ABSTRACT

DISsertation: A Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of African American Males throughout Their Career Progression to the Community College Presidency

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Since their early days, community colleges have maintained a pivotal role as a provider of education to the diverse populations they serve. Over the years, these institutions of higher learning have been tasked with expanding access to education to those who had been denied even the possibility on the basis of race, economic stability, and a host of other factors. As leaders of these great institutions, community college presidents are seen as visionaries who are called to serve as the bridge between their institution and the communities they serve. In the past, the presidency has been a role largely reserved for White men with significant academic experience alone; however, in recent decades, sitting presidents have begun to retire, leaving institutional decision makers scrambling to identify new talent in a decreasing pool. While the ranks of presidency have been diversifying, men and women from racially marginalized communities still struggle to break through the glass ceiling.

Within this qualitative study, I employed an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach to explore the lived experiences of African American males who have successfully ascended to the role of community college president. The research question is how do African American males experience their career progression to the role of community college president?
To address this question, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with sitting African American male presidents to understand their experiences. I applied a critical race theory lens to understand how each participant narrated their career progression as Black men. The findings of my study included five significant themes: (a) Black Experiences; (b) Can’t do it Alone; (c) Pressure to Perform; (d) Finding the Path; and (e) Racism exists but not a Barrier. Each of the findings represents acknowledgement of the challenges, opportunities, and experiences held by participants throughout their career journey. The implications of this study include an understanding that racism exists in the community college leadership structure and has an impact on the career decisions of Black men. This structural racism has the potential to limit the available talent pool for new community college presidents and must be addressed if these institutions are going to continue doing the critical work of providing access to education for the masses.