Transitions at the Top: A Narrative Research Study Exploring Women’s Executive Career Changes through Critical Reflection

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Abstract

Women are an underdeveloped, yet quickly growing source of leadership in higher education during an era marked by high turnover and calls for significant organizational change. In order to attract, recruit and retain the necessary executive talent to tackle future challenges, colleges and universities must develop the careers of women leaders and understand the factors that motivate them to depart from, or begin, new roles elsewhere. This study sought to understand how women leaders in higher education describe and make sense of their career and work-role transition experiences. Research was guided by the critical reflection principles of transformative learning theory. Narrative inquiry was selected as the methodology, and seven women participants, who had stepped into new executive-level positions in the last three years at two- or four-year colleges or universities, took part in semi-structured interviews. Participants’ stories of professional change suggested that self-reflection is a means to understanding assumptions and transforming perspectives; career transitions are experiences that can unfold over extended periods of time; early family and educational experiences are influential in the development of women’s career orientations and behaviors; the support of associates, mentors, sponsors and role models is important to women’s transitions and overall career success; and institutionalized gender and racial bias affects women’s ability to successfully transition to and fulfill their new roles. Recommendations drawn from these conclusions should promote coaching and professional development models that are more responsive to women’s unique work-role transition experiences, as well as aid colleges and universities in creating practices and programs customized to women’s career development needs, thereby preserving their current and future talents.
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Chapter One: Introduction and Context

Higher education professionals are experiencing more mobility during the life-span of their careers, as are employees in most vocations today (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Monks, 2012). For individuals, job and career mobility create transition experiences that can be opportunities for introspection, learning, and growth (Bridges, 2004; Hall, 2002; Wethington, 2002). Universities and colleges that operate in an increasingly challenging landscape of fluid employment environments are faced with facilitating successful transitions for their top-recruited talent and evading the outward flow of their most competent employees. This is an especially tenuous situation at the highest echelons of institutional leadership, where turnover rates have increased due to elevated occupational pressure on chief executives, and a shortage of strong, strategic leaders from which to hire (American Council on Education, 2009, 2017; Harrison & Hargrove, 2006; Korschgen, Fuller & Gardner, 2001; Martin & Samels, 2004; Padilla & Ghosh, 2000; Perrakis, Galloway, Hayes & Robinson-Galdo, 2011; Skinner, 2010).

Women represent a cohort of potential frontrunners who remain underrepresented in top positions of authority within higher education (Bischel & McChesney, 2017; Catalyst, 2017; Johnson, 2016; Lennon, 2013). Actively developing and cultivating women for university leadership roles may remedy this issue, but this will require an improved understanding of what compels women to depart from and take on new positions. Transition from one role to the next is an impactful life experience that can spur re-evaluation of one’s priorities or values while altering a person’s self-concept (Ashforth, 2001; Bridges, 2004; Hall, 2002; Schlossberg, 2011). Investigating how women leaders make meaning of and reflect upon their career shifts can help explain how and why women choose to change positions in higher education. Examining the factors that contribute to women leaders’ transitions within or outside an institution can help
education organizations design policies, programs and environments that respond to the developmental needs of the modern-day employee while attracting and retaining talented women leaders in higher education institutions.

The remainder of this chapter introduces the topic of this study while outlining the problem of practice, the purpose of the study, the research question and the theoretical framework, as well as the study’s potential significance and implications. A briefing on the research plan and key terms are also provided.

**Statement of the Problem**

In almost every industry, mobility is a reality for contemporary employees (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall & Mirvis, 1996; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). Forces such as globalization, technological innovations, and advances in transportation, as well as major social shifts like the movement of women into the workplace and new expectations of family life, have significantly altered the nature of careers (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). The modern work environment is more complex and change-oriented, and individual careers can move upwards, laterally or cross-functionally, while taking place on site, remotely, or across national, cultural and temporal borders. Today’s employee develops a career hindered by few boundaries and places far more emphasis on designing a path that fits individual needs; thus, it is no surprise that job and career mobility are the norm for modern-day professional life (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Hall, 2002; Reitman & Schneer, 2008; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009; Weick, 1996).

In a longitudinal study of baby boomers, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics showed that, on average, people hold 12 jobs over the course of their careers, and the median job tenure for all employed persons was just over four years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016; 2017). These
trends extend to higher education and the highest levels of leadership on university and college campuses. Even while the tradition of faculty tenure endures, 48 percent of professors are now part-time and 20 percent work in full-time, temporary positions. (In 1975, part-time and temporary faculty positions represented just 30 percent and 13 percent, respectively, of the professoriate.) (Cameron, 2010; Monks, 2012). Similarly, in an examination of presidential terms at 200 Research I universities from 1950 to 1990, the average term diminished from 12 years to nine years for private university presidents and from eight to approximately six years for public university presidents (Padilla & Ghosh, 2000). Moreover, with each individual move at the top comes the ripple effect of university administration changes throughout upper executive levels. This evidence suggests the increasingly transient nature of academia and, by extension, an upsurge in career movement in tertiary education (Korschgen, et al., 2001; Ryan, Healy & Sullivan, 2012; Tekniepe, 2014).

**Problem of Practice**

While the public sector is historically slow to change, higher education is not immune to macro forces such as the development of a global economy and technical advancements in communications that have transformed workplaces and careers (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). The market does, however, have unique sets of challenges such as decreased funding, declines in the college-bound population, heightened public scrutiny of the cost and value of a degree, and compliance with numerous government mandates that make both recruiting and retaining talent a major priority (Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014; Grawe, 2018; Ruben, De Lisi & Gigliotti, 2017). This is especially the case at the executive level where confident, well-informed and progressive leadership is needed to thrive during what many believe is a crisis or “bubble” on the verge of bursting in higher education (Deneen & Dretler, 2012; Skinner, 2010). Yet, turnover rates in
senior-most positions are on the rise, where high occupational burdens related to politics, governing board relations, and fund-raising demands can create pressure that compel executives to change positions (Betts, Urias & Betts, 2009; Iarrobino, 2006; Klein & Salk, 2013; Tekniepe, 2014). This mobility is costly, creates disruption and results in vulnerable leadership gaps for institutions. Moreover, an anticipated succession of retirements among top campus leaders (e.g., presidents, provosts and deans) means universities and colleges will need to think outside of the box if they are to identify, recruit and retain the talent needed to fill voids and manage mobility (American Council on Education, 2009; Harrison & Hargrove, 2006; Skinner, 2010).

Women are an underdeveloped, but fast-growing, source of leadership talent that may answer these needs within higher education institutions (Johnson, 2016; Lennon, 2013; Bischel & McChesney, 2017; White House Project, 2009). Over the past 30 years, the number of women appointed to university presidential offices has increased by 160 percent (Catalyst, 2017; Johnson, 2016). At the same time, women occupy just 27 percent of the presidencies at all types of institutions, and only 30 percent of the chief officers for key campus departments (e.g., academic affairs, facilities, development, etc.). Yet, women comprise the most doctorate degree earners, and more than 50 percent of higher education administrators across all functions, which suggests great potential in the pipeline for progression into higher positions of authority and influence (Bischel & McChesney, 2017; Johnson, 2016). Substantial evidence reveals that more gender-diverse environments lead to positive performance outcomes while increasing the number of women executives can aid in closing the talent gap for many organizations (McKinsey Report, 2017; Perryman, Fernando, & Tripathy, 2015). In a critical era in higher education, women are an under-utilized source in executive-level governance; therefore, colleges should take interest in
the career development of future women leaders and seek to understand the factors that lead them to depart from or start a new role or career.

Career and work-role transitions are substantial life events that not only affect the professional dimension of employees’ lives, but may impact other personal, physical, and social facets of being and knowing (Bridges, 2004; Hall, 2002; Schlossberg, 2011). Work-related transitions can be jolting experiences that are cause for self-reflection and learning (Ashforth, 2001; Hall, 2002). Bridges (2004) maintains that transitions indicate the culmination of something prior, a potentially unsettling adjustment period to something new, and the incorporation of novel and perhaps distinct perspectives, behaviors and relations adaptive to the current situation. This process of change can cause people to question how and why they arrived at the viewpoints and presumptions they brought to their experiences (Mezirow, 2000). Revealing what women executives ponder and discover within themselves when experiencing career transitions can help institutions respond to individual career needs of this significant and growing talent base.

**Purpose Statement**

In this study, career or work-role transitions were recognized as a potentially disarming event, which created an opening for women leaders in higher education to confront, reflect upon and reassess their perspectives. Mezirow (2000) contends that reflection facilitates the connection between experience and meaning that can result in transformational thinking and behaving. Exploring how women critically reflect on their transition journeys may provide us valuable information on their priorities, concerns and understandings, which in turn can support the individual development of future women leaders and direct efforts to fulfill institutional
recruitment and retention goals. For the purpose of this study, a career was defined as, “the unfolding of any person’s work experiences over time” (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996, p. 30). A career or work-role transition was inclusive of a “psychological and (if relevant) physical movement between sequentially held roles,” signified by exiting or re-entering an organization, as well as inter- or intra- occupational or organizational shifts (Ashforth, 2001, p. 7).

Theory and research have recognized transitions as experiences for reflection, leading to new insight and learning (Ashforth, 2001; Burns, 2010). Several career-related transition studies have documented the impact and influence these experiences have not only on objective professional outcomes (e.g., increased title or skill), but on more subjective factors such as identity, well-being, and a sense of belonging for individuals (Ibarra, 2004; Mattes, 2003; Wethington, 2002), especially for women (Josselson, 1996; Marshall, 2000). In education, transformative learning theory has been widely used as a guide for adult learning and has been extended into career contexts as both a framework and a lens through which to examine the leadership development process (Debebe, 2009). However, there is a paucity of scholarly work that explores how women leaders make meaning of specific career transition experiences in the context of higher education through critical reflection. This thesis sought to fill that gap, and thus, investigated how women executives described their work-related shifts through the reflective processes that led up to, sustained them through, and followed their transitions. This study helped explain how and why women make changes in their higher education careers, which could prove useful for tomorrow’s leaders, and guide institutions in developing better recruitment, retention, on-boarding and other programs that can counter the effects of increased workforce mobility.
Research Question

The central research question under consideration was: How do higher education women leaders describe and make sense of their career transitions?

Theoretical Framework

The phenomena of interest for this study were the reflections women leaders in higher education contemplated during a career or work-role transition. Schwandt (2005) maintains there is a link between learning and reflection, and that adult growth and development is reliant, in part, on awareness-building that leads to new meaning-making. Mezirow’s (1998, 2003) concept of critical reflection served as the guiding lens through which to explore the retroactive and experiential participant narratives. Derived from transformative learning theory, the process of critical reflection addresses how adults make new meaning of experiences that lead to a changed outlook on themselves and the world. A significant life experience, such as a career or work-role transition, can spark deep meditation on, and reevaluation of, one’s assumptions and the origins of those assumptions, which result in profound shifts in a person’s perspectives and self-concept. These shifts can be emancipatory, opening new possibilities and a broader range of available beliefs, feelings and actions in life – the sort of learning and self-discovery crucial for success in a new workplace, profession or role (Mezirow, 1990, 1998, 2003).

Jack Mezirow’s transformative learning theory, one of the most oft-cited adult learning theories, posits that transformational learning in adulthood occurs through a process where individuals are compelled to shift their assumptions and worldviews while creating broader and more inclusive perspectives that open new possibilities for thinking and behaving. Critical reflection involves active awareness-building and evaluation (or re-evaluation) of the origins and
assumptions behind a person’s feelings, thoughts or actions. Transformation occurs when perspectives are redefined and integrated into future knowing and doing (Mezirow, 1994).

Critical Reflection

Learning that is transformative involves a major paradigmatic shift in perspective, which allows for a broader construal of meaning. As Mezirow (1985) explains, individuals accomplish this by critically reflecting on “specific assumptions (schemata, criteria, rules, or repressions) on which a distorted or incomplete meaning scheme is based,” and in doing so, “reorganizes and transforms it” (p. 23). Many people try to adopt new information into existing frames of reference, but when it does not fit, a sense of contradiction is sparked (Vaughn, 1990). A disorienting situation and subsequent conflict can activate a phase of self-examining, challenging, and critiquing of the foundations of beliefs, habits of mind and perspectives. In this potentially uncomfortable phase, which can be threatening and distressing, individuals ask why they believe or do what they do (Smith, 2012). The process of turning inward and confronting long-held, taken-for-granted beliefs is the beginning of change, and creates space for the next phase of exploration, acquisition and integration of new knowledge, skills, roles, actions and perspectives.

Types of Critical Reflection

Reflection involves getting to the root of why a person believes and acts as he or she does. Mezirow (1998) created a typology for this why process, or the practice of critically reflecting on our assumptions. Critical reflection of and on assumptions (CRA) is exploration of the content and process through which we arrive at our assumptions whereas critical self-reflection of assumptions (CSRA) concerns our base premises, or where “[l]earners examine their worldview in light of their own particular belief or value system,” (Kitchenham, 2008, p.
116). In his taxonomy, objective reframing leads to learning that is more instrumental in nature, where individuals undertake critical reflection of the perspectives and underlying assumptions that are communicated and encountered in their environment. Subjective reframing, on the other hand, suggests an inquiry of the origins of assumptions within oneself and, according to Mezirow (1998), is a more powerful form of reflection. The practice of turning the microscope inward in deeply self-reflective sense-making is at the root of perspective transformation and learning.

**Concluding Paragraph**

This study centered on both the objective and subjective reflections of executive-level women who undertook significant work-related changes within the field of higher education. Their critical reflections provided deep understandings on the nature of women’s transition experiences. Ultimately, the results are useful for the development of rising women leaders who will share similar transition journeys, as well as the colleges and universities who must support their success.

**Significance of the Study**

The study intended to offer deep insight into how women leaders make meaning of their transition experiences in higher education. Individual reflection is often spurred by change, in this case a transition in career or role, that can lead to transformative self-learning, which can inform and direct women’s future career decision-making and progress (Ashforth, 2001; Mezirow, 1998). In environments such as higher education, where women are not the predominant occupants of positions of authority or influence, learning stories about others who have experienced similar circumstances can be a powerful support to women that are contemplating a career or position change (Johnson, 2016). The findings of this study can be
used to shape individual career development and counseling modalities that are more responsive to the factors women consider as they embark on a work-role transition.

Moreover, for institutions of higher learning, recruiting and retaining top academic and administrative talent is essential to success, supporting a university’s ability to enroll high-achieving students; obtain grant-funding; attract lucrative industry partnerships; accommodate a diverse student body; and gain ground in national and international rankings (Skinner, 2011). Given women’s advancement into positions of leadership over the past 20 years, higher education organizations need to pay more attention to their distinct and specific professional needs. Examining the factors that surround women’s departure or promotion from one role into another will aid institutions in designing policies, programs and processes that respond better to women’s career development, and ultimately preserve future talent within the organization.

Additionally, scholar-practitioners in education have a responsibility to show the perspective of the ‘othered’ (Briscoe, 2005). While great progress has been made, women are still underrepresented in positions of prestige and power in academia. Substantial evidence demonstrates that women experience their careers and leadership development differently than men do (Lepkowski, 2009; Ronzio, 2012; Vaccaro, 2011; Valcour & Tolbert, 2003); therefore, this study engaged a fast-rising group of women campus leaders whose voice can aid in future strategic directions in higher education.

With mobility in careers becoming commonplace for employees in higher education, understanding the complexities of work transition is of paramount concern. Keying in on the contemplative and deliberative processes of women leaders before, during and after significant employment changes illuminated the forces at play as these professionals alter their careers. Importantly, the focus on women leaders in colleges and universities brings to the forefront a
voice that is underrepresented, even while women are making strides in the academy. For tertiary institutions to maximize employee talent in a pipeline prone to mobility, they must learn to facilitate women’s transition success. This study furthered that goal through its examination of women’s reflections during work-role transitions, therein deepening our comprehension of the circumstances, intentions, hopes, apprehensions, and influences weighed by individuals during career change.

The purpose of this study was to examine the reflective experiences of women leaders’ during their career transition journeys in higher education. Rising and established women leaders, as well as the institutions with which they affiliate, are the primary beneficiaries of this research. Scholars who attend to reflection and adult learning, work and career transitions, the state of women’s career advancement in tertiary institutions, leadership development at colleges and universities, and narrative research, also stand to gain from the findings of this study.

**Key Terms / Definitions**

**Career:** The “unfolding sequence of any person’s work experiences over time” (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996, p. 30) or “the individually perceived sequence of attitudes and behaviors associated with work-related experiences and activities over the span of the person’s life” (Hall, 2002).

**Critical Reflection:** Deep introspection of assumptions, beliefs and values, and origins thereof that facilitates learning, new understanding and action (Mezirow, 1991, 1994).

**Work-Role:** A position in a social structure (Ashforth, 2001, p. 4) or a position held within a professional entity (Stephens, 1994).

**Learning:** The “social process of construing or appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience as a guide to action” (Mezirow, 1994, p. 223).

Career/Work-Role Transition: A “psychological and (if relevant) physical movement between sequentially held roles”, e.g., exiting and re-entering an organization, inter- or intra-occupational or other organizational shifts (Ashforth, 2001, p. 7).

U.S. Higher Education/Tertiary Education: Any United States-based two- or four-year accredited college or university institution (13th – 16th years of education).

Women Leaders or Executives (in Higher Education): Any self-identifying woman in a position of leadership at the assistant/associate vice president/chancellor, vice president/chancellor, provost, president or chief-level officer.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter explores three major bodies of literature that informed the current study on how executive women leaders within colleges and universities described their professional transitions. Specifically, this study uncovered how higher education executives who are women reflected on their career shifts and made meaning of such experiences. The results should inform the career development of future women leaders as well as the institutions that are tasked with supporting their advancement. The first section of this chapter provides an in-depth review on career mobility as well as transitions in the contemporary workforce. Next, the author examines the higher education landscape, the state of executive leadership, and women leaders in tertiary education. The final section reviews scholarly work on critical reflection as a means of sense-making and learning through experience, and current theory and research linking reflection to the context of careers. Where available, the author includes existing empirical evidence that speaks specifically to women’s career transitions.

Contemporary Careers

The nature of careers has changed substantially over the last thirty years. Today’s contemporary job environment is characterized by increased change and complexity as a result of rapid globalization, technological innovations, corporate out-sourcing, major social shifts such as women’s entrance into the workplace, and people working longer (Hall & Mirvis 1995; Harrison, 2006). The modern-day employee encounters fewer boundaries in career choice and is apt to make decisions based on personal desires. As a result, careers are less linear and organizationally prescribed while being more self-directed and mobile (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2002; Harrison, 2006; Litano & Major, 2016).
An increase in the frequency of work-role changes throughout the course of professional life means that employees are more likely to go through transitions. Occupational transitions are substantial life events that offer opportunities for learning, which impact both individuals and organizations (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2002; Hall & Mirvis, 1995; Stephens, 1994). This section examines the literature on career mobility and professional transitions, the experience of which serves as the context for the study of the reflections of women leaders in higher education. In order to understand how leaders made sense of their career changes, it was important to first explore what is known about the characteristics of contemporary career paths.

**Career Mobility**

Career mobility is a hallmark of today’s professional path (Stephens, 1994). Traditional linear career progression that had the employee dependent on the organization for stability and growth opportunity (see Super, 1957 for a classic career model) has been replaced with working experiences that are self-actualized, fragmented and dynamic (Harrison, 2006; Litano & Major, 2016). Arthur and Rousseau (1996) refer to modern careers as boundaryless, where crossing roles, cultures, organizations, and advances in technology and communication, enable a limitless number of career options. Briscoe and Hall (2006) describe a protean orientation towards career as one that is directed by the individual and based on subjective desires, as well as personalized notions of success and satisfaction. Instead of a single career trajectory developing over the course of a lifespan, Hall (2002) depicts a succession of shorter career learning cycles that unfold over time. As individuals change jobs or careers, they experience stages of exploration, trial, establishment and mastery, before transitioning to another role and embarking on the cycle once again. In Hall’s (2002) model, professionals are more likely to undergo several cycles throughout their careers, utilizing change as a building-block of career progression (Arthur & Rousseau,
1996). McElroy & Weng (2016) suggest that the ability to develop a successful, modern-era career rests with making effective transition choices. It was this transition space, where individuals contemplate, undergo and follow through on a move from one position or organization to the next, that was of greatest interest in this study.

**Career and Work-Role Transitions**

In the last few decades, the conventional pattern of climbing the organizational ladder has been upended (Hall, 2002; Litano & Major, 2016). Contemporary careers in both public and private sectors are characterized by mobility, and influenced by personal choice, subjective definitions of success, and an increasingly dynamic economic, political and globalized environment (Hall & Mirvis, 1995). Across position types and levels, inclusive of management and leadership positions, tenure within roles and organizations has declined (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016; Heckscher, 1995; Valcour & Tolbert, 2003). The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) reports that the median number of years in a role has dropped from 4.6 years in 2014 to 4.2 years in 2016, with greater declines and shorter tenures occurring for women (4.0 years) than for men (4.3 years). As might be expected given the relatively recent phenomenon of increased mobility and transition patterns, younger employees are less likely to be with an employer for a significant duration of time; just 13 percent of wage and salaried workers between the ages of 30 and 34 have been with their current employers for a decade or more (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016).

Similarly, in a longitudinal survey of nearly 10,000 baby boomers, the average number of jobs held over the lifespan was 11.9. Additionally, more formal education was found to be associated with holding a greater number of positions over time. Moreover, women with bachelor’s degrees or higher pursued more positions (12.7 on average) than men with the same
educational attainment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). This implies that women may, in fact, experience transitions with greater frequency throughout their careers. Given that this study focused on women who had attained top professional positions in higher education, it was important to note these trends.

The tendencies described above point to the demise of the “conceptualization of the career, emphasizing job security and long-term employment within a single organization…” (Litano & Major, 2016, p. 53). Instead, the new career model is one where “…transition is a continuing process through which people carve out careers of their choice” and “[t]ransition and employability work in tandem, driven by shifting personal competencies, project activities and perpetual discovery” (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996, p. 33). These shifts in the meaning and development of careers have distinct effects on both individuals and organizations. This will require new approaches to understanding and handling work and work lives. Since this study investigated how college women leaders contended with their transition experiences, it was essential to appraise what scholars have already uncovered about the impact of new professional change patterns.

**Effects of Transitions on Individuals**

Work changes, as with any substantial transition with periods of separation, adjustment and re-integration, can have ripple effects on individuals’ lives (Ashforth, 2001; Bridges, 2004; Hall, 2002). Ashforth (2001) states that a career or role transition is a “psychological and (if relevant) physical movement between sequentially held roles” (p. 7). This definition recognizes the internal impact of transition, in addition to the obvious material changes that come with shifting positions or organizations. Schlossberg (2011) maintains that a transition’s significance lies with how much it will alter an individual’s “roles, relationships, routines and assumptions”,
and the personal resources a person has to cope with such change (p. 159). In other words, apart from the tactical need to understand and adapt to a new position, the meaning and impact of a professional transition may extend into other personal, physical, and social facets of a person’s ways of being and knowing (Schlossberg, 2011; Bridges, 2004).

Several studies have demonstrated the influence of career transitions on subjective factors such as identity, well-being, satisfaction, relationships, and a sense of belonging (Ibarra, 2004; Jokisaari, 2003; Mattes, 2003; Wethington, 2002). Liu, Englar-Carlson and Minichello (2011) found that successful changes were directly related to individual coping resources such as optimism and emotional strength. Other scholars have ascertained that family and social supports (such as a positive occupational environment) can impact transition success. Additionally, individuals who perceived that their professional change was not positive expressed a sense of disappointment, lack of self-esteem and loss of identity. The ramifications of an unsuccessful career transition can hinder further professional growth and snowball into loss of promotion opportunities, income and capacity to positively impact the organization through one’s role (Liu, et al., 2011).

Professionals new to leadership, or transitioning to positions of equal or superior accountability, may confront distinct challenges. By nature of their roles, leaders handle organizational challenges of high complexity, and are expected to spearhead and respond to operational and strategic initiatives, a wide range of demands and goals, and manage a more expansive relational network (Terblanche, Albertyn, & van Coller-Peter, 2018). According to Terblanche et al. (2018), leaders in transition face unique “cognitive, behavioral, interpersonal, psychological and systemic” challenges (p. 62). Aside from the explicit functions of a new position that may be unfamiliar, leaders must also absorb and adjust to the tacit knowledge that is
inherent to their role or organization. For example, many transitioning leaders are tasked with driving strategic direction (cognitive), effective delegation (behavioral), consensus (interpersonal), and organizational culture (systemic). Terblanche et al. (2018) suggests that leaders in transition may contend with distinctively complex professional challenges as they change roles, in addition to the effects work change can have on other facets of life. The impact of a role transition extends well past the objective outcomes of professional development to other subjective aspects of individuals’ lives, making it a potentially jolting experience. Intense change that affects several dimensions of life and challenges intimate assumptions about oneself may spur professionals to take pause and reflect (Ashforth, 2001; Burns, 2010; Hall, 2002; Mezirow, 2000; Terblanche, Albertyn, & van Coller-Peter, 2017). The goal of this study was to understand the substance of these transitions and what emerged from the introspection and sense-making process that aided women leaders to comprehend their professional change experiences.

Women’s Career Mobility and Transitions

Women’s careers develop and are experienced differently than men, a product of long-standing economic, social and cultural barriers that have led to disparity in professional opportunity, pay and advancement (Chae, 2002; Sterrett, 1999). Women are overrepresented in secondary support and lower-ranked work roles, and underrepresented in specialist and other professional occupations, which offer the best salaries, benefits, managerial opportunity and independence (Sterrett, 1999). As a result of these factors, inclusive of women’s relatively recent entry into the workforce, evidence suggests that women’s career mobility patterns are distinct.

Women may pursue non-linear professional pathways that are more complex than men’s (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2006; Sterrett, 1999). Several studies have confirmed that the main share of family and household duties still resides with women (Tichenor, 1999). Just as with childcare,
women are also more likely to bear the burden of caring for elderly parents and relatives (Cabrera, 2007; Eby, 2001), and to suspend their careers in order to accommodate a growing family (Schneer & Reitman, 1997). In their study of dual-earner couples, Valcour and Tolbert (2003) affirmed that family relations affect men’s and women’s career choices differently. They suggest that the distinct effects of family responsibility impact the potential linearity of women’s career growth within an organization. The authors showed that women underwent more inter-organizational mobility (i.e., role change to a different organization) while their spouses were more likely to undertake intra-organizational changes (i.e., role change within the same organization) (Valcour & Tolbert, 2003). It could be surmised that if women are obliged to jump in and out of the workday, or on and off their work paths in order to meet their families’ needs, they could miss out on promotions, training, new projects, and networking opportunities that position them best for career advancement in an organization (Reitman & Schneer, 2005). In other words, given the gendered expectation that they will prioritize family over career, women may have little choice but to identify opportunities at new organizations in order to restart their careers.

On the other hand, some women may purposefully choose flexible career routes that fulfill their values. In a study with nearly 500 women graduate students in business, Cabrera (2007) found that only 35 percent of those who had taken a break from their careers did so solely to raise children. Testing the kaleidoscope career model, which posits that career decisions are driven by needs for authenticity, balance and challenge, Cabrera (2007) validated Mainiero and Sullivan’s (2006) earlier findings that women have unique career decision patterns. While men seek challenge in their early career stages, authenticity in the middle phase of their careers, and balance as they move to the later phases, women value balance during mid-career and
authenticity in the late stages of their path. Authenticity also becomes increasingly important over the course of women’s professional lives (Cabrera, 2007). Much like the protean career orientation, authenticity in the Kaleidoscope model is about making professional decisions that resonate with one’s genuine self and values (Cabrera, 2007; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2006). If the need to align career with an authentic sense of purpose becomes more salient for women over time, then it is possible that women are more apt to change occupations or careers in order to fulfill this need. It is also worth noting that finding balance between work and non-work life may be a process that requires different decisions for women and men. Balance appears to be a priority for women in the mid-career stages, which aligns with typical child-rearing years, and thus may actually be a socially- and culturally-driven artifact; nonetheless, the desire to establish balance may lead to increased mobility for women.

As evidence suggests that women lead more mobile, complex, and non-linear career pathways, it may be extrapolated that they experience work transitions with greater frequency than men (Cabrera, 2007). The way women experience career and work-role transitions may also be distinct, as they are uniquely affected by socially-constructed, gendered barriers (Ronzio, 2012). Gendered divides for household management, child care and parental care still impact women disproportionally, even in dual-earner households (Tichenor, 1999; Valcour & Tolbert, 2003). Scholars have also found that for women, stability in marriage and having children are negatively correlated with markers of career advancement (e.g., salary increases, promotions) (Han & Moen, 1998; Tharenou, Latimer, & Conroy, 1994). While it may not be the case for all women, assumptions that they will shoulder home-oriented responsibilities could encumber their ability to effectively transition to new roles. Women’s careers may be suffering doubly from
these gendered norms and expectations since it can also be the case that women who leave work to attend to familial matters are regarded as not prioritizing their work lives.

It is worth noting that women in leadership positions can encounter biases related to their leadership styles and behaviors (Chae, 2002). Many scholars argue that organizations themselves are sites of social construction that privilege some and disadvantage others through their structures, processes, and policies (Acker, 1990; May & Mumby, 2005). Acker (1990) proposed that organizations are fundamentally gendered, indicating “…that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine” (p. 146). Indeed, organizations have long valued and reinforced leadership traits that are traditionally associated with masculinity, including competition, power, rational decision-making and authority.

Eagly (2005) postulated that women, as members of an out-group (i.e., the “other”) and historically underrepresented in leadership roles, face challenges if their behavior is seen as incongruent with expected attributes of their social group. If a woman leader espouses beliefs and takes actions that defy the expectations of her traditional gender role, then followers may be less willing to accept and trust in her leadership. Liu, Cutcher and Grant (2015) support this argument with a study that examined the media’s depiction of two chief executive officers. Both leaders, Michael Smith (man) and Gail Kelly (woman), managed high profile banking companies during the global financial crisis. Utilizing media discourse analysis to examine language and images used to portray the two leaders, they found that despite similar backgrounds and experiences, the two were cast as either authentic or inauthentic based on whether they adhered to gendered norms (Liu et al., 2015).
In summary, there is evidence that socio-cultural expectations that have traditionally disempowered women have impacted their career mobility patterns, and perhaps made transitions a more frequent occurrence in their professional lives. Women who are transitioning to new leadership or professional positions may also encounter distinct challenges. They may have to grapple with gendered norms that disadvantage their career trajectories or devalue their approaches to working and leading. These effects could hamper their ability to establish trust, productive leader-follower relationships or serve as role models, and therefore impede their attempts to successfully integrate into a new role or organization. For these reasons, it was of vital importance to bring to light the subjective experience of women’s professional transitions through their own words and reflections.

**Effects of Transitions on Organizations**

The experience of a career or work-role transition draws on individuals’ psychological resources (e.g., cognitive, emotional, behavioral, etc.) and can engage important dimensions of their lives including family, interpersonal, health and other aspects of their lifestyles (Liu, et al., 2011). Human resources managers know well the whole person impact of this experience, with 87 percent naming a transition as the most difficult challenge in a professional’s career (Watkins, 2009). However, the cost of a failed transition to an organization is also very high. Recruiting, onboarding, training and retaining employees is expensive (Terblanche, et al., 2017). Turnover leads to instability, deficiencies in productivity, talent shortfalls and a bruised organizational culture that can be even more costly. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that organizations will expend 30 percent of a lost employee’s annual earnings to replace that individual (Industry Insight, 2017). At the senior most levels, the damage left by attrition can be greater. Manderscheid and Ardichvili (2008) suggest that losing a leader can cost the organization up to
24 times his or her annual salary. Yet, derailed transitions for leaders are common, with almost 50 percent underperforming in their new roles at the outset (Sutton, 2008) and less than a third meeting their goals post transition (Martin, 2015). This would indicate that organizations have not developed adequate supports and systems to enable leaders and other professionals to successfully transition. This study, which aimed to better understand the many subjective and objective facets of the career transition experience through participants’ personal reflections, may assist organizations, including colleges and universities, to develop more effective policies and programs that enable new employees to readily flourish.

**Higher Education, Transitions and Executive Leadership**

Participants in this study were women in leadership roles at higher education institutions. As a sector, higher education is facing distinct challenges that call for strong, skilled and stable leadership (Skinner, 2010). Deneen and Dretler (2012) note that institutional finances are less robust than they were previously, expenses have soared, and the health of university endowments is weaker. With few exceptions, institutions have ascribed to a philosophy of expansion, often with undifferentiated goals that has led to a failure to stand apart from competitors. College and university debt are increasing at a clip of 12 percent per year, and administrative costs are now outpacing educational expenses. Rising tuition rates, the recession and lagging job market have sparked dialogue about the value of a college education. Student and family stakeholders perceive they are bearing the brunt of excessive spending, and the slowly repairing economy means other sources of support such as endowments and donor funds are less accessible and secure. Additionally, decreases in state dollars to support public institutions, shrinking federal and state grant and loan programs to assist families, and nation-wide declines in the college-age
demographic further strain universities (Denneen & Dretler, 2012; Grawe, 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017; Ruben, De Lisi & Gigliotti, 2017; Skinner, 2010).

**Higher Education, Mobility and Transitions**

With the looming threat of the higher education bubble bursting, many have called for deep change in the operations of universities, backed by strategic, resourceful, entrepreneurial and collaborative leadership. Like many types of organizations, however, colleges are experiencing an uptick in career mobility and employee transition. Additionally, a projected series of retirements of senior executives, most of whom are baby boomers, may create a possible talent shortage at the leadership level. For institutions, this will make recruiting, successfully transitioning and retaining talent both a hardship and a critical priority over the next few decades (Desrochers & Kirschstein, 2014; Skinner, 2010).

Like other sectors, the college and university workforce has been affected by social, technological and economic shifts that have led to increased career mobility (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). For example, the traditional, American professorship has begun to destabilize. In the past, linear advancement from the lower to higher ranks with the expectation of tenure was the usual progression. As the landscape in higher education became increasingly competitive, with more institutions striving for research funding, students, endowment dollars, and a strong place in the rankings, and administrative costs rose to accommodate the contemporary needs of students, the faculty path was dismantled. Today, approximately 68 percent of the professoriate is part-time or in temporary positions, employed as lecturers, adjuncts and non-tenure track faculty on contracts; this is 25 percent more than was the case just 40 years ago (Monks, 2012). Less than half of the full-time academy has tenure, with contingency staff occupying a larger share of the
responsibility for instruction. For university educators, these patterns suggest a more transitory and less linear career in academia than would have been expected in the past.

The employment mobility landscape within higher education also shifted as institutions expanded operations, leading to a burgeoning of the non-academic university workforce. Increased demands for nuanced student services and professionals who can aid universities to comply with complicated government directives has resulted in a stronger presence and role for campus administrators. Between 2000 and 2012, the non-profit university and college employment base increased by 28 percent, with professional or student services staff accounting for the most growth in salary expenditures. Today, business and student services constitute about 25 percent of the positions on campus (Desrochers & Kirschstein, 2014).

Expansion of specialized administrative staff on campus for professional functions like human resources, admissions, residential life, and donor development has delineated responsibility between academic and non-academic staff, and created new streams of hiring, promotion, and leadership on campus. Despite the rapid development of administrative staff, little of this growth occurred at the executive and managerial levels, typically occupied by both faculty and professional administrators. At public universities, for example, just four to six percent of positions on campus are within the executive echelon (Desrochers & Kirschstein, 2014). With the contingent of seasoned leadership limited, and the prediction of en masse retirements pending, there may be a scarcity of competent and ready leaders to meet the urgent challenges ahead (Skinner, 2010). This may be further compounded by the trend of increased turnover at the highest levels on campus. At Research I universities, for instance, the average presidential term decreased from 12 to nine years at private universities and from eight to about six years at public universities (Padilla & Ghosh, 2000; Rhodes, 2005). Increasing pressures
faced by presidents hired to salvage institutions in highly politicized environments has negatively affected longevity in the role (Betts, et al., 2009; Klein & Salk, 2013; Tekniepe, 2014). The demands of drawn-out capital campaigns can take their toll on even the most experienced leaders. Martin and Samels (2004) report that “[p]residents told us that by a factor of four or five, fundraising challenges formed the greatest pressure in their professional lives” (p. 8). Greater mobility and increased transitions in the senior-most roles not only affect the individuals who are changing jobs, but the administration and campuses they leave behind. Transitions can negatively impact morale, productivity, culture and a university’s reputation, which can lead to further turnover (Basinger, 2001; Nehls, 2008).

The changes in the higher education workforce indicate the elevation of transition experiences among professionals, including those holding the chief-level positions. While professional transitions can be a positive force for individual career development, their occurrence can also be costly and disruptive to organizations. With the particular challenges saddling universities and colleges, it will be important to identify potential sources of future leadership, and to develop and retain those leaders for success. In order to accomplish this, universities must thoroughly understand what individuals experience upon transitioning to a new role or institution, and design responsive strategies that enable leaders to swiftly and effectively thrive on campus.

**Women’s Leadership in Higher Education**

As in other sectors, women professionals in higher education have been disadvantaged by systemic social and cultural norms that disproportionately impact their capacity to develop careers and achieve positions of leadership (BlackChen, 2015). Yet, they are a rapidly growing source of leadership at tertiary institutions, and at a time when there is a need for strong,
competent and forward-thinking employees to fill principal positions on campus. In the last three decades, the proportion of women holding the university presidency has increased by 160 percent (Johnson, 2016; Catalyst, 2017). In terms of institutional governance, women now make up 30 percent of board membership, and are just under 30 percent of chief officers of critical campus departments (e.g., student affairs, development, admissions, etc.).

However, it is concerning that while women make up over 50 percent of campus administrators, their representation drops dramatically as the influence, prestige and pay of a position increase (Bichsel & McChesney, 2017). Likewise, women currently comprise most doctorate degree earners but are only 25 percent of those holding full professorships (Johnson, 2016). This ‘the higher, the fewer’ trend holds true for other university leadership roles. Women are more likely to hold chief academic officer/provost positions at community colleges (50 percent), and least likely to fill this role at doctoral-granting institutions (32 percent) (American Council on Education, 2009). As the repute and distinction of a university type increases, women’s opportunity to achieve top roles declines.

While there appears to be great potential in the pipeline for women’s progression into positions of authority and influence, it has not yet been fully realized, and in some cases, appears to be actively prevented. There is evidence to suggest that women are held to higher standards in order to achieve the same level of position as men. For instance, women hired as college presidents appear to need to have checked all of the boxes of a traditional career trajectory to this role, including holding a doctoral degree and having previously served as a provost; on the other hand, with more frequency, presidents who are men may have taken a non-traditional path, have come from outside of higher education or have never held a faculty post. Moreover, no matter the academic rank, men are more likely to hold tenure track positions and make an average of
$15,000 more than women, significant deterrents to women’s career growth in higher education (Johnson, 2016; Bichsel & McChesney, 2017).

In these challenging times in higher education, women may be an untapped source of executive-level governance. If they believe they are undervalued, however, then women leaders may be more apt to change roles and institutions. Yet, if actively cultivated, then they may be a significant foundation of future leadership to solve the most critical issues facing universities and colleges. Research reveals that gender-diverse environments lead to positive performance outcomes and increasing women’s representation within organizations aids in closing the talent gap (McKinsey Report, 2017; Perryman, Fernando & Tripathy, 2015). Colleges need to take a keen interest in the career development of women leaders and understand the factors that lead them to depart from, and begin new roles. Improved comprehension of how women make meaning of their transition experiences can help universities design solutions that stabilize a growing cohort of importance within their workforce, retain their high-ranking officials, and respond proactively to the needs of future influential leaders.

Reflection

In this study, understanding career or work-role transitions was garnered through reflections from women leaders in higher education. Reflection, an act of sense-making, is an instrumental process through which adults learn from experience, and career and work are rich life spaces in which learning takes place. A work-role or career transition can be a momentous and significant professional turning point, and therefore a catalyst for introspection, self-awareness and new wisdom (Taylor, 2008). In this section, the concept of critical reflection is reviewed, along with its relationship to transformational learning and its application to career and leadership development in the literature.
Transformative Learning Theory

Learning that is transformative is “the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation and action” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 1). Transformational learning requires a substantial change in viewpoint that leads to new ways in which the world will be interpreted and perceived. Adults are learners who engage in a process that engrosses the mind, emotion and even spirit in order to create meaning from their experiences (Merriam, 2001, 2008). Yet, they can become constrained by the collective frames of reference previously relied upon to define their world, which can lead to the rejection of new and unfamiliar experiences. At the heart of transformative learning as an adult is the development of ever more independent, inclusive and introspective premises for understanding and incorporating new information (Mezirow, 1997).

While formal education is one outlet for adult learning that can push existing mental boundaries, professional life is another experiential vehicle that can be transformative. Self-reflection that is deliberate and diagnostic is at the core of that learning. Reflection is often thought of as the act of looking back on and pondering experiences, things, events, feelings, actions or relations. This straightforward contemplation does not necessarily imply evaluation of the experience; in other words, it is possible to reflect without assessment (Mezirow, 1990). Critical reflection on experience, on the other hand, is active awareness-building and evaluation of the origins and assumptions behind our feelings, thoughts or actions; transformation occurs when this leads to redefined perspectives that are then integrated into our future perceptions and actions. Learning that is truly transformative requires the capacity of critical reflection (Mezirow, 1998).
**History of transformative learning theory.** The concept of critical reflection is embedded in transformative learning theory, one of the most significant frameworks of andragogy or adult learning developed by Jack Mezirow in the late 1970s. The premise of andragogy is that adults can learn, and should be educated differently than children. Andragogy assumes that adults are independent, solution-driven and growth-oriented, and can draw on an abundance of life experience to enhance learning. In a similar vein, the theory of self-directed learning, another model of adult education, believes the learner to be capable of self-guidance and direction, as well as deep self-knowledge and awareness that can be liberating (Merriam, 2001).

Transformative learning theory harbors these broad andragogical objectives. Conceptualized through Mezirow’s lens, transformative learning is a process by which a “deep, structural shift in basic premises of thoughts, feelings, and actions” occurs for an individual (Transformational Learning Centre, 2004 in Kitchenham, 2008). Mezirow first formulated the theory and coined the phrase after conducting a study of women taking part in post-secondary education programs in preparation for re-entry into the workplace after a significant period away. He determined that the participants in his study had undergone an important personal transformation and found that the commonalities of their experiences included facing a disorienting dilemma, undertaking critical self-reflection and changing their mental frames of reference. In order for this significant shift to occur, critical reflection or deep introspection was the facilitator, leading to what Mezirow termed perspective transformation. Perspective transformation is described as:

The emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our
relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings (Mezirow, 1978, p. 6).

In other words, adults can confront the limitations of, and change their perceptions through critical reflection, resulting in the liberating reconstruction of meaning that will then be applied to new experiences.

Rooted in constructivism, which upholds that people create meaning and construct their realities through individual experiences, Mezirow’s transformative learning theory was influenced by earlier thinkers Dewey, Kuhn, Freire and Habermas (Allen, 2007; Kitchenham, 2008). Dewey contended that reflective thought can be spurred by new or differing evidence that strikes doubt on current convictions and causes the learner to investigate and gather knowledge that either confirms or invalidates present beliefs. Kuhn’s notion of a paradigm, or an inclusive yet flexible model outlook for understanding something, set the stage for major theoretical concepts like Mezirow’s notion of frames of reference. Freire argued that in order for learners to be productive actors upon society there must be a bi-directional teaching/learning experience between teacher and student, and that the unilateral transfer of knowledge stifles students’ ability to develop an empowering critical awareness, or conscientization. Mezirow’s critical reflection has origins in what Freire described as the highest level of conscientization, critical transivity, or the capacity for individuals to perceive contradictions and think critically about the state of their environment in order to proactively incite change in the world. In addition, Mezirow drew upon Habermas’ typology for learning, and, emancipatory learning. As Habermas defined it, emancipatory learning occurs when individuals take a critical stance towards their own beliefs and action when in receipt of new information. The act of asking an evaluative why and turning
the lens internally to self-analyze drives new and more informed viewpoints and actions – a process akin to Mezirow’s perspective transformation (Kitchenham, 2008).

**Perspective Transformation**

Perspective transformation occurs when there is a major paradigmatic shift in viewpoint, which henceforth enables a broader and more inclusive construal of meaning. Assumptions that were previously fixed become undone, allowing for individuals to become more “…discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow, 2003). This is accomplished through the development of awareness of “specific assumptions (schemata, criteria, rules, or repressions) on which a distorted or incomplete meaning scheme is based” (Mezirow, 1985, p. 23). Meaning schemes are the “the concepts, beliefs, judgements and feelings”, which dictate how people interpret their surroundings – they make up the lens through which individuals view their current reality (Mezirow, 1990, Mezirow, 1985, p. 21). Profound transformation of perspective occurs when individuals critically reflect upon and subsequently evolve those root assumptions behind their current meaning schemes (Kitchenham, 2008).

**Disorienting dilemma and discourse.** Transformative learning theory posits that a noteworthy life event, which unsettles and disorients a person, causing internal conflict, can spark a phase of self-examination, or critical reflection on the foundations of their present beliefs and habits of mind (Mezirow, 1994). Confronted with an experience that sparks a sense of incongruity within the self, individuals are compelled to ask why they believe and act as they do (Smith, 2012). This process of reflecting and re-assessing upon long-standing assumptions marks the beginning of perspective change and creates space for the following stages of transformative learning, which include the exploration, acquisition and integration of new knowledge, skills, roles, actions and perspectives.
Perspective transformation is facilitated through discourse. Mezirow (2003) recognized that dialogue with others’, hearing different opinions, values and beliefs, assists understanding and the *trying-on* of new perspectives. Putting those alternative conceptions to work through action helps to integrate newly transformed perspectives into our future behavioral repertoire, allowing for a broadened base of interpretation and understanding of self and experience (Merriam, 2004; Mezirow, 2003).

**Typology of critical reflection.** Reflection involves an examination of the *what*, *how* and *why* one believes and behaves as she does. Critical reflection of and on assumptions (CRA) defines exploration of the *what* and *how*, or the content and process of arriving at long-held assumptions. Critical self-reflection of assumptions (CSRA) concerns the *why*, evaluation of the base origins of those assumptions, or when “[l]earners examine their worldview in light of their own particular belief or value system” (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 116; Mezirow, 1998). An individual engaged in the process of CSRA is exploring the emotional, social, cultural, political and ideological origins of enduring, yet possibly constraining beliefs that hinder growth. Without this latter type of deep self-reflection, truly transformative learning is not possible. The connection between critical reflection and learning happens through reframing. According to Mezirow’s (1998) taxonomy, objective reframing results in learning that is instrumental in nature, where people reflect on and reframe the influential sources and perspectives that have been communicated through their environment. Subjective reframing, or the process which takes place during critical self-reflection, suggests investigation and re-assessment of the origins of assumptions within oneself. This deeply self-reflective sense-making can focus on beliefs, feelings, and values internalized by various systems (e.g., cultural, social, political,
organizational, familial), the process of which can lead to profound perspective transformation and self-learning (Mezirow, 1998; Kitchenham, 2008).

**Other Outlooks on Reflection**

Mezirow and the theory of transformational learning have been criticized for lack of attention to the role of context in shaping one’s outlets for learning and resources to act upon new self-understanding (Merriam, 2008). Mezirow emphasizes the person as the unit of interest and assumes he or she has the resources to follow through on individual transformation. Concerns have also arisen about how critical reflection and discourse require mature cognitive development, and that the theory is over reliant on rationality and cognition as sole sources of change within individuals (Merriam, 2004).

Several other theorists have helped to expand transformational learning, bringing an appreciation for other avenues to a change in perspective. Dirkx (2002) takes an extra-rational lens to learning, highlighting the role of emotions, feelings, spirituality and imagination as sources of insight and personal development. Other perspectives, such as that of Brookfield (1997), hold a social or emancipatory viewpoint, recognizing the effects of a person’s positionality, and that transformation should have a symbiotic impact on both learner and environment with the goal of creating a more just world.

In their study, Stuckey, Taylor and Cranton (2013) found that there are more similarities than differences in the distinct approaches to transformational learning, and that they share the goal of achieving a more inclusive outlook regardless of the preference for the manner of understanding (e.g., rational thought, emotions, spirituality, etc.). Mezirow has also several times revised the seminal tenets of his theory to include these other ways of knowing and learning (Kitchenham, 2008). The variety of approaches to transformative learning also seem to agree on
reflection, awareness-building and self-exploration as modalities of learning. In this study, Mezirow’s (1998) conception of critical reflection will be the primary guide to examination of women’s career transition experiences, but it is important to recognize and remain open to other possible forms of knowing, as well as the impact of social context on participants’ reflection and learning.

**Reflection on Careers**

Previous research points to how reflection can be a gateway to learning in the context of careers and career development (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011). In a review of several major career coaching models, Dingman (2004) found several commonalities. One of the tactics that tied the models together was the intentional use of reflection as a tool to spark client learning and professional attainment (Dingman, 2004). Brown et al. (2014) also found that faculty in the late stages of their academic careers retrospectively made sense of their professional paths through reflective thought. Interestingly, for the four men and women who participated in this qualitative study using narrative methodology, they note that disruptions along their career trajectories sparked periods of reflection. Much like disorienting dilemmas in Mezirow’s theory, these periods of disruption for the academics lead to instances of introspection of various durations, which resulted in beneficial professional choices (Brown, et al., 2014).

Denston and Gray (2011) call for the incorporation of reflection into leadership development programs. Leadership is an important skill and developmental aspect of many individual careers. As professionals expand in their capacity to take on complex work-related problems, managing and leading people and organizations may be an expectation, and their ability to continue to grow in their career may depend on their success as a leader. The authors suggest that reflection can be a vehicle through which leaders can enhance their skills in leading
others. However, many leaders are not aware of the assumptions and biases that impact how they lead people. Through a process of reflective consideration of previous leadership experiences, exploration and questioning of past thoughts and behaviors, Denston and Gray (2011) showed the potential improvements of leaders’ ability to reframe problems, examine situations from an expanded variety of angles, and empathize with those they lead.

In Choy’s (2009) assessment of an executive leadership development program that created opportunities for team-based critical reflection and discourse, participants showed evidence of increased self- and organizational awareness. Leaders in the cohort completed tasks that fostered a continuous culture of “critical and reflective thinking to challenge existing perspectives and practices” (p. 68). Results of a four-semester course demonstrated that individuals confronted their inhibiting frames of reference, which inspired them to make changes within themselves as well as their organizations. Choy (2009) also noted the importance of critical dialogue to the participants’ learning in this study. As Mezirow (2003) maintained, discourse that enables exposure to, understanding of, and testing out of differing perspectives can be a powerful transformer of individual perception. The combination of self and group reflection in the program made the leaders “more aware of a range of assumptions about their current organizational policies, practices and processes as well as their personal standpoints” (Choy, 2009, p. 74).

**Reflection and transitions.** While few studies have explored career transition through the lens of reflection, there is some evidence to suggest it as a useful framework for comprehending the experience. Isopokhala-Bouret (2008) examined the narrative reflections of six professionals (3 women and 3 men) who were newly transitioning to supervisory roles. In reflecting critically on their new roles, participants transformed their perspectives on authority
and power, what it means to hold a managerial-level position, and how to go about being a manager.

Responding to the high levels of transition failure on the part of senior leaders, a costly result for both individuals and organizations, Terblanche et al. (2018) recently proposed an executive coaching model for transitioning leadership that is guided by Mezirow’s transformative learning theory. Terblanche’s et al. (2018) framework aids senior executives by “identifying and transforming problematic perspectives held by the transitioning leader through a process of premise reflection and action learning” (p. 65). Through questionnaires and structured reflection activities, the author asked six recently promoted leaders to evaluate their assumptions on several parameters, including moral, psychological, political, etc. Terblanche’s et al. (2018) results were encouraging in that the executives shared that the model helped to change long-held assumptions that were barriers to their successful transition.

**Women, reflection and careers.** There is a deficit of research that explicitly focuses on women’s reflection and learning in the context of their careers, transitions, or leader development within higher education. However, some practice-based and scholarly work does indicate the potential for women’s professional growth through introspective thinking, individually and in concert with others. In a reflective piece by Bonhomme-Biais and Romano (2013), both female engineers employed at Google, they discuss the beneficial effects on each other’s career development. In a process akin to reflective discourse, Romano describes how exposure to other capable women through affiliating groups for women in computing and engineering allows for the advancement of a more inclusive outlook on what is professionally possible. Romano credits learning from Bonhomme-Biais (2013) about the change she had made in her career direction as the impetus that helped her cultivate the novel realization that she too
could steer her career towards a more personally fulfilling route. In addition, the piece itself brings into focus that reflection on career paths can be a method for new personal comprehension and awareness.

Debebe (2009) examined whether transformational learning could be fostered in a professional training setting. The author interviewed 24 women scientists and managers who had participated in a leader development program in order to explore whether they had progressed through a pattern that would suggest transformative learning. The interviewees were asked to recount leadership scenarios before, during and after their participation in the program. With a significant leadership dilemma in mind, the author ascertained that women had gone through an awareness building process that aided them in making meaning of their leadership experience in order to achieve a change in perspective that resulted in new, transformative self-understanding. Debebe (2009) demonstrated that participants challenged their internal assumptions, some of which were about themselves, and others about their environment. Like Mezirow’s stages of perspective transformation, participants were able to transform insights into action, and integrate new perspectives into their leadership practice. Debebe (2009) notes how alumnae of the program “act[ed] on the conviction to change, and they also sustained their changed behavior permanently…[O]ver time through continued reflection and adjustment of practice, there is increased self-confidence and maturation in practice. This continual learning and maturation of practice is the last key moment in the revision of world view” (p. 9). This example underscores the power of reflection for the purposes of women’s career development.

**Chapter Summary**

As a common occurrence in modern-day careers, the work-role transition was observed as a disarming life event, spurring opportunity for learning and deep self-understanding through
the process of critical reflection. Career transitions can be significant changes that affect the personal, physical, cultural and social dimensions of the lives of professionals. The purpose of this thesis was to explore how women leaders’ in higher education made sense of their individual transition experiences. While there is a paucity of research exploring women’s transitions in the college space, some evidence suggests that they will encounter distinct challenges and their experience of change may be wholly unique.

Women are underrepresented in positions of power and influence in higher education, and this study gave voice to the experience of women who had recently taken on new leadership roles. This was an important undertaking, at a time when there is a scarcity of next generation frontrunners to tackle the pressing concerns plaguing the higher education sector. Further insight into women’s executive-level transitions may aid universities to develop more effective on-boarding, preparatory, development and retention programs that enable new leaders to become lasting and productive trailblazers at the helm of their institutions. The results of this study could guide women who aspire to leadership roles on what they will encounter when changing positions. In the next section, the author will review the methods by which the reflections of higher education women executives who had recently transitioned roles were collected and analyzed.
Chapter Three: A Qualitative Inquiry

This study explored how women leaders in higher education described their career transition experiences. When researchers seek to understand the meaning that individuals accord to a phenomenon (in their own words), then a qualitative approach is appropriate. In the first section of the chapter, the study’s research approach, methodology and sample design are outlined. The second section focuses on processes related to data collection, analysis and strategies to ensure trustworthiness. Finally, the researcher’s positionality or potential biases and limitations of the study are addressed.

Research Question

The central research question was: How do higher education women leaders describe and make sense of their career transitions? Understanding how women who hold top positions in higher education reflect on and make meaning of professional change was at the core of the study. With mobility in careers now a common feature of professional life, this study intended to gather data on transitions and how they impact today’s higher education executives as well as the university and college organizations they serve. The current study was framed through, and informed by the critical reflection theory lens, a key component of transformative learning.

Qualitative Approach

The qualitative methodology of narrative inquiry was selected to carry out the study. Qualitative researchers maintain that narrative is the vehicle through which individuals make sense of the experiences that constitute their existence; therefore, the approach was situated in a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. Humans are story-telling creatures who create meaning in their lives through the development of story, and narrative researchers look to stories to
understand many of life’s phenomena. Given that this study focused on the specific, point-in-time lived experiences of women leaders in higher education, the personal, temporal, contextual and relational qualities of the narrative inquiry methodological approach were well-suited to the current study.

**Philosophical Assumptions**

According to Creswell (2012), the constructivist paradigm provides insight into how “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (p. 20). When people develop and share stories, they undergo a sense-making process that constructs a coherent identity for themselves and others (Clark & Rossiter, 2008). Fisher (1987) referred to humans as *homo narrans* to accentuate that we make meaning through story. Randall (1996) has referred to learning that is transformational as re-storying, where an individual’s life narrative no longer coordinates with their experiences, so it must be reconstructed. This is akin to the process of transformational learning through critical reflection, where baseline assumptions that helped explain reality are challenged or must be changed. This study sought to gain insight into what led women executives to shape and re-shape their life stories because of an intentional career transition and, therefore, the current study assumed a constructivist lens.

**Methodology**

While story in research and practice has long been employed across many disciplines (e.g., anthropology, literature, psychology and sociology), educators Connelly and Clandinin (1990) are credited for defining narrative inquiry. They spurred its popular use in the education field with their seminal publication *Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry* (1990). Narrative inquiry is rooted in philosopher and psychologist John Dewey’s (1938) understanding
of life’s experiences as education (Caine, Estefan & Clandinin, 2013). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) advocate for an attendance in narrative to qualities of experience outlined by Dewey, including temporality, sociality and context (Craig, 2005; Huber, Caine, Huber & Steeves, 2013). This “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space” respects that individuals are living out their stories, constructing them in continuity and relationship to others, while situating those stories in broader historic, social, cultural and political contexts (Caine, et al., 2013, p. 577).

With its focus on garnering insight into personal, subjective knowledge that informs how a life is lived, narrative inquiry is nested in an interpretivist perspective (Conle, 2000). A special focus is afforded to interactions between researcher and participant (Huber et al., 2013). As such, the scholar must be attuned to his or her positionality, its impact on the participant’s narrative, and how it may affect a person’s life story. In an examination of narrative inquiry as a pedagogical tool, Conle (2000) discussed the eye-opening realization that when researching teachers’ experiences through narrative inquiry, the researcher found as much insight in the telling of his own story as he did in examining the stories of others. Narrative inquiry, therefore, encourages scholars to be highly reflexive throughout the research process, which leads to opportunities to foreground their own experiences (Conle, 2000).

Essential to narrative inquiry is reverence for the story told and ensuring that the scholar’s interpretation is in line with the meaning expressed by participants. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) support continuous corroboration throughout data collection and analysis, empowering participants to review, retell and revise their story in connection with the researcher. Proponents of the methodology also note that some stories are difficult, or even at times traumatic, to tell. They warn researchers not to fall prey to “narrative smoothing” in order to
conjure a happy ending (Caine, et al., 2013; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). These narratives, however disturbing, need to be told in order to understand the phenomenon in question.

Through storytelling, researchers come to understand how people make meaning of their experiences (Caine et al., 2013). Narrative inquiry utilizes an inductive analytical approach, which allows the narrative to speak for itself and the “data to more clearly tell their own story” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 11). Rather than simply using narrative as a descriptive modality to elucidate the researcher’s theses, narrative inquiry presumes that understanding will emerge from the story.

**Research Site and Sample Design**

In order to explore women leaders’ reflections on their recent career transitions using narrative inquiry, a purposeful sampling approach was used to garner a group of participants with similar experiences. Purposeful sampling convenes a “typical sample”, or “one that is considered or judged to be typical or representative of that which is being studied” (Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun, 2012, p. 436). Purposeful and homogenous sampling yields a participant base with shared characteristics that can provide close insight into the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). In this case, participants were executive-level female administrators within U.S.-based higher education institutions who had experienced a recent career or work-role transition.

**Selection Criteria**

To refine the sample further, participants who had the following characteristics were recruited for the study:

1. They identified as women;
2. They experienced an inter- or intra-organizational career or work-role transition to a new executive position of leadership in the last three years;

3. They held a role in the higher education sector.

Since the purpose of the study was to understand how women executives in higher education described their career transition experiences, it was necessary to place a limit on the time-frame when the transition occurred so the experiences existed in recent memory and details leading up to, during, and after the transition could be sufficiently recalled. Limiting the time-since-transition period to three years allowed participants’ to more accurately recall event details, reflections, feelings and interactions over the course of the change. A three-year period has also been suggested as an appropriate time-frame to counsel through a work transition in the executive coaching field (Terblanche, et al., 2017). In addition, it should be noted that a three-year period allowed for a sufficient study sample to be developed; as women are already underrepresented in senior roles in higher education, a narrower time-frame might have impeded the author in identifying a satisfactory number of participants. Executive-level leadership positions were defined as roles in the dean or associate vice-presidential range or higher. Participants also possessed significant strategic and operational accountability over a department or unit in academic affairs or student services field within a U.S.-based university or college. Examples of appropriate titles were assistant/associate vice president, vice president, vice chancellor, dean, chief officer, provost, president, or chancellor. Participants had either entered their first executive-level position or held one previously.
Recruitment Plan

Purposeful sampling was used to select a group of seven women participants who held executive-level positions, were employed at a university or college, and had experienced a work-role or career transition during the last three years. A snowball recruiting strategy, whereby the researcher began by utilizing her professional networks at the university and college levels, was employed to recruit participants. The researcher has been in higher education for 13 years and operates at the executive level of administration, so this recruitment method was manageable. Snowball recruiting is a non-probability sampling method that refers to the process of utilizing potentially qualified participants to refer and recruit other potentially qualified participants, thereby expanding the possible network of candidates available to the researcher.

Potential participants were first approached with an email that introduced the study, the purpose, and the criteria for participation (Appendix A). Interested participants were contacted via email to inquire about their interest level and intention to participate or not in the study. If an email recipient was not interested or was ineligible, then she was asked to forward the introductory email to other women colleagues who might have been interested and qualified to participate. For those who were interested, the researcher communicated via email to confirm qualification for the study, answer any initial questions or concerns, and request and obtain a signed consent form before data collection began (Appendix B).

Data Collection

The research plan consisted of three phases, and the table below outlines the basic steps that were undertaken. In the qualitative methodological tradition of narrative inquiry, the experiences of a single participant or a few individuals become the focus of the study (Creswell,
With narrative inquiry, interviews are the most common mechanism for eliciting data. Therefore, the sample for this study consisted of seven participants who engaged in in-depth semi-structured interviews.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases of the Research Plan</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Phase I | Participant Selection, Pilot | • Participant Recruitment and Qualification  
• Participant Selection  
• Informed Consent  
• Request Documents  
• Pilot and Finalize Interview Protocol |
| Phase II | Data Collection | • Document Review (e.g., resumes)  
• Schedule Interviews  
• Conduct, Record Semi-Structured Interviews  
• Transcribe Interviews  
• Participant Review of Transcriptions |
| Phase III | Data Analysis | • Data Storage  
• Coding (Inductive)  
• Develop Participant Profiles  
• Thematic Analysis |

Phase I

In Phase I, participants were recruited, qualified and selected as described above. Informed consent (Appendix B) was obtained from each participant and a request for a resume or curriculum vita was extended. Constructing narrative through a variety of modalities not only validates testimonies, but also provides a deeper level of insight into the experience. Triangulation of sources such as documents, interviews, observation, field notes, journals kept by participants, letters and memos, and visuals such as photos and video, is recommended for narrative researchers (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Creswell, 2013). The interviewees’ resumes enabled the researcher to gain a sense of their individual career paths and validate the timing of
their recent transitions. If an updated resume or C.V. was unavailable, then alternative sources such as LinkedIn profiles and/or online public announcements of their recent appointments were accepted. Each participant also selected a pseudonym to represent her persona in the study to maintain confidentiality of her identity.

Phase I included pilot testing of the interview guide (Appendix C) with one to two individuals who fit the criteria for the study’s population. The protocol was shared with these individuals in order to garner feedback, comments and concerns regarding its ability to respond to the research question. Piloting the protocol allowed the researcher to test the timing of interviews, clarity and comprehension of questions, interview format (e.g., in person, video call), alignment of questions with the theoretical framework, and tools the researcher would use to record interviews. The interview guide was then updated and revised accordingly.

Semi-structured interviews, while they can be guided by pre-determined questions and in a pre-determined order, allow the researcher to adapt to and explore individual participant’s experiences and thoughts as they emerge during the interview (Seidman, 2006). Open-ended questions along with probes, aligned with the theoretical framework, formed the basis of the interview protocol. Following the three-dimensional inquiry foci of narrative methodology (temporality, sociality and context), the interview protocol was designed to explore the participants’ timeline of critical turning points, the relationships influential to their experiences, and the context of their transitions (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990).

**Phase II**

Phase II included a thorough review of the participants’ resume/C.V./LinkedIn profile materials for biographical, career-related and professional transition data. The researcher
scheduled and conducted 60- to 120- minute semi-structured interviews. Based on each participant’s preferences, interviews were in-person at a mutually convenient, private location, or conducted via videoconference. The final protocol guided each interview, which was audio-recorded using a phone voice recorder application. The researcher wrote field notes during the interviews, which were used later in the analysis phase. Interview recordings and files were stored on password-protected devices (the researcher’s phone and personal laptop), and notes were kept in a locked and private office location to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed by a reputable, professional transcription service (Rev.com). A transcript of each interview was sent to each participant via email for member-checking to validate the accuracy of its content. At that time, participants were also encouraged to add any additional reflections, and any requested modifications or revisions to transcripts.

**Phase III**

**Data storage.** As noted above, precautions were taken to securely store all data collected in Phases I and II to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of participants. Data, including emails, forms, recordings and transcripts, were kept on the researcher’s password protected devices (i.e., laptop and phone). Written notes were stored in the researcher’s locked office filing drawer. Only participant pseudonyms were used to refer to the interviewees. At the completion of this doctoral thesis, all electronic files were deleted, and paper notes or files shredded.

**Data analysis.** In “restorying”, or organizing and presenting narrative, the researcher ultimately “…tells the story of individuals unfolding in a chronology of their experiences, set within their personal, social and historical context, and including the important themes in those lived experiences” (Creswell, 2013, p. 75). To generate new and emerging insights through story, narrative inquiry is inductive, and researchers examine data using thematic, structural and/or
dialogic/performance approaches. Thematic analysis seeks patterns within the stories of women executives’ reflections on their transitions within higher education.

The researcher began by listening to each interview recording, and thoroughly reviewing and re-reading each transcript. Field notes were examined alongside this review. An initial coding attuned to the temporal, contextual or social qualities of the participants’ narratives was undertaken in order to construct a descriptive profile of each interviewee and her reflections on the transition experience. The researcher then embarked on an intensive second phase of coding of each transcript, facilitated and recorded through software programs (i.e., Microsoft Excel, Microsoft Word, and NVivo 10), to capture participants’ reflections upon experiences expressed through words, thoughts, opinions, phrases, events, feelings, etc. Then, the researcher categorized common codes into themes and conducted a cross-case analysis to seek commonalities or redundancies among themes. This helped the researcher identify and define emergent themes that connected participants’ reflections about career transitions. Here, knowledge of the theoretical framework supported, but did not determine or supersede, findings or interpretation, and a final group of themes and sub-themes arose from the data.

**Trustworthiness**

Establishing trustworthiness in the collected data is an essential obligation of the researcher. Lincoln and Guba (1985) express trustworthiness of qualitative research as establishing its dependability, confirmability, transferability and authenticity. A researcher must ask his or herself whether the interpretation developed is an accurate, fair and honest representation of the participants’ meaning (Creswell, 2013). In this study, several validation strategies were employed. They include triangulation, member-checking, and the use of rich, thick description. The content of multiple interviews was transcribed and triangulated with the
researcher’s field notes and reflective journal entries. Opportunities for member-checking were provided during and after the interviews to ensure clarity of the questions asked, responses provided, and credibility of findings or conclusions. In addition, participants were provided the transcriptions of their interviews to review and affirm (or modify, if desired) the transcriptions. Rich, detailed descriptions were applied to profiles of participants and the themes that emerged from the research to determine the transferability of interpretations and their application. Additionally, the researcher reflected on her own potential biases, and acknowledged their capacity to impact the research process and results. A high standard of “reflexivity” in the form of “criticality” (Is there a critical appraisal of all aspects of the research?) and “integrity” (Are the investigators self-critical?) were important to consider as the storied experiences of the participants were re-built and re-told (Creswell, 2013, p. 248).

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Prior to embarking on the study, the researcher sought approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Northeastern University. The purpose of the research, process of data collection, and intentions with the data were explained to potential participants. Permission to participate in the study was obtained through informed and voluntary consent of every participant, and participants were assured of the protection of their identity using pseudonyms for their names and institutions. Additionally, the researcher verified that all data and documents, including participants’ resumes, interview recordings, transcripts, and field notes were securely stored and only accessible to the researcher. While the risk to subjects is minimal, participants were told that they could decide not to participate at any time, and/or refuse any questions they deemed too sensitive or uncomfortable.
Assumptions/Delimiters/Limitations

This narrative inquiry study examined how executive women leaders at public and private, two- or four-year non-profit higher education institutions reflected on recent work-related transition experiences. As with any research undertaking, it was important to recognize the potential assumptions and limitations of the study, as its scope, context and methodology may limit its generalizability to other individuals, fields and organizations. This study assumed that understanding the career transition journeys of women leaders in higher education would be valuable for both aspiring and existing leaders as well as the academic institutions they serve. This research focused on a small number of leaders of one gender at a particular professional level, which limits its applicability to other professionals and institutions. This research was qualitative in nature, and semi-structured interviews were bound by time constraints. Therefore, a limited amount of knowledge was gleaned through the selected method, which further restricts the extent of results and scope of interpretation.

Statement of the Researcher

As I explored how women leaders described and reflected on their career transitions, I was aware of the perspectives, opinions and assumptions, as well as potential biases I, as the researcher, brought to the study.

Gender

In the field of higher education, women leaders remain underrepresented in positions of authority and influence despite a recent surge in our advancement (Catalyst, 2017). In the context of my study, women were ‘the other’, and this was one rationale for why I wished to give voice to their specific experiences (Briscoe, 2005). I am a woman and shared that characteristic in
common with my participants. It is important to note that this aspect of my identity is well-developed and of great significance to me. I attended a women’s college as an undergraduate, am a self-identified feminist and am informed on gender-related social, economic, cultural and political issues. I also spent part of my career working at a women’s residential college, leading women’s programs and mentoring young women students. While having this component of my identity in common with my participants enabled a more thorough comprehension of their experiences, I was wary not to assume that this aspect was as salient for them as it is for me, or that sharing this commonality meant I could fully know their experiences. I also took care not to impose an othering view on my participants, forcing my assumptions about obstacles they faced while, in their opinion, none might exist.

**Professional Level**

I am an executive-level leader within a large, public university; therefore, I shared this attribute with my participants. In my current professional role, I have discretion and decision-making authority over my unit, oversee a sizeable budget, and manage a team of 60 professionals. Like many at my level, I serve on numerous committees within the institution, contribute to the strategic direction of my department and the university, and my expertise is sought within the university and in the broader professional community. As a woman in this role, I have experienced first-hand biases related to my leadership style, challenges to having my perspective taken seriously, and exclusion from networks dominated by leader counterparts who are men. I consider myself to be particularly attuned to the obstacles and differential treatment that women leaders experience as their careers develop, but I did not assume that these encounters were noticeable, prominent or significant to higher education women leaders in the current study.
Career Transition History

My experiences as a career-changer and professional leader played a role in shaping my assumptions. I began my career in the private sector and after six years, moved to the non-profit environment of higher education. Additionally, within the span of the first decade of my career, I made several intentional transitions to different fields as I sought to refine my professional interests. Finally, since deciding on my administrative path in higher education in 2005, I have progressed through positions of increasing responsibility and leadership, transitioning three times to more senior roles. Work-role and career transitions have been a significant part of my professional trajectory, and in each instance, I have critically reflected upon the significant personal, social, emotional, familial and cultural factors that influenced my decisions and next steps. In part, my personal career transition experiences and reflective processes served as the reason for my deep interest in this study.

Nationality

It was important to recognize my nationality as a potential form of bias. I am American and bring a ‘Western’ view of career development to my research. Fennell and Arnot (2008) warn of the imposition of a ‘Western’ ideological agenda at the risk of undermining other cultural perspectives. While there is evidence that the effects of globalization, technology and economic conditions have impacted how modern-day careers now progress all over the world, I took care not to assume that the transition reflections of U.S.-based women leaders would apply to women of different countries of origin. I did not lose sight of the fact that women leaders are diverse in background and perspective, and the origins of their opinions may be situated in different national contexts.
Summary of Statement of the Researcher

Stating my positionality necessarily built my awareness of, and drew my attention to, how profoundly my experiences and identity have influenced my research interests. I needed to be diligent not to confound findings with my own perceptions. A rich exploration of women executives’ introspective processes during career transitions would only be realized if I fostered open and genuine commentary and reflection.

Summary of the Research Plan

The study explored the reflections of women executives in higher education on their recent career or work-role transition experiences. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodological approach embedded in the constructivist paradigm, which suggests that individuals construct their knowledge and understanding of the world through the interpretation of their experiences (Conle, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Constructivism respects the subjective nature of knowing, and that individuals bring past experience to the forefront of current experience in order to make sense of their world. As this study aimed to understand how individuals made meaning of their particular transition experiences, narrative inquiry facilitated the uncovering of that meaning through the stories of change constructed by participants (Clark & Rossiter, 2008).

A purposeful sampling approach was utilized to identify seven executive-level women leaders who were employed within U.S.-based institutions of higher education, and who had experienced a career-related transition in the last three years. Limiting the time-since-transition period capitalized on participants’ memory and ability to recall event details, reflections, feelings and interactions over the course of the change. In the executive coaching field, a three-year
period has also been suggested as an appropriate time-frame to counsel through a work transition, indicating that zero to three years is the most sensitive for employees undergoing a career or role transition (Terblanche, et al., 2017). Data collection occurred in three phases, with the primary source of data generated through semi-structured interviews.

In phase I, participants were recruited, qualified and selected, and informed consent was obtained. As is appropriate in narrative inquiry, additional relevant documentation such as a curriculum vita were collected to provide context for participants’ career pathways.

In phase II, additional materials were reviewed and semi-structured interviews, guided by an interview protocol, were conducted and audio-recorded. The researcher took notes before, during and after each interview to supplement the data collected. Recordings were transcribed through a third-party service, and transcriptions were sent to participants to allow for checking and validation of content; participants’ modifications, reflections, comments or observations were welcomed by the researcher.

Finally, in phase III, the researcher took an inductive approach to coding and thematically analyzing the data in order to appropriately reconstruct the transition narratives of women leader participants, and garner new insights through their critically reflective processes. Through this process, the researcher aimed to enhance scholarly understanding of the unique impact of professional change on women leaders’ in order to develop individual and organizational solutions that would more readily aid their career advancement in higher education.
Chapter Four: Research Findings

In this qualitative study, seven women leaders in higher education shared their reflections on recent career transitions. Their narratives provided insight into how they made meaning of these particular professional experiences. Each participant had undergone a position transition within the last three years, and currently sits at the executive level of leadership within their two- or four-year institution of tertiary education. Typically underrepresented at the highest leadership echelons of universities and colleges, the current study enhanced understanding of women’s unique professional change experiences in order to develop solutions that will aid in advancing their careers in higher education.

The following chapter presents findings that respond to the main research question: How do higher education women leaders describe and make sense of their career transitions? An inductive approach was used to analyze data collected through semi-structured interviews in order to allow space for transition narratives to unfold and common themes to emerge across individuals. In the first section of this chapter, the researcher presents descriptive profiles of each participant. This is followed with an account of shared themes across participants, gathered through narrative inquiry methods with attention to the temporal, contextual and relational qualities of their stories. To ensure confidentiality throughout, pseudonyms were used to represent the participants’ names and all other personal or identifying aspects of their narratives. The chapter ends with a summary of the research findings.

Overview of Participants

Seven participants who identified as women and who held senior positions within higher education took part in this study. Women leaders represented two- and four-year public and private universities that ranged in size from small (approximately 4000 students) to large
(approximately 60,000 students). For educational and professional background knowledge, participants provided resumes/curriculum vitae and/or LinkedIn profiles, and the researcher reviewed public appointment announcements and/or biographical website pages for additional information.

Table 2 provides a summary of participants’ educational, professional and demographic backgrounds. Three of the participants identified as women of color. Additionally, all participants held advanced degrees and executive-level positions of leadership at their current institutions. Since the primary phenomenon of this research study was the sense-making process of career or work-role transitions, the number of months or years since their professional change occurred is included.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Institution Type</th>
<th>Years/Months In Current Role</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Highest Degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>4-year, public, large</td>
<td>1.5 years</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>Vice Dean</td>
<td>4-year, public, large</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathryn</td>
<td>Vice President</td>
<td>4-year, private, small</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M.Ed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>Exec. Vice Chancellor</td>
<td>4-year, public, large</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>Black/African-American</td>
<td>Ed.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Dean</td>
<td>2-year, public, medium</td>
<td>8 months</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>Assistant Chancellor</td>
<td>4-year, public, medium</td>
<td>3 weeks</td>
<td>Black/African-American</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruby</td>
<td>Vice Provost</td>
<td>4-year, public, large</td>
<td>1.5 years</td>
<td>Hispanic/Latina</td>
<td>Ed.D.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The study and interview protocol were guided by a theoretical tenet of Jack Mezirow’s transformative learning theory - critical reflection. Mezirow’s (2004) theory suggests that critical reflection is a means to significant change in underlying assumptions, thereby transforming
perspectives that lead to a new understanding of self, others and the world. Participants were asked to reflect on their transition experiences, and any factors that were salient to them before, during and after the move to a new career role. As this study attended to women’s experiences in particular, reflections on being women were considered. In keeping with the methodology of narrative inquiry, which upholds that individuals are living out their stories, in relation to others while situated in broader contexts (e.g., historic, cultural), the author constructed profiles for participants and created a critical storyline that appeared to characterize the participants’ career choices (Caine, et al., 2013). In re-storying their professional transition reflections into synthesized themes, the author also took note of any other temporal, relational or contextual qualities of their experiences.

**Participant Profiles**

**Anna**

Anna is an executive director in student services administration at a large public university in the Midwestern United States. She is one and a half years into her transition from a senior director to the present executive role. The first half year of her tenure in this chief of division position was interim, until she was permanently offered the role. She has eight direct reports, and oversees a staff of 70 full-time professionals and 25 to 30 seasonal employees. She leads all activity under the umbrella of her unit, including human resources and fiscal management. Anna has spent her career at her present institution, having started in a junior role soon after graduating, and progressed into positions of increasing responsibility over time.

Anna’s career has been influenced by her independent disposition. She has a strong sense of self-sufficiency and reliance, and brings a problem-solving and diligent style to her work. She
is intrigued by new challenges, and can keep even-keeled, even in the face of difficult situations. The quote below is illustrative of Anna and her professional ethos:

I was really taught to be independent and do things on my own,… which I think has led to positive working styles because I just forge ahead…I think that's also taught me some resilience in terms of figuring out how to navigate obstacles and how to get through struggles, and how to be okay with painful situations.

**Julie**

Julie is a vice dean in academic administration at a large, public university in the Northeast. She has held this role for three years and was appointed to it after holding consecutive positions of growing responsibility in academic affairs. Julie began her career as a faculty member at the university, eventually earning tenure and taking on a leadership function within her department. She played an instrumental role in an institutional restructuring initiative, which led to an opportunity to serve directly under the individual who previously held her present position. Three years ago, her supervisor decided to return to a faculty role, and she was selected as the next head. Julie oversees more than 40 academic departments, as well as offices that serve undergraduates’ academic support needs. She liaises to several offices as the primary representative for the interests of the largest college within her university, and leads numerous educational initiatives in support of institutional growth.

Julie’s career direction and approach to her new position were squarely focused on enabling student success and facilitating decisions that had the best interests of students at heart. While her choices have taken her off the traditional faculty path, Julie has prioritized her
investment in improving the student experience at the university. The words below captured Julie’s sentiment on the topic:

I feel like I have the opportunity to make a difference in this position, both at the macro and micro level. Almost every day, I can go home and say I made the…experience somewhat better for at least one person.

**Kathryn**

Kathryn is a vice president in student services administration at a small, private Midwestern university, a position she has held for six months. Kathryn knew early on in her career (while in the process of obtaining her bachelor’s degree) that she wanted to pursue higher education administration as a vocation. To that end, she obtained a graduate degree in college student personnel and concurrently began to accumulate work experiences in student services. Over the course of more than 20 years, she stepped into positions of increasing responsibility at mid-size and small, private institutions. Kathryn was with her immediate past college for almost 17 years before relocating her family to take the vice president position. She currently leads a division of approximately 30 employees and oversees five functional areas within the department.

Both Kathryn’s professional strengths and her greatest source of strength is in relationships and relationship development. Throughout her career, she has actively leveraged internal and external networks to grow herself and others while meeting institutional goals. The way that Kathryn has handled the early months of her transition illuminate this particular value:

[W]hen I came in…I started meeting with everybody, mostly on an individual basis....I wanted to hear their own stories of, "How’d you get here? What keeps you here? What do
you need?" To me, that's how I begin to build those relationships, is understanding where people are coming from; and that's how I think I've always centered myself in any role that I've had.

Victoria

Victoria is an executive vice chancellor at a large, public university in the Northeast, and has held this cabinet-level position for six months. A key advisor to leadership, she is responsible for strategic planning and oversight of all administrative (non-academic) operations that support the student experience, accounting for hundreds of staff in service to thousands of students. Growing up in the southwestern United States, her first professional pursuits were in administration at her alma mater while she contemplated becoming a lawyer. Based on statistics showing how few African-Americans pursue education degrees over law degrees coupled with how influential her connection with the college dean of students had been, Victoria decided she would do better on an educational path. She earned her doctorate degree and continuously grew into positions of increased breadth in student services administration. While she deeply valued relationship-building and direct contact with students, Victoria wanted to affect policy change and development while having a broader impact in higher education. This desire led Victoria into several senior positions at other large universities from the west to east coasts before moving into her present role.

Victoria brought to her overall career and present position an empowered conviction in her aspiration and ability to act on her responsibilities and fulfill university goals. A self-described strategic risk-taker, she strove to make professional choices that would situate her in positions where she could make the most impact in service to the campus community.
What I found that has aided in my transition is an abiding belief that I can do the job. If we get inside of our head, and the doubt and the negative self-talk, it shows. If you believe you're the imposter, then imposter syndrome walks in the room before you do...Sometimes you just got to give yourself a good talking to and know that you can do the job and that you're ready for it.

Jane

Jane is a dean in student services administration at a two-year associate’s degree-granting institution in the Northeast. She began her career in social work before adapting her counseling skills to serve disadvantaged students at two two-year community colleges. After almost a decade, she was able to parlay her experience into a director-level role in a different department at the college. From there, she continued to augment her scope, which ultimately culminated in her obtaining the chief student affairs administrative role at the college. In this immediate past role, she had planning and operational responsibility for several divisions supporting students’ educational experience. After 20 years at the college, she began exploring new opportunities, but her search was accelerated by financial difficulties at the college and several leadership changes in quick succession. Jane attained her current role as dean at a larger two-year college, which she has held for the past eight months. She currently oversees fourteen departments under the student services umbrella for the institution.

Jane’s career has been influenced by a desire to do work with great humanity. As a professional, she believes in making decisions that accomplish the most for students, and admires leaders who demonstrate this genuine interest in helping and serving others. It is important to her to bring her authentic self to the role she occupies and lead in an environment
that embraces her style. Her articulation of early influences aided in characterizing her approach to her career:

[My parents] were social justice-minded people...they put their money where their mouth was. They practiced what they preached...They were always giving...they raised us to be, to give back, to appreciate what you have, be grateful, and that's what I do...I try to bring that side into the decisions we make about serving students...it just taught us [that]...actions speak louder than words. They walked the walk and talked the talk. Work hard and good things will come to you.

Ann

Ann is an assistant chancellor in student services administration at a medium-sized, public university located in northeastern United States. At the time of her interview, she was three weeks into her new role. In her current position, Ann has strategic and operational oversight over four major departments. She has experienced two significant transitions in the last two years. In 2017, Ann left an assistant provost position in student services administration to join the academic side of the university as part of a dean’s administration. After two years, the high level of student engagement that had attracted her to the position began to wane, and the vision of the school changed when the dean departed due to a terminal illness. The assistant chancellor position became available, and it was, in fact, an iteration of the earlier position Ann had held in the same department but with larger scope. This piqued her interest, so she applied and was successfully hired into the role.

Ann has 23 years of professional experience, 20 of which have been at her current institution, where she is highly respected in both academic and student service administration.
She believes strongly in maintaining honest, working relationships that build effective teams and meet goals. She has directed her career under the guiding principle of caring first and foremost for people and ensuring that she leads in a truthful and candid manner. She stated:

I believe in caring for people, genuinely caring for people...I don't think that we all need to love each other, but we definitely need to figure out how to get this work done...I took this not from leadership, but I took this from my mother. I will have gloves-off conversations...I need to be able to be very honest with you and you can be honest with me. I may not like it, but at least you and I know where we're coming from…

Ruby

Ruby is a vice provost at a large, public university in Midwestern United States. She is chief of her division and oversees four sizeable departments. She has held her current role for nearly two years after working at numerous institutions throughout the United States for the past 20 years. Ruby holds a doctorate in education and began her career in college access programming, which strengthened her commitment to student access and success early on. After serving in administration for several universities, transitions have been an important learning modality for her over the years, and have enabled her to grow in ways that stretched beyond title and role.

Ruby’s career is epitomized through her aspiration to lead at an institution that aligns authentically with her values. She has been astute in observing whether the principles of a university are threaded throughout the organization and acted upon at every level. Additionally, she built and steered her career towards cultures that are collaborative and supportive, where
people and offices view themselves in partnership with each other, mobilizing towards unified goals. Ruby said of her transition into her current role:

Those are values that are very important to me. I saw that alignment with what I hope to achieve in my career with the institution. Had I not seen that alignment, I probably wouldn't have come...I'd seen at other institutions where the highest levels might say one thing, but…it wasn't embedded in the actions of the rest of the institution.

**Key Themes**

The following key themes were developed from interview transcriptions based on the research question: *How do higher education women leaders describe and make sense of their career transitions?* The transcribed interviews resulted in 186 pages of documentation that the researcher analyzed using an interpretive, inductive approach. Analysis was an iterative process, whereby documents, field notes, transcribed interviews and interview recordings were reviewed and re-examined thoroughly and on an ongoing basis. At the completion of analysis for each participant, a cross-case comparison was conducted to identify common ideas and emergent themes across the narratives.

A set of six themes were derived from the analysis of the interviews and other data. They were:

1. Gender and Identity
2. Disposition and Character
3. Motivators for Change
4. Key Supporters
5. Adjustment and Adaptation
6. (Re)crystallization of Self.

Table 3 offers a summary of the themes and subthemes and notes the participants for whom each was relevant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Anna</th>
<th>Julie</th>
<th>Kathryn</th>
<th>Victoria</th>
<th>Jane</th>
<th>Ann</th>
<th>Ruby</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gender and identity</td>
<td>1.1 Being a woman</td>
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<td>1.2 Being a woman of color</td>
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<td>1.3 Being first generation</td>
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<td>1.4. Being spiritual</td>
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<td>1.5 Family upbringing</td>
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<td>2. Disposition and character</td>
<td>2.1 Open to opportunity, learning and growth</td>
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<td>2.2 Investment and diligence</td>
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<td>2.3 Independence and determination</td>
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<td>3. Motivators for change</td>
<td>3.1 Desire for growth and opportunity</td>
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<td>3.2 Desire to lead, influence and impact</td>
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<td>3.3. Practical considerations</td>
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<td>3.4 Organizational culture and conditions</td>
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<td>4. Key supporters</td>
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<td>5. Adjustment and adaptation</td>
<td>5.1 Trepidation and reservations about role</td>
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<td>5.2 Preparation for change</td>
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<td>5.3 Navigating culture</td>
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<td>5.4 Developing new networks and knowledge</td>
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<td>6. (Re)crystallization of self</td>
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The emergent themes captured the meaning and sense participants made of their career or work-role transition experiences. They offered an organized framework for understanding the reflection processes women leaders went through (or are currently experiencing) as they navigate professional change. It is important to note that while themes and subthemes are presented as
distinct items, in practice, thematic categories are interwoven and influence each other. This is the nature of life stories, as they are lived out over time, in relationship to others, and in specific contextual conditions. Additionally, while a career transition can be regarded as a singular, point-in-time life event, participants demonstrated how earlier life experiences, concurrent events and future expectations impacted how they reflected upon and experienced their present transitions. The next sections examine each theme in more depth and how themes were supported and accentuated through participants’ narratives.

**The Transition Experience**

The timeframe for when women leaders in the study formally transitioned to their new roles ranged from three weeks to three years. How participants’ career or work-role transition narratives unfolded had some temporal similarities, which were illuminated in the themes that emerged and in how the author chose to organize them in this chapter. While the interview protocol was designed to explore interviewees’ professional change over an approximate pre-, mid-, and post-transition timeline, the dialogue was flexible enough such that participants could jump forwards and backwards in time to reference significant moments, points, thoughts or contexts that were salient to their personal narratives. Nonetheless, a likeness was observed across experiences in how transitions unfolded, regardless of when the formal transfer from one position to the next took place.

First, identity variables (1. gender and identity) and career-oriented traits (2. disposition and character) cut across all the other themes in terms of their influence on the narrative, participants’ willingness to change, approach to a professional move, and reflections on their transition experience. Participants could point to either an acute or gradual feeling, thought, event, experience or other poignant professional or personal consideration while employed in
their former roles that motivated their action to change (3. motivators for change). Assistance and encouragement from colleagues, supervisors, friends and/or family (4. key supporters) wrapped around the entire transition experience and was continuously leveraged. Most could also speak specifically to preparatory actions, challenges, feelings and perceptions related to a period of adjustment that spanned from the months leading up to the change, to the formal departure from and start of a new position, to the present day state of occupation in their current roles. The majority of participants articulated that they were still in the midst of acclimating to their position (5. adjustment and adaptation). Additionally, regardless of when they stepped into their new role, all participants could stipulate a take-away or new knowledge that gelled for them as a result of their transitions. This pointed to an increased understanding about themselves, their abilities, their leadership and/or their values (6. (re)crystallization of self). For most, this realization and learning process was still underway.

1. Gender and Identity

All participants in the study pointed to their identity as a woman along with a number of other identity variables as impactful to their present or past career transitions or occupational pathways. Being a woman was viewed as both a source of strength and, at times, a challenge in terms of how they navigated organizational environments or how others regarded their professional capacities. Closely related to being a woman was identifying as a woman of color, which for Victoria, Ann and Ruby, came with specific trials and challenges in the workplace. For five out of the seven participants, having been a first generation college student was a significant part of their unique selves that connected to character assets, which enabled them to arrive at their current career success. Likewise, all participants referenced early family life and upbringing
as a force behind their career drive and achievement. The gender and identity theme and its subthemes are further explored in the following sections.

**Subtheme 1.1 Being a woman.** For each participant, reflecting on being a woman, a female professional and a leader in their field situated in their newest role helped them connect with earlier career choices they had made, how they went about approaching their transition, or their perceived ability to adapt to the new position or organization’s culture.

Past experiences in professional environments that were not particularly welcoming to women affected some interviewees’ choices about the type of culture they sought out, intended to build, or how they maneuvered the culture in their current environment. For Julie and Jane, earlier experiences with teams or leaders who were dismissive or exclusionary of women affected their present-day career choices, the environments they created for their teams, as well as the professional cultures they avoided. For example, Jane’s prior experience with a senior leader who seemed to purposely limit women’s participation was one influencer in her decision to make a change from her previous employer, and sensitized her to behaviors that minimized women’s growth:

He didn't care for strong women…I know he did not care for strong women, and you could tell: he only kept, at any time, one strong woman, anywhere in his leadership. And that was totally obvious, and I couldn't…that was tough for me.

Early career experiences taught Victoria that women are often required to ‘read’ the culture, perhaps more adeptly than their male counterparts. Speaking about this in the context of her current role, her comments suggested that women must approach any given culture with more care and cunning to effectively work within it:
Effective leaders, in particular, women...we have to see, okay, what is the culture? And we have to adapt to it to some degree. Then we have to, for me, figure out how to influence it...And then bring who I am to the space. Undoubtedly, I'm a Black woman. I'm proud of my heritage...If you look around my office, you see images that look like me...But this is my little space of me. This is me bringing my whole self here. My little sign over there, "Well behaved women rarely make history." That's me being the woman I am and finding a way to influence a culture in some positive ways.

The above reflection relates to another challenge several participants cited: communicating as women leaders, being heard, and what constitutes acceptable expression. Participants intimated that men have more latitude in conveying their thoughts and feelings, while the boundaries within which women may express themselves are narrower. This was described as an obstacle in the context of taking on a new role, as it made it more difficult to establish oneself as an expert or authority in a new environment. It was suggested, too, that what appears to be highly valued in a team dialogue is freely offering opinions, even if not fully fleshed out. Yet, if women in leadership roles are compelled to or elect to think more thoroughly before speaking, then their reserved demeanor can come across as lacking a viewpoint. In an understated manner, Victoria made note of this concern:

I also think there's a whole gender dynamic as well... where women tend to, or at least I do...I want to listen before I speak, and I want to be heard when I have something to share, as opposed to just thinking out loud as if everything is a Socratic seminar...

In Jane’s straightforward example, she shared that expressing oneself in ways that fulfill the gendered stereotype of how women behave, such as crying, comes with punishing consequences
for women in professional environments. When prompted to explain how a boss might perceive a female colleague or supervisee who became upset, she stated:

We can't make decisions, can't make difficult decisions. Gets her feelings hurt a lot. That it's personal, not professional…she's less of a professional.

Several participants spoke about the challenge of proving that they deserve the position they occupy. A shared feeling among many of the interviewees was that women leaders are not given the benefit of the doubt, despite years of demonstrated experience and earned respect in their fields, which was especially challenging at the outset of a transition. Ruby shared:

I think because I'm seen, first, as a small woman, which is easily dismissed. Because I come off as nice, which is also easily dismissed. I think there are a lot of very quick assumptions…I have been continually told as people get to know me: Wow, I'm just so impressed by the fact that you can speak in a room and get people's attention….W]hy did you assume I couldn't?]...I think it is that presumption that you're a woman. You don't know as much…Having to get over that hurdle…and then achieving the place at the table.

Ruby further relayed a recent experience in a meeting with 20 people about space and signage. For Ruby, who identifies as Latina and noted her petite stature in the above excerpt, it was salient that the other attendees in the room were a homogenous group of white men who worked in construction. She recalled thinking:

...[T]here is really no woman in this room other than me. All the men had this look on their face like: Why are you here? That realization of okay, it's going to take me a few
minutes to get them to recognize that I have something that contributes to this conversation.

Victoria also acknowledged that this issue exists, but imparted that she no longer engages in defending her right to be in her role. Instead, she wants her actions on behalf of her institution to tell the story:

…women are often in a position of feeling like we have to explain ourselves or recite our credentials and, you know, we're not pledging a sorority here. I'm a leader so I'm trying to help impact the organization and move toward achieving those goals. I have moved beyond that need to explain why I'm worthy.

Nonetheless, some participants were actively grappling with situations during their transitions that readily spoke to this concern. Despite her title and notable expertise in her arena, Ruby shared an in-the-moment experience:

It really comes down to a colleague always talking over the top of me in every meeting. Taking my work and then man-splaining my work away every time he has the opportunity…Times when he does do a little bit of the arrogant male in the room having to talk down to this young woman who doesn't belong in the room kind of approach that is explaining everything… These are the reasons why I am here, because I do understand the data. I understand all of these elements, and I don't need you to explain what I'm already working on explaining…I've tried…the kind of ‘kill him with kindness’ approach. Leave no question about my ability to be knowledgeable in his face as a gap, so that people know when he's not there that I'm completely knowledgeable and have the data and have the information…so that is not a matter of he's trying to make up a gap to me.
Several women communicated that they were not sure whether their male counterparts entering a new position would ever experience as much self-doubt or questions about their preparedness as much as they did as women. Most believed that a man would not be socialized to worry as deeply about his gaps in knowledge, whether he would be accepted by others, or could meet the expectations placed in front of him. This relates closely to the notion presented above, where women professionals are tasked with proving they deserve the role they have achieved, in spite of having already earned it. Ruby stated:

[W]hat I've seen of most men, whether they have a knowledge gap or not….they tend to believe, it's okay, I'll cover it. I've got this. It's not a problem. Whatever happens, I'll be fine.

Similarly, Anna speculated that professionals who are men would not concern themselves as much with whether they and their working style would be welcomed by a new team.

I just didn't know how they would be okay with or not okay with my style, which is again completely different than my predecessors. So I had that concern too, which I think is just a very female concern. I mean I can't imagine like a male coming in and thinking, "Oh I hope they're okay with me."

Importantly, several participants remarked that they felt a sea-change was underway and that more women in the field were proactively making strides to support each other, celebrate each other, and form networks that recognizes the unique experiences they have as women leaders. Of this evolution, Kathryn noted:

I feel like there's more…and maybe it’s just technology, is helping to cultivate it differently than it has happened in the past, but I feel like there's definitely more…just recognition and support of the things we go through that are unique to us as women.
Along similar lines, Ruby also stated:

This is kind of a more longitudinal thought about being a female who's transitioning. I would say, as I was younger in my career, I could not look to women to help me…It's very different now. I feel like I am surrounded by women, both in this profession and even largely at this university, that I can work with, I can look to. There seems to be somewhat of a demographic shift of the women we do see who are now in leadership roles. Their willingness and belief in other women. I think there was a generational gap, where the women who got to the top weren't there to help other women also get there. It seems to be changing…To know that you can have that connection with another woman in an authoritative position, who you can be transparent with. I hope that we're changing the culture for other women coming behind us. I really do.

Indeed, in the last year, several prominent professional associations in higher education had kicked off new special interest groups to convene women, and identify their particular challenges and needs. Informal networks through social media have also sprung up to enable women leaders to find each other, create a system of support and inspiration, and ask questions in a safe, reassuring environment.

**Sub-theme 1.2 Being a woman of color.** Three participants identified as women of color. Victoria and Ann are African-American women, and Ruby is multi-racial and identifies as Latina. For these women, being people of color meant facing additional challenges or reflecting in distinct ways about their decisions or actions. For Ruby, gaining a sense of belonging at her new institution was difficult in that she is among a small number of people of color on campus. Her multi-racial roots also mean that, phenotypically, it is not apparent what racial or ethnic
group she belongs to, which has even made connecting with others with whom she shares an identity an obstacle. She contemplated:

The transition for me is always a little hard. This is a little less about being a woman and a little bit more about being multiracial is nobody can put you in a box. They don't really know which box you belong in. Nobody really reaches out to help you, because they don't really know…Do you belong to us? Should we welcome you?...You can always see in people the attempt to try and figure out who you are and whether you belong or don't belong all of the time as people are trying to figure out how you fit within what they see as the different pockets of the organization...It's something I've lived with my whole life, but it can be difficult sometimes.

Ann experienced great dissonance in making the decision to transition to a position that would decrease her salary, knowing that women struggle for wage equity, and that African-American women are subject to worse pay inequities. Ann ultimately decided not to allow compensation to define her value, when she believed strongly that the role was right for her. She stated:

I think for me the other thing my flesh was struggling with: was as a woman, you were giving up salary…[but], I felt like this is where I want to be and I need to be in this time of my life...I talked to some of my girlfriends who have very high level executive positions in corporate, and they thought I was out of my loving mind. Are you kidding me? You are a Black woman in higher education and you are giving up money? You're giving up your salary, your worth? I'm like that doesn't even measure my worth. That is just what I use to pay my bills. That doesn't measure my worth, because I know I'm worth more than that.
Victoria discussed the added challenge of communicating as an African-American in the face of pejorative stereotypes such as the ‘angry Black woman’:

[A]s a woman of color, I think that there's always a struggle for me to effectively communicate and to be heard the way that I want to be heard…I think I'm an honest communicator and I think when people look at me, it is very clear that I'm a woman, and that I'm a Black woman…I also think that some of those perceptions and biases play into things...Please don't tell me you don't see color. Cause you actually do….we see color...So seeing those things, acknowledging those differences, doesn't mean that we should treat each other differently.

Victoria spoke of how her words can be filtered by others through these biased assumptions and having to be exceptionally mindful in her expressions. These circumstances presented added obstacles for her and the other women leaders of color who may be unfairly dismissed and must work more intentionally to be taken seriously.

**Sub-theme 1.3 Being first generation.** Five out of the seven participants were the first generation in their family to attend college. For some interviewees, they credited their independence and strong work ethic to being first generation; for others, being the first to matriculate to college allowed them to identify more purposefully with their work. Both Julie and Kathryn expressed parallel points about their self-sufficient nature in relation to being first generation:

Julie: …I was not born into an intellectual family. I am first generation...I've done a lot on my own...I don't just assume that I should be here and I'm in charge...I guess I do kind
of feel like I need to earn it…I probably do throw myself into things more than I would absolutely have to…

Kathryn: I think my career path…was somewhat influenced by the fact that I was a first generation college student and my parents were not equipped. They were supportive, they just weren't equipped to assist me… I always just had to figure things out…I just always would be the one willing to do the work to compensate for what I didn't know...I think in some ways that helped me be a curious person or be willing to do the work which probably helps, has helped in my career.

Among other factors, Ann found that her identity as a first generation student facilitated her connection with the mission of the institution, the community in which it is situated, and the student body she supported:

The transition…the first time. I identified with being first generation, with being from [this city], with being of color. I will tell you that because of the strategic mission and vision, it made it very easy for me to develop...So it made it very easy for me to transition into my role going into the community, educating folks around [the University]…

Most of the participants tied being first generation to their choice of career and passion for higher education, as well as to forging the characteristics that enabled them to reach the heights in their profession that they now found themselves in.

Sub-theme 1.4 Being spiritual. While spirituality was an aspect of identity that was prominent for just two of the participants, it was nonetheless a strong component of their sense of self and is therefore included in the analyses. For Ann, her spirituality helped her grapple with
the decision to take on the new role for lower pay. Ultimately, her spirituality allowed her to be comfortable with her decision:

For me, I have never taken a position because of money. I have always said that it will come. I just need to love what I'm doing...I'm a very spiritual person, so for me, I say the Holy Spirit spoke to me and I heard clear as day, first thought in my mind was, you can't serve two masters. To me, that was you are either going to serve me, being God, or you're going to serve the money...So, I came back to...a bigger job making less money...For me,...I would rather have a stronger and better relationship with my Creator and be happy, versus choosing another route...I believe that this is the route that I will be happiest in, despite the finances, but I really do believe that this was the better decision to make.

Similarly, for Victoria, her spirituality helped to avow the position she now holds and take ownership of it:

You know I pray a lot. It's just my own kind of spiritual stuff and I have this real kind of spiritual belief that what's for me, is for me. I actually tell myself...and I'll tell other people who I know are believers: I've been appointed and anointed. If you've got a problem, take it up with Jesus. I didn't put myself here so this is where I'm supposed to be and I walk with that belief. That I've been appointed, I've been anointed...I think a big part of it is defining your own narrative and not letting people define it for you.

Both Ann and Victoria affirmed a powerful spirituality from which they derived a strength that supported their overall career direction and their most recent professional change.
**Sub-theme 1.5 Family upbringing.** Every participant in the study cited early familial influence as impactful to their career pathways. For most of the women, the frequently stated outcome of their upbringing was positive character development, even if the positive effects came as a result of a lack of support from their families. Ruby said of her decision to attend college:

I'd say she [maternal grandmother] was probably the most influence…She might have had an elementary education, but that was it. She came from a very large ranching family…The girls weren't allowed to go to school, because they needed to go to work...She would tell me all the time, I never remember a day that didn't pass where she didn't say, you have to go to school and you have to get good grades…It was just really drilled into us...The expectation is, you have what I never had, and you need to take advantage of it...In this case, home really expected this is why you're here, this is what you're supposed to do.

Victoria shared a comparable experience about her early home life:

But, there was always this value. This encouragement. Always an expectation that I do well in school…I think that that's shaped a lot of how I kind of pursued education. I have to tell you, growing up with parents and grandparents who would always say, "Education is the key." I heard that all the time...As I made meaning of that when I got older, I understood that if I got an education, then I could do what I wanted to do. There was always an emphasis on working and getting a good job.
Ann noted the influence her mother had on how she approaches difficult situations with her team, colleagues or supervisors. Having “gloves-off” conversations that are truthful and open was a tactic she took from her mother’s manner of communicating.

My mother is a very direct person. My house we loved boxing, so it came from the boxing influence...Gloves off meant no protection...When you get hit, it’s going to hurt...I need to tell you something that's going to hurt you...so I need you to take off your padding, take off your tape, and let's just have the conversation that is difficult...It was my mom trying to have gloves-off conversations with us...Because she loved me, it was hard...[W]hen I worked with students, instead of saying gloves off...I would say, "Look, I'm going to give you some tough love."...[W]ith students, I use the phrase tough love; with the team members, I use gloves off...I have allowed them to have gloves-off conversations with me...I said, "Look, if I'm doing something, if you see something, you need to pull my coattail and say, 'We're having a gloves-off conversation,' and it may hurt but I need to hear it."

Overall, interviewees believed that their families’ influences permitted them to develop the strengths that led them to the levels they advanced to in their careers.

2. Disposition and Character

The disposition and character theme captures the traits and orientations that many women in the study had in common, and to which they linked their career growth and ability to achieve prominence in their respective fields. Participants often referenced an openness and willingness to try new opportunities. Communicating this directly or indirectly to past and present superiors was a strategy that led them to securing their most recent leadership role. Interviewees also
shared that they had always fulfilled their duties and embraced their positions with persistence, diligence and commitment. A strong sense of independence and resolve typified their approach to their careers and professional opportunities.

Sub-theme 2.1 Open to opportunity, learning and growth. Most of the participants (Anna, Julie, Kathryn, Victoria and Ruby) credited a good deal of their career success to an orientation towards opportunity and their willingness to take on more responsibility or new challenges in order to grow. Interestingly, while these character assets seemed powerfully embedded in their personalities and approach to work, some women expressed surprise at having been tapped or recognized for leadership roles earlier on in their careers. For example, Anna noted that she was intentional in conveying that she was open to opportunity:

I made myself very clear that I was looking for a change or I was looking for something new and even if something new was added on to the things that I already had, I made it something new.

Yet, at the same time, Anna voiced wonder about being granted opportunities:

On the one hand, I'm very blessed because it means…people respect and like the work that I do. But it almost feels a little bizarre because I've never really asked for any of the positions that I have; I've just been open to opportunity and that opportunity has been given to me.

Julie relayed a similar sentiment:
From there, I continued to have opportunities to do more of that by moving up in this position. I didn't really set out to do that. I was quite surprised that [he] asked me to take on this position.

On the other hand, Victoria remembered being deliberate in her orientation towards work:

What is it that's going to stimulate me as a professional and help me to grow? One of the things that I've just tried to do is just be open to trying something new. To getting out of my comfort zone. Because I think if I get too comfortable, I'm not growing.

Ruby acknowledged that while undertaking novel responsibilities can be daunting, an inclination towards doing so had driven her career in a positive direction:

Not always planned, but sometimes there were opportunities that came up that I may not have been looking for at the time. Especially with my move here to [current institution]. I wasn't necessarily looking at leaving…I can't always say that I'm terribly comfortable with newness and new challenges, but I think the mentality that I have to be ready and try them at least is what has led to this.

Overall, participants recalled that a consistent receptiveness to new professional challenges, even when not proactively seeking opportunities, had helped set them on a path to career advancement and achievement.

Sub-theme 2.2 Investment and diligence. While all participants in one way or another conveyed a hard-working spirit, Anna, Julie, Kathryn and Jane expressed this disposition most specifically in relation to their transition narratives. As relayed above, Jane was heavily influenced by her parents’ work ethic and commitment to helping others:
My father was a pediatrician, and my mother was a nurse...They were social justice-minded people. Always - even raising 12 children, involved in PTA and school board, and they were Catholic...they put their money where their mouth was. They practiced what they preached...[My father]…taught us all to work hard…Work hard and good things will come to you. Work hard and give back to others.

Anna acknowledged her highly productive nature as an asset: “I think that I am someone who has incredible capacity to produce work. I can produce a lot in a fairly short period of time and I’ve always been that way.” In the same vein, Julie illustrated her productivity in the context of how she, as a woman, tackles her work:

There's a great cartoon...It's something like, you ask the husband to get the laundry, and he walks by the coffee table, and there's all kinds of stuff on it, and he goes and gets the laundry and sits back down. Whereas if we do it, we walk by the coffee table, we start putting all that stuff away, and get the laundry, and don’t sit down until two hours later…I probably bring some of that to the job, too...I try to get a lot done. When I see something, I try to start fixing it.

**Sub-theme 2.3 Independence and self-determination.** Each of the participants demonstrated self-sufficiency and fortitude, but several (Anna, Kathryn, Jane, Victoria, Ruby) readily recognized these character qualities as ones that set them on an upwardly mobile track to their most recent work-role transition. Three illuminating examples from the participants’ stories came from Victoria, Anna and Jane. Victoria spoke of how the decision to leave home for college against her family’s initial wishes was critical to developing her sense of independence:
The prevailing thought was, get a good job, but stay close to home. My father was very suspicious of white folks because he had grown up in a time, and in a place where the world was very different, and just by being Black, got you beat, arrested, all those things...He did not want us to go away anywhere because of his fear...It took my teachers talking to him…My math teacher [was] an African American male, came and talked to my dad and said, "Really, it will be okay. You need to let her go. I promise, if you do this, she's going to be okay." If they had not done that, I would have went to [local college]. I probably would have finished but maybe I would have stopped and worked for a while…But that would have kind of been it.

Anna was raised on a farm, where hard work was the expectation and norm. Of how this manifested into her highly autonomous and dedicated disposition, she stated:

I grew up on a farm, certainly with the ethics of being a really hard worker. And, I work until the work is done, and I think that was certainly ingrained in me from my family, from my dad in particular…in the way that I was raised, I was really taught to be independent and do things on my own and be able to figure out things on my own, which I think has led to positive working styles because I just forge ahead…I am very high on the resiliency scale, and nothing much gets to me. And, I think that impacts a transition positively, maybe more than anything because I really do let things go, and let things roll off my back.

As one of twelve children with active, civically engaged parents, Jane was expected to learn how to rely on herself, as well as how to aid her parents with the younger children. For ten years of
her youth, she also went away for long stretches in the summer, where she acquired important skills that enabled her independent-mindedness:

[M]y parents raised strong children, and especially strong women. My brothers are strong, too, but the women...I used to have to go to summer camp for eight weeks from age six to 16. Can you imagine sending your six-year-old away for two months? It really taught me how to be independent. Everything was a team, you're in a team with the other kids in your cabin, and a counselor, and my sisters were the only people I knew...we were raised to be strong, independent women.

By and large, the women commonly credited influential aspects of their upbringing for solidifying their do-it-yourself mentality and resolve.

3. Motivators for Change

The motivators for change theme captured the rationale participants had for the occupational transitions they undertook. Reasons gleaned from their reflections ranged from a yearning to expand professionally to practical concerns such as family and finances to particular organizational circumstances that were the impetus to change.

Sub-theme 3.1 Desire for growth and opportunity. A desire for growth, often coupled with being situated in an environment that could not offer opportunity at the time they were seeking to take on new challenges, was expressed by several participants as the situation that prompted their transition. The chance to gain expertise in novel functional areas was an important motivator for some participants. Of her return to the same department but with a magnified role, Ann relayed that:
This role is different than when I was here before… The other thing that was attractive to me was that there is responsibility for [three new functional areas]… not only will I get to learn more about [my field], but learn about all… services and how they operate… it was expanding my portfolio… I am going back to a position that is now bigger, broader, and I can get my hands in a little bit of everything.

Jane indicated her readiness to move on and how her former institution did not provide an environment that helped her advance in both knowledge and leadership, nor did her previous position test her skills:

I had been looking. I was ready to leave… I knew I still had a lot more learning, growing to do… I wasn't growing as much as I wanted to. And I had to look outside the institution for professional development. So I knew it was time to spread my wings… I needed a change in leadership. And I needed a bigger challenge within my own position.

Similarly, when Victoria was contacted about the role that she now occupies, she indicated that her job at the time had become stagnant, and it was time to expand her horizons:

I think when the opportunity came to move to this role, I had been in my job for five years. I loved it... Thinking about leaving to me: I thought it's been a really good run, and it's not necessarily that I want to leave, but I also know you should leave when things are good and you're on top… I was at the point where I thought, "Okay, how do I make this new every day? And how do I continue to learn and to challenge myself?" It can't just be around whatever challenge of the day that students are upset about. What is it that's going to stimulate me as a professional and help me to grow?
For the majority of the participants, seeking increased responsibility was a potent motivator for a change.

**Sub-theme 3.2 Desire to lead, influence and impact.** Most women leaders communicated a desire to broaden their impact on the institution through obtaining a position of greater influence. For example, Ruby was attracted to the big picture and complex problems she would have the opportunity to handle in a role reporting directly to the institution’s chief academic officer. She perceived the strategic outcomes and solutions of the new position as facilitating better and greater change at her university. Kathryn initially wrestled with taking on a position that was highly visible internally and externally. Ultimately, she decided that visibility was a fair price for the ability to direct her institution:

> I realized that, basically, you're exposed no matter where you are; that you take risks working in this industry now…that if I'm going to have that level of exposure, [I] might as well have the role and the ability to create situations…I really enjoy the ability that [my field] has to influence the overall health and what happens at the university.

Likewise, Julie saw the potential in her present position to orient the academic mission of her college towards student success, a purpose to which she feels a deep connection:

> I really have taken this office and…oriented it towards student success. That's a strong focus of what we're doing. It always contributed to that…but I've made it that much more front and center. So, that's a strategic guide and the underlying reason for most of the things I do.

Some of them wanted to affect the policy, the mission or the culture of a department or university, while others longed for more control over day-to-day operations.
Sub-theme 3.3 Practical considerations. While specifically addressed by only a minority of participants (Kathryn and Ruby) in the context of motivating a professional change, familial and financial concerns were significant factors to those individuals. Ruby took on a role that moved her from the Midwest to the West Coast, and her cost of living rose exponentially. This had a negative impact on her lifestyle, which caused personal distress. This prompted her to seek out new opportunities in areas of the country that would be more financially manageable, which eventually brought her back to Midwestern U.S. She stated:

The cost of living is just so much better here…The ability to be able to afford to live and not be worrying about [the] rising cost of living all the time kind of allows you to focus more on the things that matter, as opposed to trying to worry about what's coming over the horizon, which is always the case out in [former state]…That's very practical.

Kathryn was concerned about both financial and family needs. She recalled:

Obviously, it's a bigger jump in pay between the level I was at and this level…that's one of the bigger jumps, I think, in roles, and so financially it was attractive, especially given my husband's career trajectory…But it was also a matter of timing. My daughter is in eighth grade right now, and I was like, I have to do this before she starts high school.

As the primary source of income for her family, and opportunity to have greater compensation with a more senior role were appealing. Equally important, however, was the timing of her transition. With three children, and one about to enter high school, Kathryn was highly motivated to make a transition before this occurred for her eldest child.

Sub-theme 3.4 Organizational culture and conditions. For many participants, attributes of the organizational climate in their former role or institution, and/or particular
circumstances within their departments prompted them to search for new professional opportunities. Of the distinct cultures Ruby found from her former to current employer that were an impetus for her transition, she noted:

Knowing that the work in the Midwest was just so collegial, and that the environment was so vastly more supportive than what I had found [on the West Coast] made me look at the position where I might not have otherwise been looking to leave…I saw a culture here which was just more welcoming and inviting. Knowing that I would be surrounded by a team and colleagues who embraced not only a new person, but also invites them to challenge them to do something new…Think about things differently. It's a rewarding environment to be in.

Anna was also motivated to seek out opportunities to try out the effectiveness of her leadership style over that of a former supervisor:

I always was looking for a different management style…I was interested in the test-driving of different management styles of people, because I thought well certainly there must be somebody else who's a better manager.

On the other hand, some participants faced unique conditions within their higher education environments that were momentous enough to drive a desire to change. Jane’s two-year community college had been under substantial strain that led to presidential turnover, widespread leadership change, and the likelihood of a merger and layoffs. She recalled:

[A] lack of consistency in the leaders…I had lost faith in the leadership and wanted something different. So that's why I started to look…I came back from [a meeting with the] assistant vice president, where [they] told me that I needed a plan B because of the
merger. My position would have been redundant…There was nothing, there was no communication, nobody knew what was going on…we all felt we were losing our jobs that month…I was ready to move on anyway…this helped me just take that next step. It was a good enough reason, and I made out financially very, very, very well…and I’m growing again. It was worth it.

Kathryn observed that her former boss would not move on for another four to five years, but she was ready to advance her career. The situation was such that if she wanted to move up, she needed to move on. Ann had initially been drawn to her former role in academic affairs by the vision of the dean to whom she reported. Her student-centric values were aligned with the direction the dean hoped to lead the organization. Unfortunately, her dean fell ill and passed away. Amidst her sorrow over the loss of a mentor, she recognized that the vision for the position under new leadership was unlikely to come to fruition; thus, she decided to seek a change.

4. Key Supporters

Every participant in the study reflected on people who had influenced their professional direction or were critically supportive of their career advancement and present transition experience. They described key supporters ranging from friends or colleagues, to aspirational role models, to mentors who had groomed them, to those who had actively advocated on their behalf, to the staff they inherited after stepping into their current position. Many were models or advocates early on in their personal, educational or professional lives. Others had mentors who eventually became colleagues and who still served as sounding boards and advisors today. Interviewees had both instrumental women and men supporters, but most felt strongly about
‘paying it forward’ to support more women advancing in their careers and becoming leaders. All participants acknowledged their supporters as having some measure of impact on their ability to make a successful transition.

Ruby recalled a college advisor who now occupies a position of leadership in her same field, and the significant part the mentor, now her colleague and friend, has played in guiding her career, including her most recent transition:

I think one of the most important relationships I have goes back a long way. My college academic advisor, who I got to know very early on…throughout my career he has been the person that I turn to and say: Is this something that makes sense? What do you think? You know me. You know my work. Do you see what my skill sets are, what my interests are, and who I am as a person…as aligning with what you know of this organization, of this institution and the role of this institution? That individual has, at times, said, ‘No, absolutely not. I would not do that. That's not the right fit for you.’…Even in coming here…when you’re new to the role, it’s just been so incredibly helpful to me to have that person you can call who you know and trust on a level that they've known you for so long.

For Anna, the voices of professional peers and friends offering encouragement and validating that she could bring her own style to the position, and thereby make it her own, was critical to building her confidence to undertake her new position:

Every single person would tell me that they thought I would be great at this role, because I wasn't so hungry for it, because I had an attitude that was more of a team attitude as
opposed to a me attitude. And I think that that helped me see the role differently and see myself in the role differently.

Anna also acknowledged that the substantial support from her new team bolstered her faith that she would flourish in the role while helping her division and the university thrive.

I think that the people on my leadership team were really all in. There was not one person who I felt like was trying to…stand in my way…They were ready to give me advice if I asked for it. They were ready to support me in everything, and they were ready to tell me when they thought I was doing something wrong. And, so, I think that I couldn't have asked for a better group of people to help me on my way there.

For Kathryn, building meaningful relationships is a hallmark of her career and essential to her ability to thrive. In departing from her previous role, she left behind a network that became personally and professionally profound and intertwined. Her new team accepting and backing her up was key to her successful transition. She recalled the moment when she realized she had their support, and became visibly emotional when speaking about it:

A couple months in, [staff member] said to me…, "It's like we've worked together forever."...And I was like, "Oh my God, that's the best compliment you could ever give me."...The women that I left at [Prior University], my gosh, they were my sisters…So...
Oh gosh, sorry [tears up]...we just kind of grew up together, we had our kids together, we got married, we had all these other life experiences together too.

When Julie first transitioned from the academy to administration, she remembered how women in the department would help each other. She was a single parent, raising a daughter on her own. She described a culture where, at the time, leaving the office to attend to her childcare
responsibilities would have opened her up to questions about her commitment to her work. In that office, a sign that one was present and working at their desk was if their door was open.

Sometimes when I was out, because my daughter was sick or whatever, she'd just go open my door anyway...I had a colleague right across the hall who also had a young child...but he was male, and he could walk out and say, "I have to go take care of [my child]. He has a fever. I have to pick him up from school". And everybody said, "What a great father." If I had done the same thing, they would've said, "Does she have her priorities straight?"

Anna described the significance of witnessing women in, and being surrounded by, other women in leadership roles. The majority of staff in her superior’s cabinet are women:

[My boss is the vice provost, and his entire cabinet is made up of very strong-willed women...We have very different personalities, but we're all very similar in that way, and so I think that has made the transition from a leadership role outside of the office a little easier, because it's just ‘of course this is who would be in the role’.

The proximity of others who share her gender has provided comfort and a sense of inclusiveness, while making her new responsibilities seem less intimidating.

5. Adjustment and Adaptation

All participants reflected on a process of adjustment and adaptation as they moved from one position to the next and, in some cases, one university to the next. Common sub-themes that arose were feelings and thoughts of trepidation, anxiety, and apprehension about their abilities, or their fit for the role or institution. Some women undertook concrete steps to prepare for the
new position, at times to counteract their self-doubt or reservations. Many participants echoed each other’s sentiments about their greatest transition challenges thus far – navigating a different culture, as well as cultivating effective networks and acquiring new knowledge.

**Sub-theme 5.1 Trepidation and reservations about role.** All participants spoke honestly about their fears, angst, self-doubt and questions about whether their transition would work out well. Words and phrases used during their interviews included ‘trepidation’, ‘anxiety’ and ‘imposter syndrome’. The following excerpts from participants’ interviews illustrate this sub-theme:

Anna: [F]irst, when I was just asked to do this as an interim, I thought, "Well I can do an interim; I can keep the train running." And, then…my boss just said, "I really want you to have this job, we're not going to do a search, you can have the job." I felt all sorts of ways about that. I felt trepidation because I don't think that's the way a process should work…I felt self-doubt… I found ways to work through those [feelings] such as working I think extra hard, to make sure that people knew that I knew what was going on in their business…I've been really mindful about my transition and I don't know if that's because I'm a woman or because that's who I am as a person, maybe it's a little bit of both…I, as many women do, felt more self-doubt then maybe a man might feel. (I'm stereotyping, gender typing a little bit.)

Victoria: I also knew that my appointment would be ... some people would meet it with happiness, and others with cynicism and a critique, right? So, I had to woman up and say, "Okay, and I'm going to deal with all that, and that's okay." I think that that's one of the challenges of leadership. It's the bittersweet piece of saying: You may be selected, people
may want you for a position, and even when people want you, there will always be critiques. That happens every day. That's part of leadership. You can't allow that to derail you or your sense of self.

Jane: Especially as a woman, what do they say, imposter syndrome? I knew that I was coming in with some areas of weakness…People call me Dean here. That means nothing to me, but…people put a level of power to that. It's a way different environment. So just feeling like I could have my own style, that's genuine to me, but also transition that to a new environment, where maybe I don't wear khakis every day. But I don't wear suit jackets, either…Trying to find a balance.

Ruby: Stepping…into a vice provost role…You do have to think through how am I going to approach work that I'm not an expert at…Knowing that if you suffer from imposter syndrome anyway, you're always questioning yourself anyhow. There's a lot of trepidation in that. How do you come to the table in a way that looks like you can lead even when you have gaps in knowledge? You try to get what the general principles are in a way that you can intelligently participate in conversations, but don't have to be the expert in the room…Knowing your expectations are high. Knowing you have, no matter who you are and what you're stepping into, you have a knowledge gap you've got to fill. To me, there's always going be some trepidation, because you're self-analyzing: Okay, how quickly can I get there? What do I have to do to get there? Am I going to be able to do this? Consecutively return on all those expectations that are laid out in front of me.

Several participants noted a sense of not belonging, a sharp awareness of areas where they were professionally inexperienced, or of being un-deserving of the opportunity. Many also expressed a
heightened concern for how well-received they would be by others on the new team or within the university. However, all the women had tactics for overcoming those thoughts and feelings. Some drew on internal strengths such as empowering self-talk to buoy their confidence, while others relied on their expertise, or sought external sources of support such as mentors, or professional resources such as books.

**Sub-theme 5.2 Preparation for change.** Several participants expressed feeling prepared by previous experiences for their role transition. Victoria believed prior roles trained her well for how her career took shape. Similarly, Anna understood the expectations placed on her because she had occupied most roles leading up to her present position:

[I]n transitioning to this role, I actually found it...a much easier transition I think because I knew what was expected of me already. I had already served in most of the capacities.

Other participants leveraged their networks and had conversations with those who were ‘in the know’ about the goings-on at their future university. For example, because Ruby would be moving to an institution that was in the same athletic conference as a previous employer, she had well established relationships:

I did call a few people...and say, hey, you know, what do you know about [current University], and the culture, and the environment? I knew [the incumbent]. Was able to sit and talk with [the incumbent] for a long time about [their] position and [their] experience, because of that.

A couple of participants found concrete methods to support and ease their transition. Jane read industry literature and leadership books:
I did read a book about executive presence... I had started reading a lot of literature on merging institutions... So I did try to stay current in that... I knew from the way they had written the job description that Guided Pathways, that model was going to be a job. So I re-read the book I had read six years before.

Kathryn, on the other hand, catalogued much of the documentation she had created on behalf of her former institution, such as strategic plans and proposals, for future reference.

**Sub-theme 5.3 Navigating culture.** A common challenge for the newly transitioned leaders was learning how to navigate a new culture. For the three participants who were changing colleges (Kathryn, Jane and Ruby), this was a prominent theme. This was the case for Kathryn and Jane, both of whom had been at their institutions for extended periods of time, as well as for Ruby, who had been with her former employer for only three years. However, Ruby knew to anticipate the challenge since she had been at several universities over the last decade. She stated:

I've been able to grow throughout all of those transitions, I'm thankful for that. They haven't always been easy moves either because every time you start at a new institution, you're starting fresh. People don't know you. You don't know the institution. Regardless of how much you know [your field]...it's really re-learning...what you're conducting the work in....Part of why I chose to come to [Current University] was through the interview process, I could see that this was a campus that they knew they had to work together to get things done...They know they can't burn bridges here, because we all have to work together in some way. There seems to be this shared mentality of we all rise together...
Both Jane and Kathryn communicated that they underestimated just how crucial grasping and immersing into a culture could be on their ability to onboard and complete their responsibilities. Understanding their university’s history and its values and norms were a central part of the transition process. Jane remarked:

[And then not having institutional knowledge. I didn't realize how valuable, just how much, you rely on that. I have to ask ten questions to make one decision now, to make sure that I have all the information. Where before…I was ten steps ahead of everyone. Now I feel like I'm ten steps behind. And I have to work that much harder to catch up.]

Jane also discussed adjusting to the culture and conveyed concern about its match to her style:

I went to a senior staff executive board meeting...and I remember [the] vice president told me that the president was impressed with my candor...And I didn't see anything remarkable about that…And, the fact that I heard about it from three people that were present in the meeting really kind of woke me up to how different the culture is here...And what happens when I'm candid about something they don't want me to be? I've been encouraged to be candid, but we'll see how far that goes. I know to be careful.

Kathryn voiced coming to similar conclusions about the importance of culture and the feeling of helplessness when it is unfamiliar:

Losing that institutional knowledge and confidence has been a very humbling experience. I'm always relying on other people to kind of give me the quick and dirty and also coming to the conclusion that I will never know this place to the same level that I knew [Prior University]…And it's not necessary for my role to know the level of detail that I knew about the operations and things...I can't dedicate the time it would take to gain all
that intimate level of information…It will definitely get stronger the longer that I'm here, but it's just never going to be at that level.

The above participants were still in the process of understanding the cultural nuances, customs and values of their new universities and colleges.

**Sub-theme 5.4 Developing new knowledge and networks.** Equally challenging for several participants during their career transition was filling gaps in their knowledge, be it institutional or related to their field, and developing new relationship networks. For some women, their scope had broadened to include functional areas to which they only had had minimal exposure and no previous direct oversight. Ruby maintained that it is an ongoing process of active education, poise and an ability to intuit what needs to be done without full knowledge of the situation. She said:

You try to know as much as you can. You try to get what the general principles are in a way that you can intelligently participate in conversations, but don't have to be the expert in the room. There's kind of this huge ramp up in that kind of a transition… If I'm going to a meeting where I know there will be something that might challenge one of my gaps, do as much homework as I can beforehand. There's always going to be something that you walk in that might catch you cold. Being willing at that time to say, that's something I don't know…Then…even if you don't know, asking the intelligent and informed questions: Help me understand the framework that I need to think about to go back and understand what that is.
On the need to develop productive relationships, Kathryn commented:

It's been a really long time since I started a new job and so that has been hard…knowing who the players are, being at this level and not knowing who the players are…Just trying to constantly kind of navigate what can I have influence on right now that we need to change that's more of a short term need?

Some women found that the authority their title and position commanded enabled them to have some influence earlier in their transition without having established relationships. Jane remarked:

[The position’s] a level of influence that I hadn't had before. And I think that's sort of making up for [not having an established network], I don't think that'll last forever. But it certainly is moving the process along...So there's a level of influence that automatically came with the position. Plus, my boss has a level of influence that I'm able to use to move projects forward, without having those relationships built.

Two participants noted that the authority within their new position changed how they formed networks and relations with other people. On this theme, Julie stated:

I didn't expect people's perception of me to change as much as maybe it has. I guess in some cases being taken more seriously, in some cases more...Not exactly scared of me, but being seen more as, "She's a person in authority, so I need to be... ". It's just a vibe I pick up...there is something different about being number one instead of almost number one.
Ann and Ruby discussed negotiating relationships with their direct supervisors, building a foundation of trust, and learning each other’s styles. Ann discussed a task her boss was working on, but that she believed she could make her own. She talked about how she needed to approach this potentially difficult conversation:

That's one thing that we're definitely going to have to talk about…who's going to do this? I would like to have responsibility for it because it is within my shop and I report to you…That's the way it should be. So, it is owning those kinds of things…it gives me some kind of anxiety...It's all of these feelings of anxiety, but I am owning them. I've learned, most of my life, the way to get through something is to go through it.

Learning the instrumental and relational knowledge that would enable their productivity was an ongoing part of the transition process for most participants.

6. (Re)crystallization of Self

Participants described feeling validated through their transition experience for what they believed to be their capacities, or a sense of exceeding what they believed they were capable of. Most of the women articulated a renewed belief in or a revelation about their ability to be efficacious and resilient. Anna, Julie, Victoria, Jane and Ruby exemplified this outlook:

Anna: I think I really can actually do pretty much anything, and I don't know that I would have thought that before, if this job would have opened up and there had been a search, I don't think I would have applied for this role...I didn't think it was for me. And…knowing what I know now about myself now…I know that I could apply for this job and that I could do a good job…I just never would have thought that this is a role that would really fit me, and now I think it does.
Julie: I find myself saying to myself, in this sense of surprise, "I'm really good at this."...people don’t often stop and tell you “you are really good at this,” and there are no clear markers, like getting a book or article accepted for publication.

Victoria: I've just come to the place where I'm more comfortable in my own skin and where I also recognize that leaders get to make their own decisions. I respect that and I'm not a supplicant. I also get to make my own decisions about where I focus my energies and talents...what I've learned is I don't have anything to be afraid of. I'm going to do my best work. At the end of the day, I want to be pleased with my work. I would love for other people to be pleased with it, but it's about my integrity. It's about me being able to look at myself and say, "Did I do right with the responsibility that was granted to me?"

For me, it's been a ... a confidence has had to come over time.

Jane: I'm way stronger than I thought I was…This is the hardest thing I've done in my life. Starting over after 20 years, where you walk in your job, you know you're good at your job. I was good at my last job. I knew how, I was effective…But the fact that I could rip off that band-aid and start over…I knew that this job was taking me to the next level of being strategic and being, and letting, and trusting, and building a team that could handle the weeds...So having the courage to take that next step…But I'm up for the challenge...I've just absolutely learned that I was way stronger than I thought I was...

Ruby: I think the thing I've learned the most, which is really going to sound so trite is how strong I am, that I didn't know I was. To be thrust into sometimes really uncomfortable positions…[n]ow have spent more time than I ever anticipated I would sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with a trustee talking about really important decisions.
Thinking wow, that's a really weight-y thing that I am having a discussion about…The responsibility of representing who those students are…You can crumble under that and fall apart, you can rise to the occasion…Trying to both own my background and own what's of value to me…I think I've found really just how much I can dig down and be stronger than I anticipated…

While uncertainty was still evident, especially for those leaders who were newest to their roles or brand new to their institutions, all participants expressed a sense of optimism for the future state of their continued adaptation to their work-role.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented findings from semi-structured interviews with seven women leaders who experienced a work-role transition in the last three years. Additional data were gathered from documents such as curriculum vitae, public appointment announcements, emails with participants, and field notes. Collectively, the interviews and additional information were inductively analyzed to uncover common themes and re-tell the transition narratives of the participants in order to answer the research question: *How do higher education women leaders describe and make sense of their career transitions?*

Six emergent themes typified the transition reflections of the women participants. They include: 1. Gender and identity; 2. Disposition and character; 3. Key supporters; 4. Motivators for change; 5. Adjustment and adaptation; and 6. (Re)crystallization of self. It is important to note that while each theme and sub-theme has been classified as if fully demarcated from the next, themes often intertwined and bore influence on each other. For example, the intersection of identity variables such as gender and racial background co-mingled with familial influences to
develop career-oriented dispositions that were instrumental to participants’ interests in professional change, their transition success and capacity to attain their most recent leadership position.

In the next and final chapter, discussion and interpretation of the findings will be presented and supported by the theoretical framework. Conclusions will be extrapolated from the interpretations and actionable recommendations for practice will be rendered. In addition, the author will suggest implications for future research and note any limitations of the study.
Chapter Five: Interpretations, Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this chapter is to interpret findings from the review of documentation and semi-structured interviews, and present conclusions along with implications for practice and future research. The interpretations and actionable conclusions directly relate to the purpose of the study, as explained in the first chapter: to explore the career transition experiences of women leaders in higher education through their reflections. This chapter is divided into four sections: 1. Overview of the Study; 2. Interpretations and Conclusions; 3. Implications for Practice and Future Research; and 4. Epilogue, a Personal Reflection.

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the professional change experiences of higher education women leaders through their reflective-thinking processes. Women are an underdeveloped, yet quickly growing, pool of leaders within an era marked by high turnover and a dearth of talent in executive administration at colleges and universities (Bischel & McChesney, 2017; Catalyst, 2017; Johnson, 2016; Skinner, 2010). As in other industries, career mobility continues to increase at the upper echelons of institutional leadership, which is costly, disruptive, and creates vulnerabilities at a time when many believe higher education is a “bubble” waiting to burst. Intense occupational demands for chief academic and administrative positions such as fundraising expectations, managing board relations and budget shortages compel shortened tenures, which makes the recruitment and successful retention of long-term talent a mounting challenge (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Deneen & Dretler, 2012; Monks, 2012; Skinner, 2010).
Improved understanding of how to attract and retain women leaders, an under-tapped yet emerging pipeline of governance and skill, may remedy talent deficiencies in higher education. Colleges and universities should take interest in the career development of future women leaders and seek to understand the factors that motivate them to depart from, and choose to begin, new roles elsewhere. The findings of this study provide deep insight into the professional change stories of executive women in the tertiary education sphere. Results can support the development of individual career coaching modalities that are responsive to women’s unique work-role transition experiences, as well as guide institutions to create policies and programs that are better tailored to women’s career development needs, which will ultimately aid in the preservation of future and long-term talent.

The current study sought to answer the following research question: How do higher education women leaders describe and make sense of their career transition experiences? The research was guided by transformative learning theory, which posits that critical reflection is the vehicle through which adults make new meaning of life experiences. A significant life event, such as a career or work-role transition, can spur introspection and a re-evaluation of one’s core assumptions and origins. This process can result in profound and emancipatory changes to a person’s perspectives and self-concept, opening new possibilities for a broader range of available beliefs, feelings and actions in life (Mezirow, 1990, 1998; Kitchenham, 2008; Schwandt, 2007). In this study, the focus was on exploring how women critically reflected on their transition journeys in order to support the individual development of future women leaders, and direct efforts to fulfill institutional recruitment and retention goals.

Narrative inquiry was selected as the methodology because it attends to the “three dimensional narrative inquiry space” of temporality, sociality and context, which respects that
individuals are constructing their stories in continuity and relationship to others, while situated in broader historic, social, cultural and political contexts (Caine, et al., 2013, p. 577; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Craig, 2005; Huber, et al., 2013). Seven participants who identified as women and stepped into new executive level positions in the last three years at two- or four-year colleges or universities took part in semi-structured interviews. The author obtained additional documentation such as resumes, LinkedIn profiles and public appointment announcements to triangulate data gathered through the interviews. An inductive approach to thematic analysis, whereby each interview was independently coded followed by a cross-case comparison, led to the emergence of six themes. Participants’ reflective stories of their professional changes revealed these themes: 1. gender and identity; 2. disposition and character; 3. motivators for change; 4. key supporters; 5. adjustment and adaptation; and 6. (re)crystallization of self. These six themes were further refined into sub-themes that elucidated prominent elements of the career transition experience. Themes and sub-themes are outlined and described in Table 3 of Chapter Four.

**Interpretations and Conclusions**

The current study shed light on the career transition journeys of women leaders in higher education. Interpretations of findings led to five distinct and actionable conclusions:

1. Self-reflection is a means to understanding assumptions and transforming perspectives.

2. Career transitions are experiences that unfold over time and extend beyond the formal departure and starting points of a position.

3. Early family and educational experiences influence the development of women’s career orientations and behaviors that facilitate transition effectiveness.
4. The support of associates, mentors, sponsors and role models is important to women’s transitions and overall career success.

5. Institutionalized gender and racial bias affects women’s ability to successfully transition to and fulfill their new roles.

**Reflection and Transitions**

*Conclusion 1: Self-reflection is a means to understanding assumptions and transforming perspectives.*

Evidence from interviews showed that self-reflection is a means through which participants increased their understanding of recent occupational transition experiences, which led to changed views of themselves and their career pathways. Women leaders attached novel meaning to their transitions through reflective thought about identities, dispositions, factors that motivated their change, mentors and other supporters who influenced or aided them, and the period of adjustment experienced through the change. Participants viewed their role transitions as impactful life events that spurred a re-imagining of their priorities, values, expectations and/or self-concepts. As they reflected upon their transition experiences, they actively examined assumptions encountered in their environment (objective reframing) and took stock of the origins of the beliefs they had internalized about themselves (subjective reframing) (Mezirow, 1998; Kitchenham, 2008). Mezirow (1998) outlined the processes of objective and subjective reframing as deeply reflective and self-reflective sense-making, whereby an individual recognizes how and why she harbors certain beliefs. Undergoing the reflective reframing process can lead to transformed and emancipatory outlooks, ultimately opening doors to a wider range of
thoughts, feelings and actions (Mezirow, 1998). The findings of this study support the theoretical
linkage between experience, reflection, meaning-making and perspective transformation.

Additionally, outcomes from the study demonstrated that critical reflection can be a
powerful vehicle to achieve new understandings of self, and changed perspectives on personal
assumptions, values, capacities, and circumstances. Women leaders reflected on the pre-, mid-
and post- components of their transition experiences and were able to articulate instances where
they had to make sense of situations, test them against their personal belief systems, grapple with
them if they challenged their perspectives, and arrive at transformative meanings or realizations.
For most of the participants, the outcomes were largely positive, which enabled them to gain a
strengthened sense of self. Table 4 provides several examples from participant interviews that
connect themes with critical reflection theory concepts.

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<td><strong>Summary of Emergent Themes as Related to Critical Reflection Concepts</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Theme/Sub-theme(s)</strong></td>
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<td>Gender and identity</td>
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Victoria recognized through self-reflection that she did not want to subject herself to the pressures of having to prove qualifications for her position in perpetuity. Eagly and Karau (2002) discuss how gender bias leads to unfounded assumptions of incompatibility between appropriate female behaviors and leadership. Studies have also shown that women are held to stricter standards on assessments of competence (see Foschi, 1996). Through reflection, and a process of reframing, Victoria acknowledged the social and cultural systems responsible for this assumption and made a conscious decision to measure her worth by standards she set for herself.

Upon reflecting on seizing an opportunity, Julie noted that she continued to rise in her career by accepting the opportunities extended to her, but she expressed surprise when asked to step into her new role. Anna articulated a similar thought about her professional trajectory when she expressed bewilderment at being in a senior position at her college. Interestingly, both women demonstrated professional characteristics and followed paths that suggested they were proactive, ambitious and self-directed with their careers. Jost (1997) and Moss-Racusin (2012) found that women tend to undervalue their merit and monetary worth, while avoiding self-promotion, which can be detrimental to long-term career advancement. For Julie and Anna, an evolution in thought appeared to be underway about what they had accomplished. Reflecting on their openness to opportunity related to a revised sense of self; each relayed a renewed
confidence in their ability to be successful in their new roles and a recognition of the personal power they harbored to influence change in their careers.

Kathryn’s realization about what influenced her to decide to become a vice president serves as another example of reflection that resulted in a transformed perspective. She had been reluctant to move to that level of accountability because of its exposure and visibility. However, she started to appreciate that in any senior position in her field, there is a measure of liability that comes along with taking risks and being at the forefront of new, creative initiatives. After realizing this, she decided to become a vice president and position herself so that she could best affect decisions and direction in the face of her new visibility. In this case, Kathryn transformed an assumption about executive roles and her willingness to embrace this level for herself, which ultimately expanded her professional prospects and was an impetus to begin looking for a new position.

Mezirow (2003) explained the importance of critical discourse in the learning process. When engaging in critical dialogue with each other, individuals can test, validate and achieve profound comprehension of the assumptions, beliefs or viewpoints they hold (Mezirow, 2003). For all the participants, supporters who were early influencers, mentors, partners, advocates or role models played a part in their reflecting on and processing of new ideas. Jane discussed how the en masse departure of colleagues who acted as a sounding board at her previous institution was, in part, the impetus for her decision to move to another position. Peers at her prior employer were trusted partners who challenged her and allowed for collective experimentation of thought. The loss of that critical discourse stymied her ability to reflect and develop; thus, this provided one rationale for her transitioning to a role that provided such an environment. This illustrates the importance of participating in analytical and collegial dialogue during the reflection process.
Objective reframing, or reflection that connects to the *what* and *how* (rather than the *why*) of our assumptions, leads to learning that is instrumental in nature. It is an exploration of the content and process through which individuals arrive at assumptions that govern behavior (Mezirow, 1990). This type of reflection happens through actions and new views that change the way a person approaches problems. In preparing for her transition, Jane explained that she read a book that embodied the lens through which her new institution would handle organizing and developing initiatives to enhance the student experience. Jane intentionally engaged with this paradigm so she could understand and act upon it in her new role.

The (re)crystallization of self theme is perhaps the clearest account of transformed perspectives through reflection that occurs over the course of a professional transition. It is important to note that several women remarked that their interview served as an opportunity to reflect holistically on their experiences. For some, the interview offered new and helpful insight that had not yet come into their awareness about their transitions. Participants experienced unique and fresh learning about themselves that expanded their outlook on their transitions, capabilities and careers. As explained in Chapter Two, critical reflection that leads to the transformation of perspectives can be liberating for individuals while increasing access to a wider range of available beliefs, feelings and future behaviors (Mezirow, 1978). Table 4 depicts Ruby’s articulation of newfound strength, admiration and pride in herself for working through the transition process successfully. Her recrystallized sense of increased inner strength exemplifies transformative learning that will broaden what Ruby is able to act upon in her career’s future development.

Previous research has shown that reflection can be a useful mechanism to gain insight into career or professional development related issues (Passamore & Fillery-Travis, 2011). For
example, Choy’s (2009) study showed that active reflection in teams afforded novel understanding of leadership behavior and organizational practices. Similarly, Terblanche et al. (2018) had early success with an executive coaching model for leaders in transition based on tenets of transformative learning theory. Reflection and active learning facilitated progression through the transition process and encouraged leader development. Results of the current study provide additional support for the premise that critical reflection in career transition situations expands self-understanding and perspectives, which enable personal and professional growth.

**Time and Transitions**

*Conclusion 2: Career transitions are experiences that unfold over time and extend beyond the formal departure and starting points of a position.*

Results from this study demonstrate that career or work-role transitions endure beyond the point of a formal departure from one organization and entry to another. The women in the study were between three weeks and three years into their transitions, with six out of seven in their current roles for less than two years. Their narratives suggested that their transitions were still in process, with most speaking about their adjustment as if it was ongoing and in progress. While this conclusion emerged from analysis across all themes, it is most evident in the adjustment and adaptation category.

Kathryn (six months into transition), Jane (eight months into transition), and Ruby (two years into transition) were in the process of learning to navigate a new organizational culture. Kathryn noted that she felt humbled by the effects of her lack of institutional knowledge, while Jane was testing the waters on how candid she could be with her leadership. Most participants were actively developing their networks and deciphering which critical people would enable
them to meet expectations in their new roles. Even Julie (three years into transition), who had been in her post the longest, was still discovering that her relations with others at her institution changed as a result of the new authority she had in her new position. This suggests that even after three years, the experience of being in transition may still be acute for some.

Bridges (2004) defines the stages of transition as events with an end, an acclimation period, and a phase of integration of new distinct perspectives, behaviors and connections. Schlossberg (2011) acknowledges that workplace transitions happen over time, which can differ depending on individuals’ coping mechanisms and the extent to which the transition altered their “roles, routines, relationships, and assumptions” (p. 159). Terblanche’s et al. (2017) work with recently promoted executives revealed that coaching often begins too late (in response to problematic circumstances) and does not extend for adequate intervals afterwards. His study suggests that coaching should be delivered in ongoing sessions for up to three years. While there is no definitive determination for the timeframe of how long a transition experience extends, the current study suggests that transitions can last for years, and involve more than just the typical observable points in time, such as a departure and start date, that drive current on-boarding and training human resource protocols. This suggests a need for expanded scholarly views on the timeline and the extent of impact on a career or work-role transition on individuals’ lives.

**Education, Family and Women Leaders’ Transitions**

*Conclusion 3: Early family and educational experiences influence the development of women’s career orientations and behaviors that facilitate transition effectiveness.*

In this study, early family and educational experiences strongly influenced women’s career choices, development of capacities that enabled their successful transitions, and their
global sense of professional efficaciousness. This conclusion linked to several themes including gender and identity, disposition and character, key supporters, and adjustment and adaptation. Family influence related closely to educational and career motivations which was regarded as a central source for the qualities that equipped them for transition and career achievement. Interactions with educators as well as the pursuit of higher education also affected women leaders’ career trajectories.

For several of the participants, early and consistent messages they received from family members about the importance of education motivated them to do well in school and pursue post-secondary education. Ruby recalled how her maternal grandmother, who only had an elementary school education, would consistently communicate that she must strive for good grades. The underlying message was that Ruby would have advantages that had not been available to others in her family, so she should access and leverage those opportunities. Similarly, Victoria heard at home that education was the tool that would give her latitude to choose what she wanted to do in her career and life.

Participants noted that these home-life lessons were, in part, responsible for their desire to continue their education. Five out of the seven participants were the first in their family to attend college, and it is notable that all now hold advanced graduate degrees and work in higher education. It was salient that the women in this study believed that education was instrumental to their professional prospects. Being a first-generation student brought with it challenges of having little preparation, informed support or context for obtaining a bachelor’s degree. For most, this necessitated independent-thinking, perseverance, an inquisitive attitude, and a continued resolve to do well. These traits became inherent to their character, and many of the women attributed their capacity to wade through a transition and their overall career success to these qualities.
For several women, educators in secondary or post-secondary institutions contributed to their current direction. As a high school student, Victoria had a math teacher who took time to speak with her family and persuade them to allow her to leave the state for college. Kathryn, Ruby and Victoria found support in deans, advisors and other administrators in college who offered guidance and encouragement, and who helped sustain their focus on completing their education during difficult times. However, not all the women reported positive interactions with early educators. Ruby recalled an incident with her high school counselor when she was on the cusp of not attending college. Expectations of students at the school who came from disadvantaged backgrounds like Ruby’s were quite low. A counselor gave her a book on community college and told her to enroll in a cosmetology program. She remarked:

To me, I think in some ways, that was more motivating than anything. I was like, how dare you. How dare you categorize me because of who I am, that all I'm good enough for is to go get a cosmetology degree in community college. I went to college not knowing what I was going to do with myself…

For Ruby, an educator’s suggestion that she pursue a path that she inherently knew was less than what was possible for her, in part, fanned the flame that led her to college. While her experience with this educator was negative, it steered Ruby’s continued development of a persistent, strong-willed temperament, which amounted to useful virtues in the face of a transition.

Many scholars point to the importance of educator and parental support to future educational and career success (Nelson & Smith, 2001; Frederick, Hofkens, Wang, Mortenson & Scott, 2018). Nelson and Smith (2001) stated that educational and professional attainment for girls’ in gifted programs is highly influenced by attitudes of peers and parents, and whether their
school environment encourages their potential. Researchers posit that early schooling and outreach programs for girls of color that introduce different STEM pathways are important for helping girls learn that their identities are compatible with STEM fields (Kang, Barton, Tan, Simkins, Rhee & Turner, 2018). Moreover, there is strong evidence that parental engagement in a child’s education leads to improved grades and test scores, stronger confidence levels, and higher high school graduation and college attendance rates (American Psychological Association, 2019; National PTA, 2000; Wairimu, Macharia & Mairu, 2016;). The present study largely supports these prior findings. Women leaders’ connected their early family encounters and educational experiences to future prospects, including their drive to pursue academic and career advancement, and to the development of traits that effectively guided them through the professional change process.

Supporters and Women Leaders’ Transitions

Conclusion 4. The support of associates, mentors, sponsors and role models is important to women’s transitions and overall career success.

The supportive and nurturing relationships formed with colleagues, mentors, and role models were critical to participants’ capacity to forge ahead in a work-role transition and achieve career success. This conclusion is apparent in the shared aspects of the women’s narratives related to key supporters, but also emerges in other themes or sub-themes such as motivators for change (organizational culture and conditions) and adjustment and adaptation (developing new networks and knowledge). Ruby, Julie and Victoria gave credit to long-time trusted mentors who guided and honestly challenged them, while offering empathy, reassurance and inspiration. Anna
and Kathryn drew strength and courage from team members who embraced them moving into their new roles and welcomed their leadership.

The significant positive effects of mentors and other champions on women’s career development are well-documented (Josselson, 1987; Kay, Hagan & Parker, 2009). Additionally, a transition is viewed as a disorienting life event - one that can induce thoughts and feelings of a life crisis (see sub-theme trepidation and reservations about role). Adequate supports to help arouse confidence and act as a sounding board were key to participants’ capacity to endure the challenges of their transitions.

Especially notable in this study were references to the importance of women supporting women. Two participants explicitly remarked that they noticed a shift in their field, with more women both seeking and offering to be relatable allies for each other. In the era of the #MeToo movement, women are looking to each other as sources of strength and validation while being encouraged to share experiences that are germane to their unique existence. Websites like www.leanin.org represent organizations that discuss how women can achieve more together, sponsor research that promotes the benefits of women and diversity in the workplace, and serve as meeting grounds through programs like Circles (a program to help women meet, learn and grow together).

In the author’s profession of enrollment management, this phenomenon is apparent. Two prominent professional associations have recently organized women’s special interest groups to talk, teach and learn about the distinctive experiences of women in the profession. At the first meeting of one group in 2018, nearly 200 women attended. Likewise, a new Facebook group created in 2016 called Wonder Women in Admissions now has over 4200 members and is an
active forum with new questions and responses posted by members daily. Both the name of and the formal description of the group denotes the intention to encourage growth and recognition of women’s specific needs for career and leadership advancement:

This group is for women who currently work in college admissions. The community is intended to be a forum in which the posts are more so about our lives as professionals than about the tasks at hand. So, instead of posting about students you might want some advice on -- let's talk about what we need as women in this profession. Let's talk about what we need and want from a professional development standpoint. We hope that this group will foster mentors and mentees. We hope that those of us with experience will lend wisdom and insight to those just starting out -- and those just starting out will lend wisdom and insight to what it's like entering this profession in more recent times. Let's discuss what's important to us so that we stay in this profession and become leaders (Wonder Women in Admissions, 2019).

Scholars have recognized that, for some girls and women, having role models of the same gender identity can be significant for growth and expansion of understanding what is possible and attainable for them in terms of professional possibilities (Aachard, 2012; McIntyre, Paulson,
Taylor, Morin & Lord, 2011). This was also found to be important for some young women of color (Blake-Beard, Bayne, Crosby & Muller, 2011). While participants in this study had mentors and models of both similar and dissimilar backgrounds, the findings underscore the premise that supporters are critical to vocational development.

**Bias and Women Leaders’ Transitions**

*Conclusion 5.* Institutionalized gender and racial bias affect women’s ability to successfully transition to and fulfill their new roles.

The fifth and final conclusion presented from this study is that institutionalized bias affects women’s ability to transition successfully to new roles and effectively fulfill the expectations of their positions. This inference was drawn from across the themes but was most conspicuous in relationship to gender and identity, disposition and character, motivators for change and adjustment and adaptation. Entrenched social and cultural assumptions lead to widespread implicit biases about women’s professional capacities. Scholars have argued that organizations, as sites of social construction that are fundamentally gendered, privilege some and disadvantage others. Studies also show that women, as members of an out-group (i.e., the “other”) and historically underrepresented, face challenges if their behavior is seen as incongruent with expected gendered attributes (Acker, 1990; Briscoe, 2005; Eagly, 2005; Vaccaro, 2011; Liu et al., 2015). Several women leaders in this study encountered these biases, which actively hindered their transition process.

Participants’ narratives affirmed what prior scholarship shows, but the study added to the literature through its focus on higher education transitions. For these collegiate women leaders, establishing proficiency and competence in their new roles was particularly challenging. Either
in the present or the past, they encountered embedded assumptions in organizational climates that expressed that they were not welcomed, not expected to be experts, not able to contend with difficult situations, or not deserving of the positions they occupied. Participants understandably struggled to break into their new cultures and develop productive networks.

The ripple effects of gendered messages in any organizational environment, let alone an unfamiliar one, can hinder development. Gendered expectations of how women should think, feel and act narrow the scope of acceptable behavior, thereby imposing constraints on how they communicate and participate in dialogue (Chae, 2002). Many of the characteristics that aided these women leaders in their advancement, such as independence, investment in becoming experts in their fields, and proactive career ambitions, defy expectations of their traditional gendered roles. Women leaders are at an additional disadvantage if they are presumed unworthy of or unprepared for the role they occupy. This may hinder their acceptance into the organization at a time when their focus should be on gaining entry into the culture and cultivating productive relationships.

The notion of being ‘othered’ and an outsider in the workplace due to assumptions related to race or being a woman of color was salient for two participants in this study. Importantly, people harbor multiple identities that intersect and result in unique ways of experiencing the world. The concept of intersectionality refers to the linkage between these distinct identity factors, such as being a woman and being Latina (Cho, Crenshaw & McCall, 2013; Gopaldas, 2013). Crenshaw (1994), who is credited with coining the term, and whose research initially focused on Black women, offers that to more fully understand Black women’s lives, one must look at the experience at the intersection of race and gender dimensions. Women of color are not only subject to factors of sexism but also racism, and this creates both a distinctive experience of
the world, and specific ways in which the world will perceive them (Gaetane, Williams & Sherman, 2009; Gopaldas, 2013.) In this study, Victoria discussed how careful and measured she believed she had to be when communicating an opinion at the leaders’ table, especially when expressing a dissenting thought. She was mindful of the negative stereotype of the ‘angry Black woman’, which could distort perceptions of her, leading to unfair expectations or interpretations on how she speaks and behaves. This implicit gendered racial prejudice can confine professional communication and conduct, restricting actions to what the majority favors. Once again, confronting biased presuppositions and unwarranted expectations can prove substantial obstacles to a successful transition experience.

**Implications for Practice and Future Research**

The current study gave voice to the experiences of women who recently assumed new executive roles in higher education. In the face of a dramatically shifting landscape in higher education, and a predicted shortage of prepared leaders, colleges must understand how to better recruit, on-board and retain needed talent. Women are an up and coming leadership force in the pipeline that has yet to be fully developed and leveraged. The results and conclusions of this study offer multiple implications for practice that may guide women who aspire to leadership roles and assist universities to develop effective programs and policies to cultivate rising women leaders. Inferences from this study can also steer future research efforts in the areas of women’s career and leadership development, as well as career and work-role transitions.

**Implications for Practice**

Several implications and applications for practice arose through the findings, interpretations and conclusions of this study. First, this research points to the benefits of
reflection; the higher education women leaders in this research critically reflected on their transition experiences, and were able to realize transformed and expanded perspectives that would enrich their future career success. Postsecondary institutions should dedicate resources to intentional coaching services that offer women and leaders of other identities dedicated time to reflect on and evaluate their transitions. This may aid in identifying issues or concerns, provide a safe and confidential space for contemplation, and allow for early interventions, if necessary. This type of support could be especially important for women who are new to their institutions, not just their positions, when relationships and networks are underdeveloped. Considering the high cost of losing an employee (Industry Insight, 2017), and the high rate of failed transitions (Sutton, 2008), a solution such as this may help mitigate those expenditures by increasing the retention of valuable professionals. This recommendation could translate to environments beyond higher education (and to populations other than women), where documented turnover exceeds that of the non-profit world (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016).

Second, the findings of this study indicate that the temporal boundaries of a career or work-role transition are fluid and the experience could extend over a significant length of time. Higher education institutions tend to focus on the transactional steps of de-boarding and on-boarding employees that occur within a compressed timeframe. Departing employees help train others on their responsibilities, hand over keys and save valuable files. New employees may attend an orientation program, undergo training on unfamiliar processes, and gain access to new systems. The participants in the current study, however, illuminated that the transition experience stretches far beyond the time it takes to address these operational matters. Yet, they experienced little systematic and planned support that followed the contractual components of on-boarding.
For the aforementioned reasons, the author recommends that universities and colleges develop multi-year on-boarding and employee transition plans. The Society of Human Resource Management suggests designing an on-boarding plan that lasts for up to 12 months. Terblanche et al. (2017) posits that coaching executives through transitions can take up to three years. Most who are operating at the leadership level are tasked with delivering results soon after taking on new roles. While it would be impractical for organizations to wait out executives’ transitions before expecting them to meet the goals of their positions, offering regular, ongoing coaching over an extended time period to support a successful process, for example, could be both productive and preventative for individual and organization alike. It was clear from this study that orienting to a new role or organization includes time well beyond the first few weeks or months of a professional’s arrival.

A transition plan should also account for facilitating development in some of the areas that participants in this study noted as challenges. For example, institutions can implement purposeful strategies that enable relationship and network cultivation. Tactics could include: pre-arranged meetings and lunches with key players throughout the college; pairing a new leader with a seasoned ‘buddy’ who can act as guide and filter for unfamiliar situations or cultural nuances in the first year; and pre-scheduled quarterly coaching sessions to allow for reflective check-ins (see Implications for Practice, first paragraph).

A further conclusion derived through the findings is the importance of supporters, mentors, and role models to the transition process. A third proposal for practice is that higher education institutions should make efforts to connect women leaders with each other both within and outside of their organizations. While some of this may occur organically on campus, as women seek out supporters, colleges can demonstrate their formal commitment to fostering
women’s leadership on campus by funding projects that bring women together. For example, universities can sponsor special networking meals, bring in guest speakers who are advocates for women’s advancement, encourage and support membership and conference attendance for women’s associations, and host forums for the discussion of women’s issues. Networks and networking opportunities should also be intentionally cultivated for women of color, who may be more comfortable sharing their unique experiences with women of similar racial or ethnic origins. Organized outlets that empower women to meet other like-minded women may assist leaders who are new to their positions to readily thrive and smooth their transitions.

This study provided evidence that early family and education experiences affect the outcomes of women’s future transitions and careers. The research suggests programmatic interventions for girls during their early educational years, delivered by teachers, advisors and critical family members, would support their growth even years after their participation. Girls may benefit from programs that provide wrap-around exposure to messaging that places a high value on education and career, and that consistently demonstrates wide-ranging academic and professional possibilities from parents, educators and other supporters.

National and international recognition of women’s underrepresentation in critical disciplines has led to the growing demand for proactive programs like these. For example, the author’s university offers a summer academy to introduce girls to engineering and technology majors and occupations. The program states its central objective is “to eradicate the negative stereotypes commonly associated with women’s ability to pursue careers in math and science related fields” (Target Academy for Girls in Engineering and Technology, 2019). Also available through another department is a holistic educational platform and toolbox for teachers and parents to promote girls’ involvement in civic leadership. The Teach A Girl to Lead initiative
equips educators and family members with a centralized repository of activities, classroom resources, books and other media that encourage girls’ development of leadership skills. The program website asserts:

Teach a Girl to Lead provides the tools and resources to help young people rethink leadership and refocus the picture, because if a girl can’t imagine a woman leader, how can she become one? And if a boy sees only men in leadership roles, what will convince him to support aspiring women leaders? (Teach a Girl to Lead, 2019).

These and other similar programs and projects proactively engage young girls of all backgrounds in areas where they are underrepresented, call attention to the need for early intervention to change future prospects, and recognize the importance of role models to women’s future success.

At the postsecondary level, a good example of young women’s educational aspirations is an annual women’s empowerment conference held every March, also at the author’s institution. The Dr. Jewel Plummer Cobb S.T.E.A.M Women’s Empowerment Conference celebrates the career achievements of a woman of color. The inspiration for this conference comes from Dr. Plummer Cobb, who confronted both racism and sexism as she aspired to have a career in biology. She was the first African-American to be appointed to the deanship of the all-women’s
Douglass College, and was among the first Black women to become president of a major university (California State University at Fullerton). The conference articulates its aims to: “Continuously showcase women dedicated to careers in STEM; Educate and provide resources and support for women currently pursuing opportunities in STEM; Promote, empower, and encourage young women interested in STEM and provide role modeling” (Rutgers Student Affairs, 2019). While the proliferation of this and other programs for girls and young women is promising, their continued development and accessibility to girls from a broad spectrum of backgrounds are necessary for women’s future career success.

At the executive level, new leaders face pressures to have an immediate positive and widespread impact soon after joining a new organization. This research uncovered that embedded adverse assumptions about women and women of color, and their aptitudes and permissible behaviors, could undercut their ability to transition and fulfill the obligations of their new roles. Institutionalized biases sanction discriminatory practices within universities and colleges (Vaccaro, 2011). Because these practices can be subtle, they may be exercised with little awareness, through habit, procedure or other organizational norms. Popularized contemporary terms such as ‘manterrupting’, ‘bropriating’ and ‘mansplaining’ capture common gendered forms of communication in the workplace. In these instances, women are far more likely to be interrupted by men, have their idea appropriated by a man, or have a topic on which they are an expert explained to them by a man in a belittling manner (Reeves, 2015).

Building awareness about gender and racial bias at all levels of an organization is essential. Institutions of higher education, like the author’s, focus efforts on academic and co-curricular programs that raise consciousness among students about the value of diverse identities, origins and perspectives, but can neglect the same biases they aim to counter for students within
their own administrations. Anti-bias or unconscious bias training that focuses on reducing inequities in organizations should be required of all existing and new employees. Mindfulness and awareness training can be an effective step in eliminating exclusionary practices within professional spaces. This could also aid in fostering inclusive behaviors. It is likely that many institutions already have these resources on campus. While they may have been intended initially for students, departments that emphasize social justice programming likely offer opportunities for staff and faculty as well.

Additionally, leaders and managers must strive to create diverse teams, committees and panels. For example, if it is not already an institutionalized hiring practice, human resource administrators should seek out job boards through associations that represent diverse groups and routinely post positions on those specialized sites. Leaders who form panels or working groups should knowingly endeavor to include a mix of diverse voices and viewpoints. Acclimatization to witnessing those voices, including women’s, can set a tone of acceptance and inclusion.

Finally, all institutions should have a formalized pledge to embrace diversity and reject prejudiced vantage points. Having visible statements that speak to the university’s regard for the identities of its faculty and staff, in addition to its students, should be part of any institution’s diversity and inclusion program. The recent #MeToo movement brought to light the rampant occurrence of harassment and abuse women and others face. Many institutions have had to look inward, reevaluate their systems and cultures, recognize mistreatment, and improve the climate for women. However, an environment that is welcoming and inclusive of women, as well as women of color, must be more than one that touts the reduction or absence of sexual harassment. Ultimately, the organizational goal should be to create climates that invite knowing, understanding and valuing the ways in which women have experienced the world.
Implications for Future Research

Research on career transitions of women leaders in higher education is sparse. The implications of this study suggest that further quantitative and qualitative research would be beneficial to aid in understanding this population, but also of other groups that were beyond the scope of this thesis. The study brought to light the possibility of critical reflection as a modality for insight into the career or work-role transition process, and narrative methodology as a means to understand how professional stories unfold in light of transition experiences. While this particular thesis focused on women in executive level roles, and extrapolated the themes important to that population, it would be an interesting scholarly undertaking to examine whether transition reflections are different at early, mid- and other points along the career continuum. This could allow for a more robust view of the spectrum of meaning attributed to occupational changes. Additionally, this work suggests it could be useful to explore in further depth the types of reflection (e.g., therapeutic subjective reframing, epistemological reframing, etc.) naturally performed pre-, mid-, and post- transition, and which lead to positive learning outcomes for professionals.

Moreover, the utility of critical reflection (and its varying types) as a meaning-making framework to comprehend the transition experience should be applied to other underrepresented populations of interest. This study observed one group within higher education, which is fast-rising into leadership roles but remains in the minority in the top echelons of influence. The findings pointed to the unique way transitions were experienced due to this status. Given the various identity variables that emerged as significant, as well as the importance of intersecting identities to several of the participants, extending this research to the experiences of other minorities should be prioritized.
Scholars should advance understanding of the variables that motivate departures and attract women to specific leadership positions. This can inform colleges as to why they may encounter high turnover or, alternatively, success in enticing good-fit hires. Researchers should also explore the longevity of the professional change process, and the factors that may truncate or extend the experience of being in a transition phase. Most participants in this study viewed it as unfavorable to feel unsettled in their new role, even as they learned a great deal about their personal and professional selves. Interventions to ease transition, such as those mentioned in the previous section, may assist with this experience. However, it would benefit the design of these interventions to ascertain what institutional practices may adversely prolong the transition process for women and other leaders.

Another important study to undertake emphasizes deeper investigation into the early educational and familial influences that impact women’s career choices. An offshoot of this research could be to spotlight the narratives of first-generation students to understand both the distinct challenges and the unique strengths they derive from being the first to attend college, and what influence this has on later career experiences. Perhaps also connected to this sphere of research would be to further examine how a variety of supporters, including mentors, advocates and other role models, shape women’s career prospects and leadership aspirations in higher education.

In general, research on higher education leadership tends to focus on faculty and those holding positions that require a faculty appointment. Given the abundance of professionals who work in student services and other non-academic administrative capacities that support the delivery of the educational mission (e.g., enrollment, facilities, marketing, residence life), scholars should dedicate more attention to the career experiences of these individuals. Leaders in
these fields will be equally indispensable to maintaining the organizational health of institutions in the coming years. With women now advancing rapidly into leadership roles, higher education organizations should attend, with more urgency and intentionality, to their distinct and specific career experiences.

Conclusion

The current study examined the dynamics of women leaders’ transitions from one role or institution to another through their critical reflections. The conclusions and recommendations support and add to the body of scholarly knowledge on reflection and learning, career transitions, women’s professional advancement in tertiary education, leadership development at colleges and universities, and narrative research. The findings of participants’ narratives may serve to inspire rising women professionals, create responsive coaching models, and guide institutions to enhance talent acquisition, development, retention and diversity practices that will conserve the valuable talent that will come to steer their organizations into the future.

Epilogue, a Personal Reflection

In a doctoral thesis guided by a critical reflection theoretical framework and narrative methodology, it is appropriate for the author to foreground her personal and introspective story. As a woman leader in higher education who, one year ago, formally stepped into my present position, this study was deeply relatable, making the research and interviews a reflective learning experience for me as well. I identified closely with the participants’ trepidation and anxieties, with their concerns about deficits in knowledge and competency, with their receptiveness to new ideas and initiatives, with their experiences of being talked over, patronized and regarded with unfounded doubt, and with their accounts of family trials that somehow turned into opportunities to gain strength.
From their narratives of key supporters, what I acutely realized is just how few true mentors I have had in my life. I have people who have advocated for me in my profession, a spouse and family who believe in me and who are always ready with a supportive word, and early educators who helped me navigate the college process and encouraged my desire to attend. No one recently, however, would I call mentor, or someone who I could call upon to share personal and professional ideas, who will support and challenge me, who knows me well enough to push me past my comfort zone, and offer honest, tough-love guidance when needed. This experience surfaced what I had just begun to realize shortly after taking on this new position: that I need some good counsel and cannot continue to go it alone, that I would be a more well-rounded professional if I asked for help every once in a while, and that this is not a sign of weakness or inability to handle the work. (This is a kind of trite bit of awareness to come into for someone who has advanced degrees in counseling and psychology.) For me, this and the revelation that my own aversion to being vulnerable in professional situations has prevented me from connecting with some of the amazing people in my field and in higher education at large. I am grateful to have been afforded the chance to acquire this self-understanding through this process, and it has already prompted me to reach out to others in ways I have not before.

The women who participated in this work are incredibly accomplished and powerful, and yet so accessible, caring and compassionate. They approach their roles, their students, their institutions, and their lives with a truly authentic orientation towards doing good and right by others. I have great admiration and appreciation for them, and am incredibly thankful that they shared their experiences with me, and that I was able to learn from them.
Appendices
Appendix A: Recruitment Email to Prospective Participants

Initial Recruitment/Referral Email
Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Doctor of Education Program

Subject Line: Recruiting women leaders for a research study

Dear >>>>>>>>>>>>>>,

I hope this finds you well. I am the Associate Vice Chancellor of Enrollment Management at Rutgers University, and am working towards my Doctor of Education at Northeastern University. As part of the requirements of my program, I am conducting a research study and seeking eligible participants. The purpose of my email today is to invite you to participate, and request referrals to others who might also qualify to be in this study.

My research will explore the first-hand accounts of women leaders in higher education who have recently transitioned to a new position. The objective is to understand, through personal reflections, the process and experience of changing roles or institutions at the leadership level. Ultimately, the goal of my research is to help women leaders succeed in their new positions, and to guide universities and colleges to design better policies and programs that facilitate their successful job transitions.

The account of your career or work-role transition experience (or the accounts of others you may know) would be of great value to fulfilling the goals of this project. If you hold a position of leadership at your current institution, have made a job transition in the last three years, and would like to volunteer to participate in this study, then I will be interviewing you about your transition experience. The duration of the interview is expected to be 60 to 120 minutes, and it will focus on your career and the details of your recent professional transition experience. This can take place at a location that is convenient to you, or via phone, or an online video/web chat service, which I can set up for us.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you are interested in learning more about this study and have questions, please email me at castaneda.t@husky.neu.edu. If you would like to participate, please include the following information, and I will schedule a short phone call to provide you additional details about the study and gather some preliminary information:

- Name
- Email Address and Phone Number
- Current Position and First Day on the Job at Current Position
- Best Dates/Times to Meet in January/February

Please also feel free to forward this email to any other possible participants you know. Thank you very much for your consideration.

My best,
Tani Castañeda
609-651-6096 | castaneda.t@husky.neu.edu
Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Title of Project: Transitions at the Top: A Narrative Research Study Exploring Women’s Executive Career Changes through Critical Reflection
Student Researcher: Tania Castañeda
Principal Investigator: Dr. Hattie Hammonds

Request to Participate in Research
We invite you to participate in a research project. This form will explain the study, but the researcher is also available to answer any questions you may have. When you are ready to decide, please tell the researcher if you would like to participate. You are not obligated to participate if you would prefer not to.

Why are you being asked to participate in this research study?
We are asking you to participate in this study because you have been identified as an executive level woman leader at a higher education institution who has experienced a career or work-role transition in the last three years.

Why is this research being performed?
The purpose of this research study is to explore the unique career transition experiences of women leaders in higher education.

What will be I asked to do as a participant in this study?
If you decide to participate in this research, we will ask you to first provide some basic background information on yourself and your current position and select a pseudonym that will help ensure your confidentiality. We will ask for a resume, curriculum vita or any other documentation that highlights your career path. We will then schedule and ask you to participate in a 60 to 120-minute semi-structured interview in order to capture your individual career transition experience at a university or college. This interview will take place in person, phone or via Web-ex or another web-based video service, if more convenient. Your interview will be transcribed by a professional transcription service. You will then be provided an opportunity through further email interaction with the researcher to review the transcript, and make any revisions or deletions, as you deem appropriate.

How much time should I expect my participation to take?
The following study procedures outlined below will require your time and participation.

1. Initial phone call outreach to explain the study, respond to questions, collect/request basic career information, and schedule the formal interview. Approximately 30 minutes.
2. Semi-structured interview in person, or via online video conference. 60 to 120 minutes.
3. Validation of transcript, revisions, and any commentary or feedback (as necessary). No more than 60 minutes.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
No personal or physical risk to you is expected. Data collected will be held in confidence and stored in a secure and safe place. Your selected pseudonym will be used and all elements of your
identity, locale, specific role, relations, and institution of employment will be removed from the transcripts. If reference must be made to any of the items above, a pseudonym will replace the actual reference. All information that identifies you, including audio recordings of the interview, will be destroyed once this dissertation has been completed. Typed material, stored in a cloud-based password protected site, will be retained for a period of seven years and then destroyed. Please know you may withdraw from the study at any time.

**Will I benefit from participating in this research study?**
No direct benefit to you is expected from participating in this study. It is hoped, however, that the insight gained from your interview may prepare other women leaders who will experience transitions during their career trajectories, and guide institutions to better support women who have recently joined their organizations.

**Who will see the information about me?**
The researcher and advisor on the study will see and have access to your information, but the finalized dissertation, or associated reports or publications, will not use your information or identity. The data collected through emails, notes, interviews, audio recordings and transcripts will be stored securely and not through any publicly accessible means. No unauthorized persons will be allowed to review the data collected. However, in rare cases, the Institutional Review Board at Northeastern University might request access to the original transcripts.

**What if I would like to stop participating in the study?**
Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may cease participation and refuse to answer any questions at any time. Your decision to participate or not participate, to stop participating even after the study has begun or after it has finished, is your choice, and will not impact your relationship with Northeastern University or any other entity.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**
There is no compensation for your participation in this study.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**
There is no cost associated with your participation in this study.

**Who should I contact if I have questions, problems or concerns?**
The researcher is your main contact and is available to answer any questions. Please reach Tania Castañeda at 609-651-6096 or castaneda.t@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact the principal investigator Dr. Hattie Hammonds at h.hammonds@northeastern.edu.

**Who should I contact about my rights as a participant in this study?**
Should you have questions about your rights as a participant in this research, please contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, Mail Stop 560-177, 360 Huntington Avenue, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115, 617-373-4588 or n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Please note:** You must be 18 years or older to participate in this research study.
I offer my consent to participate in this research project.

__________________________________________ Date: _________
Optional Signature of Person Agreeing to Participate

__________________________________________ Date: _________
Printed Name of Person Above

__________________________________________ Date: _________
Signature of Person Who Explained the Study to Participant and Obtained Consent

__________________________________________
Printed Name of Person Above
Appendix C: Interview Protocol

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Reflection Concepts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Please walk me through your career path and educational experience.</td>
<td>Background/introductory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe your immediate previous professional role.</td>
<td>Background/introductory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe your present professional role.</td>
<td>Background/introductory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When did this career transition take place?</td>
<td>Background/introductory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please tell me about a specific event or experience, if any, that triggered your decision to change occupations/careers. [If your decision to make a change unfolded over a more gradual period of time, what experience(s) or event(s) led to it?]</td>
<td>Disorienting dilemma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What thoughts about yourself (or your work) can you recall having leading up to your career transition?</td>
<td>Thoughts/feelings self-examination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What feelings about yourself (or your work) did you experience leading up to your career transition?</td>
<td>Thoughts/feelings self-examination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did you value most about your previous position and career track before your work transition?</td>
<td>CSRA, subjective reframing, systemic - moral/ethical/value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What influence, if any, did your early family life have on your career path and choices?</td>
<td>CSRA, subjective reframing, systemic – familial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent did your previous organizational environment affect your decision to make a career transition?</td>
<td>CSRA, subjective reframing, systemic – organizational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What professional or social relationships (e.g., mentors, colleagues, supervisors, friends), if any, influenced your decision to make a career change?</td>
<td>CSRA, subjective reframing, systemic – social)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were or are there other influences (e.g., cultural, religious, political, etc.) throughout your life that impacted your beliefs about working and/or your career choices? What are they?</td>
<td>CSRA, subjective reframing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What were your primary reasons or motivations for deciding to make a career transition?</td>
<td>Background/introductory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once you decided to make a career change, what action(s) did you take to explore and identify other career options?</td>
<td>CSRA, objective reframing – action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you go about planning for your career transition?</td>
<td>CSRA, objective reframing – action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were there any particular people (e.g., with mentors, family members, associates) who played an especially significant role during this transition period? Who were they, and what role did they play?</td>
<td>Critical discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you compare your professional skills and competencies pre- vs. post- career change?</td>
<td>Acquisition of skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What, if anything, about being a leader has changed for you?</td>
<td>Acquisition of skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What words might you have used to describe yourself as a professional before deciding to make a career transition? What words might you use to describe yourself as a professional now, post-transition?</td>
<td>CSRA, subjective reframing - narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you think your identity as a woman impacted your transition, and ability to transition to your new position?</td>
<td>CSRA, subjective reframing – social, cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you consider your transition to be a successful one? Why or why not? What factors enabled or inhibited your transition?</td>
<td>CSRA, objective reframing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What more, if anything, did you learn about yourself through the experience of this transition?</td>
<td>CSRA, general learning/perspective transformation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interview Protocol (with prompts)

Background & Introductory Questions

Please walk me through your career path and educational experience.
Describe your immediate previous professional role.
Describe your present professional role.
When did this career transition take place?

Career Transition Journey & Critical Reflection Questions

**Pre-Career Transition**

1. Please tell me about a specific event or experience, if any, that triggered your decision to change occupations/careers. (disorienting dilemma)
   
   [If your decision to make a change unfolded over a more gradual period of time, what experience(s) or event(s) led to it?]

2. What thoughts about yourself (or your work) can you recall having leading up to your career transition? (self-examination)

3. What feelings about yourself (or your work) did you experience leading up to your career transition? (self-examination)

4. What did you value most about your previous position and career track before your work transition? (CSRA, subjective reframing, systemic - moral/ethical/value)
   
   *Probe:* How did you come to place value or importance on those aspects of your career?
   
   *Probe:* Did your values change throughout the career transition process? If so, how, and what do you value differently about your work now?

5. What influence, if any, did your early family life have on your career path and choices? (CSRA, subjective reframing, systemic – familial)
   
   *Probe:* What influence did your present family life have on your decision to make a career transition?

6. To what extent did your previous organizational environment affect your decision to make a career transition? (CSRA, subjective reframing, systemic – organizational)
   
   *Probe:* Describe the (previous) environment. How did it help or hinder you on your career path?
   
   *Probe:* What is different about your current organizational environment?
7. What professional or social relationships (e.g., mentors, colleagues, supervisors, friends), if any, influenced your decision to make a career change? (CSRA, subjective reframing, systemic – social)

8. Were or are there other influences (e.g., cultural, religious, political, etc.) throughout your life that impacted your beliefs about working and/or your career choices? What are they? (CSRA, subjective reframing)

   *Probes:* How did these influences help or hinder you on your career path?

9. What were your primary reasons or motivations for deciding to make a career transition?

Mid-Career Transition

10. Once you decided to make a career change, what action(s) did you take to explore and identify other career options? (CSA, objective reframing – action)

   *Probes:* In taking action, what insight, awareness or realizations (if any) did you come to? (CSRA, subjective reframing – narrative)
   *Probes:* How (if at all) were these insights different from your previous perspectives?

11. How did you go about planning for your career transition?

   *Probes:* Describe the thoughts and feelings you experienced while you were going through this process. (CSRA, subjective reframing – therapeutic)
   *Probes:* What was the basis for [XXX] thought/feeling? How had you come to develop it?

12. Were there any particular people (e.g., with mentors, family members, associates) who played an especially significant role during this transition period? Who were they, and what role did they play?

Post-Career Transition

13. How would you compare your professional skills and competencies pre- vs. post- career change?

   *Probes:* To what extent did your career transition affect your view of your professional potential?
   *Probes:* To what extent did your career transition affect your view of yourself as a leader?

14. What, if anything, about being a leader has changed for you?

15. What words might you have used to describe yourself as a professional before deciding to make a career transition? What words might you use to describe yourself as a professional now, post-transition?
16. How do you think your identity as a woman impacted your transition, and ability to transition to your new position?

_Probe:_ What other aspects of your identity, if any, might have impacted your transition, and ability to transition to your new position?

17. Do you consider your transition to be a successful one? Why or why not? What factors enabled or inhibited your transition?

18. What more, if anything, did you learn about yourself through the experience of this transition? (CSRA, general learning/perspective transformation)
References


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