional comments or observations</b>
<b>Additional Observations &amp; Notes</b>

## Appendix G

### Subject Matter Expert Identification

#### SME #1

Name: Dr. Stephanie Varnon-Hughes

Qualifications: Ph.D. Interreligious Education  
Director of the Claremont Core  
Professor  
Author  
Claremont Lincoln University

#### Agreement:

Re: Dissertation request ➤

Stephanie Varnon-Hughes  
to me

Fri, Oct 22, 1:12 PM



I WOULD LOVE TO!

I would be seriously honored. I'm so proud and happy for you! YES! Just let me know what to do and when.

very very warmly,  
Stephanie

#### SME #2

Name: Dr. Stan Ward

Qualifications: Ph.D. Leadership Studies  
Founder and Leadership Coach  
Professor: capstone, communications, leadership studies  
Author

#### Agreement:

Stanley Ward, Ph.D. • 1:00 PM

I'd be honored to help with this. Send over a copy, and we can set up a time to discuss my feedback. Congratulations on taking this next step toward graduation.

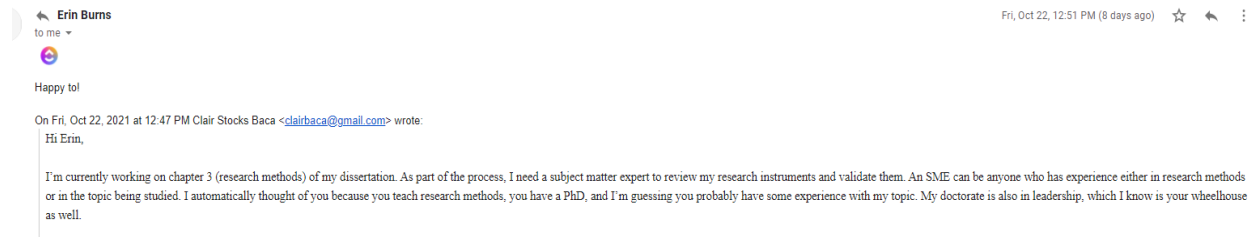
Please use this link to schedule a time that works for you: [REDACTED]

SME #3

Name: Dr. Erin Burns

Qualifications: Ph.D. Psychology  
Associate Professor: Leadership, research methods  
Presidio Graduate School

Agreement:



## Appendix H

### Subject Matter Expert Validation

Feedback from Stan Ward 11/2/21

Meeting via Phone – Notes taken by C. Stocks and sent to SME to affirm

Why demographic and states

Can geographic information help with triangulation?

Correlations between language and geographic language - Cultural assumptions in the language

Saldana – coding manual for qualitative researchers (tool)

Completing your qualitative dissertation – Bloomberg

Don't be so rigid you confirm your expectations and biases

Question 2 – leading. To what extent... is a better lead in.

Question 3 is yes or no. Start with Describe.

Question 4 – the way you view mentoring other women

Question 5 – move away from what they think to what they have seen

Define population for the study

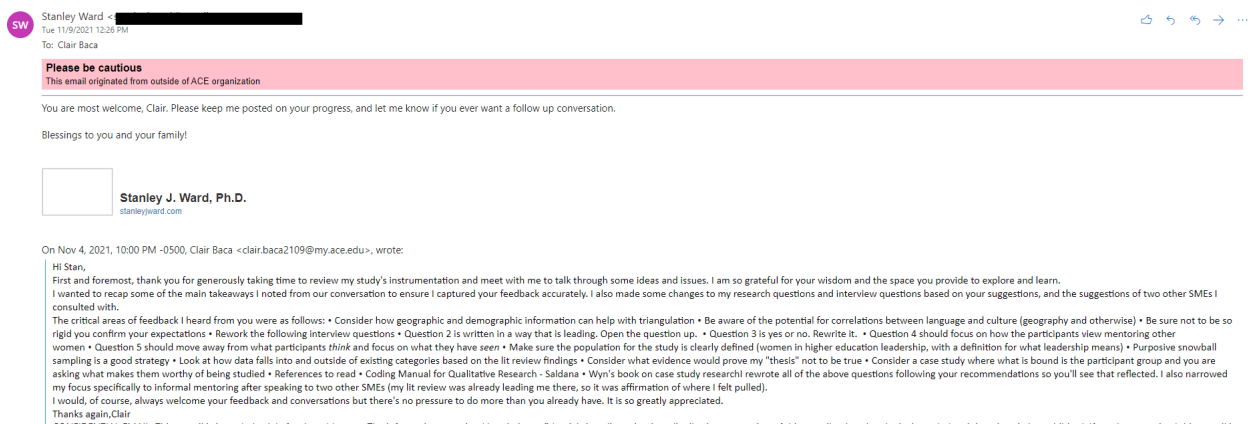
Purposive snowball with some gatekeepers

How does data fall into and outside of existing categories based on lit review findings

What evidence would prove my thesis not to be true

Case study – women leaders who have been mentored are the case at X level of leadership. What makes them worthy of being studied?

Wyn's book on case study research



### Interview Questions

- 2) ~~How~~ To what extent have gender role expectations shaped your professional experiences?
- 4) ~~Can you talk about~~ Describe your experiences being mentored by another woman?
- 5) How ~~have~~ has your experiences being mentored influenced the way you view mentorship mentoring other women?
- b) ~~What do you think~~ In your experience, what are the goals and limitations of a mentoring relationship? are
- 6) ~~What affect do~~ To what extent do you think mentorship between women ~~has on~~ affects gender role expectations?

Feedback from Stephanie 11/2/21  
Via Email



Stephanie Varnon-Hughes

to Clair, me ▾



Hi, Clair,

Thank you for sharing this with me, and I look forward to talking soon! Please find attached my initial feedback on the research questions and plan.

very best,  
Stephanie

Define “informal” and “formal” mentoring, or give examples. I *think* I have examples of each in my own professional life, but tightening what you mean for participants (or asking them to define) might be helpful.

For me and for the women I see in the Academic Mamas\* FB group I help moderate (12,000+ women\* in higher ed), mentoring also includes advice, modeling, resources, and networking around parenting, accessing child and health care, and social-emotional support. Not just explicitly professional... but that advice/mentoring helps ensure I thrive *as* a professional. Does this also count as “mentoring” to you?

Finally, I don't see anything in the interview questions that get at "What responsibility do women in higher education leadership positions feel to *pay it forward* by participating in the mentoring of other women?" Number 4A, "What are your feelings about being a mentor to other women..." assumes all participants have gotten the chance to mentor another woman.

I don't know if that will be the case. And/or, I don't know if women know that a lot of what they are doing is mentoring. So maybe related questions: Are you currently mentoring a woman/women? Is this part of your formal job description/expectation? How many women are you mentoring? Do they report to you? Work at the same organization? In the same field? How did you connect with these women? Do you seek out mentee relationships? When you think about your professional responsibilities (to your job and to the field), where does mentoring fall/rank?

---

Number 5, "What affect do you think mentorship between women has on gender role relationships" again presupposes that A) I am aware of gender role stuff going on in my career and B) mentoring is about helping *women* succeed. If my mentor is telling me the nuts and bolts of how to send discipline referrals, how to plan a field trip, how to get the unlisted library journals, and which janitor will turn my AC on—those might help me succeed as a woman in the field in spite of gender bias, but will not be set up to aid me in that aim explicitly.

Whereas sometimes I do need explicit mentoring around things like: The board member will only speak to male faculty; the Muslim donors won't shake my hand how do I navigate that; the journal rejected my article when I used my first name should I resubmit with just an initial so they don't know I'm a woman; my chair is biased against mothers/parents; what do I do about the hole in my CV from caring for my aging parents...

Maybe for Number 5, ask, "Do you think mentorship between women has an affect..." I know you're trying to avoid yes/no questions but 5 is pretty loaded to assume all mentoring is working to lessen the impact of gender bias. It also leaves out the whole issue of women having male mentors who are working for a similar goal... way too much for the scope of this project, but my basic suggestion is to be more precise/explicit about either assuming or asking about people's experience being discriminated against, whether or not they need/have received mentoring from other women to help address that, and *then* whether or not this is effective/helpful.

I do think survey + interview is a good way to get to your research questions. I hope you will also leave room in your theming/coding to discover things you might not have considered—room for surprise. You might uncover grief, hostility, jealousy... who knows? Just make room for that when you get to coding. For example, I was surprised to find in my interviews a lot of mention of "joy" and "puzzling." I didn't set out to ask for that...

Finally, if you want/need 18, you might aim for 20-22 to begin with, because even after you schedule people will drop off. But maybe you need/want 15 and already planned for that...

Feedback from Stephanie 11/3/21

Meeting via Zoom – notes taken by C. Stocks and sent for validation

- Question 5 is leading
- Rework RQ2
- Share results with participants especially on their sections – validity, codes, and themes
- Can recruit in Stephanie's group (Academic Mamas)

**RQ2:** ~~What responsibility~~ To what extent do women in higher education leadership positions feel ~~to pay it forward by participating called to~~ in the mentoring of other women?

~~65) What affect do~~ To what extent do you think mentorship between women ~~has on~~ affects gender role expectations?

Feedback from Erin 11/3/21

Meeting via Zoom – notes taken by C. Stocks:

- Give examples (people will default to formalized) of what can be considered mentorship
- Define what mentorship means to them
- Focus on informal mentoring
- Prime people – remember what just happened or what was bad.
- Honesty from peers critical. Safer, bidirectional structure. Performative in hierarchical mentoring.
- Can stay with basic qual and case study may emerge. Pose to IRB just in case.

Track Changes from E. Burns:

**RQ1:** How have women in higher education leadership experienced informal same-gender mentorship as a tool for ~~addressing~~ managing role incongruence?

*Interview Questions*

3) What is your definition of mentoring?

Revise|participant pre-interview letter to include examples of formal v. informal

## Appendix I

### Institutional Review Board Approval



February 24, 2022

To : Clair Baca  
Joshua Long, Dissertation Committee Chair

From : Institutional Review Board  
American College of Education

Re: IRB Approval

"Informal Mentoring to Subvert Role Incongruence in Higher Education Leadership: A Qualitative Study"

The American College of Education IRB has reviewed your application, proposal, and any related materials. We have determined that your research provides sufficient protection of human subjects.

Your research is therefore approved to proceed. The expiration date for this IRB approval is one year from the date of review completion, February 24, 2023. If you would like to continue your research beyond this point, including data collection and/or analysis of private data, you must submit a renewal request to the IRB.

Candidates are prohibited from collecting data or interacting with participants if they are not actively enrolled in a dissertation sequence course (RES6521, RES6531, RES6541, RES6551, RES6561, RES6302) and under the supervision of their dissertation chair.

Our best to you as you continue your studies.

Sincerely,

Tiffany Hamlett  
Chair, Institutional Review Board  
American College of Education