A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES THROUGHOUT THEIR CAREER PROGRESSION TO THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENCY

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

BY

WILLIAM CHRIS CATHCART

DISSERTATION ADVISOR: DR. AMANDA O. LATZ

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

MUNCIE, INDIANA

December 2020
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BALL STATE UNIVERSITY
MUNCIE, INDIANA
December 2020
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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DEGREE: Doctor of Education

COLLEGE: Teachers College

DATE: December 2020

PAGES: 170

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.
DEDICATION

This dissertation has been a labor of love and hate—testing me to the very core and showing me just how much I can achieve with the right mix of time, effort, and love. I could not have done this without the undying support of my family. Thank you seems like too small a sentiment for everything that has been given in order to make this goal a reality. I dedicate this work to Kim, Ronald, and Mason, my family. This is our accomplishment and I am thankful for every moment you have given me in support of this dream.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my undying gratitude to everyone who helped me to achieve this great accomplishment. First and foremost, to my advisor Dr. Amanda Latz, who gave me snacks and listened to all my insane stories. To Ronald and Mason, who each, in his own way, has been my constant sources of inspiration to reach for higher heights. To Kim Williams, who taught me to love, helped me to grow, and never stopped believing in me—even when it got hard. To Vashon Broadnax and Toni Payne for being unapologetically Black with me and for constantly pulling me back-in every time I wanted to quit. To Drs. Sam Snideman, Mary Henehan, Barbara Mebane, Amy Ward, and the host of other classmates who proved this could be done. To Dr. Jerrilee Mosier, for teaching the importance of robust dialog and the meaning of courageous leadership. To Tre, for not ever giving up on us.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Community colleges have a massive leadership problem. There has been a well-documented understanding that in the coming years there will be a need to identify new and emerging leaders who could take the place of currently sitting community college presidents (Amey et al., 2002; McNair et al., 2011). This concern has been exacerbated by the fact that many vice presidents and deans have also declared an intent to retire in the next few years. Research has shown that these mid- and senior-level leaders are making their way to retirement at rates similar to those of their sitting presidents (Brown et al., 2002; Shults, 2001; Tekle, 2013). The inescapable fact is that the leaders who pioneered the expansion of the comprehensive community college model in the 1960s and 1970s have begun to make their exit from the center stage and replacements must be identified in short order (Shults, 2001). The lack of depth in the talent pool for senior community college leaders has never been more apparent.

Preparation for the role of president in a community college has evolved over time to include many different forms of training and development to identify the next generation of leaders. One pathway is preparation through graduate education. In 2010, Plinski and Walker identified that community college boards of trustees placed a high value in evidence of at least master’s level preparation for potential presidents with a high preference for doctoral level achievement. These findings in literature that show 88% of community college presidents held an earned doctorate (Weisman & Vaughan, 2007). Programs specifically designed to develop community college presidents have sometimes struggled to prove their value in preparing future community college administrators due in part to a lack of consensus around what should be included as required learning (Hammons & Miller, 2006; Laabs, 1987; Weisman & Vaughan,
1998). This perception is increasingly challenging as the roles and expectations of community college presidents have changed over time (Glass, Jr. & Jackson, 2006; Thomas, 2013).

With differing opinions have come differing approaches to solutions. In some cases, independent organizations have opted for training programs through professional development and networking experiences in the hopes of giving aspiring presidents a taste of what might be expected should they assume these roles. Examples of such programs include the Aspen Institute’s Presidential Fellows program, the American Association of Community Colleges’ (AACC) Future Presidents Institute, and the League for Innovation’s Executive Leadership Institute to name a few. These programs seek to identify and cultivate the next generation of community college leaders through approaches that are both unique and similar in their various approaches. Still some community colleges, identifying the need to find leaders that can address their unique needs, have opted to develop their own training and development programs following a “grow your own” model to varying degrees of effectiveness (McNair, 2015; Reille & Kezar, 2010).

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and other stakeholders have attempted to address the shortfall of talent by providing resources for community colleges in order to better identify future talent through either more-focused screening processes or grow-your-own leadership development programs (Ottenritter, 2012). In early editions, the competencies for community college leaders included six characteristics that were deemed necessary for successful leadership: (a) Organizational Strategy, (b) Resource Management, (c) Communication, (d) Collaboration, (e) Community College Advocacy, and (f) Professionalism (AACC, 2013). Each competency was specifically outlined to provide insight into what skills successful community college presidents possessed and on what aspiring leaders should focus to
prepare for the role of president. More recently, a new edition of the competencies was released. The revised version moved from a focus on six competencies to 11 focus areas within which new competencies were identified (AACC, 2018). Those focus areas were then provided as roadmaps for those who aspire to presidency (e.g., faculty leaders and vice presidents) as well as those new to the presidency (within their first three years of service). Although the work done by AACC and other groups (e.g., deans for community college leadership graduate programs and human resources professionals) is significant, the number of new community college presidents is not on pace with the massive number of expected retirements that will come in the years ahead.

**Problem Statement**

In 2017, women and racial/ethnic minorities were still underrepresented among the college and university presidencies. Three out of every 10 college presidents were women, and less than one in five presidents, or 17%, were racial/ethnic minorities. The current rate of retirement among current community college presidents and their generally held lack of confidence in the preparedness of the future talent pool necessitates a critical review of the pipeline to determine where gaps may exist (Gagliardi et al., 2017; Shults, 2001). In addition, a review of existing data revealed that there is a significant lack of diversity among those currently holding the role of president (Jaskchik & Lederman, 2018). Compared to other institutions of higher education, community colleges are considered to have the most diversity in their leadership ranks; however, there is still much work to be done.

The historical archetype of the American community college president is a White male who is between 55-65 years of age (Gagliardi et al., 2017). They are also increasingly coming to the role with prior experience, which denotes more lateral movement in positions rather than
upward mobility for new talent. Although women, as a whole, have made gains in their efforts to achieve the role of president, among racially marginalized groups, those gains for men and women have remained slow or flat over time (Evelyn, 2001; Seltzer, 2017; Vaughan, 1991). These consistent trends bring to the foreground questions about the experience of racial minorities who seek to become community college presidents. By giving voice to the experiences of this population, it may be possible to identify patterns of deficiency within their development process that ultimately create barriers to their ability to achieve the desired goal of becoming president.

The question of who is responsible for creating the inclusive culture that might foster more opportunities for African Americans is important, as well. In the third edition of the Competencies for Community College leadership produced by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2018), diversity as a concern for leadership received little attention. In the introductory sections of the document, there is a statement on the value of diversity and a reference to the efforts being made by some unnamed institutions to foster inclusive environments. Beyond these mentions, there are no additional statements or expressions of the need for valuing diversity within the institution as a skill that is needed for leaders to master. The lack of depth in these examples highlights the potential challenges that African Americans may experience in community college leadership talent pools and beyond.

**Purpose and Research Question**

The purpose of this research project is to examine the career experiences of African American males who have successfully attained the role of community college president. Existing literature on the subject of leadership development for future presidents is limited in its examination of limiting factors for minority groups. The scant amount of available research
made it necessary and much more important to learn about the experiences of this group as they have lived them. A singular research question guided this study: How do African American males experience their career progression to the role of community college president? I am applied a phenomenological approach to this study in order to explore these experiences and seek understanding.

**Research Approach and Theoretical Perspective**

I took a qualitative approach in an attempt to understand how members of a common community, African American male community college presidents, shed light on their perspectives related to their progress to the most senior office in an institution. Qualitative research is intended to provide a better understanding of the lived experience as a way to expand knowledge and our perspective of reality (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leavy, 2014). It is focused on the description of incidents, actions, and processes (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009) and requires in-depth analysis and coding of data. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) explained that qualitative research is the study of things in their natural settings, and it attempts to make sense of or interpret a phenomenon by the meaning that people bring to them. It involves the collection of a variety of materials including case studies, personal experience, introspections, life stories, interviews, and artifacts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). I employed a qualitative research approach to understand the descriptions provided by participants of their experiences throughout their career progression to the role of community college president.

An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach was applied to this study in an attempt to explore and understand the common experiences of participants who, in this case, were represented as African American community college presidents. Smith et al. (2012) identified IPA as a qualitative research approach committed to the exploration of how people
make meaning of their major life experiences. In this case, the shared experiences are those of African American community college administrators as they navigated a career pathway to the presidency. For Smith et al. (2012), IPA is also considered an interpretative process that is rooted in hermeneutics as a theory of interpretation. IPA researchers are especially interested in what happens when everyday lived experiences take on a particular significance for people. This usually happens when something significant happens in our individual lives.

Critical race theory (CRT) forms the theoretical basis for this study. CRT is a framework that seeks to center the impact of race and racism on the lives of People of Color (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Credited to legal scholar Derrick Bell, CRT has its origins in the criminal justice system, with a focus on the experiences of African American people during the Civil Rights era (Bell, 1995; Khalifa et al., 2013). In writing, CRT is characterized by frequent use of first-person, storytelling, narrative allegory, interdisciplinary treatment of law, and the unapologetic use of creativity. The work is often seen as disruptive and goes further to challenge racism than civil rights, integration, affirmative action, and other liberal measures. While CRT is generally held as a central tool for discussing race and racism’s impact on various minority groups, the focus of this study is the experiences of African American males. As a result, CRT becomes BlackCrit and seeks to expand the body of literature that is specific to African American people (Dumas & Ross, 2016).

**Rationale and Significance of the Study**

There is considerable literature available that addresses the topic of preparing future leaders for the presidency (Eddy, 2012; Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017; Jones, 2012; McNair et al., 2011). There is also research that identifies the key knowledge and capabilities that successful community college presidents are expected to have (Brown et al., 2002; Cejda &
Jolley, 2016; Eddy, 2012; McNair, 2015). There is, however, a limited amount of information that addresses the specific experiences of African American male community college leaders who successfully have risen to the role of president. The choice to focus on African American male community college presidents was made based on a desire to expand the amount of available literature that explores the professional journey of African American community college administrators while giving focus to a specific subset of the population as a point of later expansion. This goal is important to me as an African American who is interested in becoming a community college president. As a result of this study, I hope to draw out ideas about the root causes for the lack of diversity at the level of community college president and how to improve it.

By focusing on the experiences of African American male community college presidents, it is hoped that there will be emergent patterns useful as a basis for developing understanding and improvement in the overall talent pool for the role of community college president. I believe that the individual and collective experiences of this specific group (i.e., African American male community college presidents) would likely be transferrable to other racial minority groups. This also forms the foundation for the theoretical framework that was applied.

**Limitations**

Face to face interviews were not possible in this study because the majority of prospective participants were located at a considerable distance from where I, as the researcher, was located. Therefore, interviews were conducted by phone. This limited my ability to catch non-verbal cues that came from responses. While visual technology might have provided some possible solution there was still a limited ability to catch the type of reactions that would occur in a face to face interaction. Also, community college presidents are often limited in their ability to
participate in outside activities, this possibility resulted in lower than expected participation rates compared to those found in other studies. Finally, the overall number of African American male community college presidents served as a natural limiting factor in the ability to generate a large sample size.

The participants in this study identify as either presidents or chancellors. Presidents are generally considered chief operating officers who oversee a single institution. The colleges they led may have had multiple locations but they still identify as a singular college. Chancellors in this study operated at a system level. This system level includes multiple individual schools or campuses that may or may not be associated with an individual institution. Generally, presidents who are operating in a system report directly to a chancellor, those who are not in an identified system report directly to a board of directors. Chancellors who oversee systems report directly to a board and have no other direct supervisor. Individuals who hold the role of system chancellor in this study have significantly more years of experience than those holding president roles. Due to their age differences it is possible that their responses were less focused on their first experience as president exclusively and may be less focused in their responses.

**Positionality**

I began working in at a community college in December 2012 with the purpose of becoming a community college president. I was hired to serve at the vice president level and have worked on the president’s leadership team for five years. In that time, I have had the opportunity to work under an experienced community college president who has given me insight into the requirements and responsibilities of the role of president. I have also participated in several presidential leadership development programs which were designed for the purpose of helping emerging leaders to understand the role of community college president and prepare to
compete for available positions. One of the programs that I completed, the Lakin Institute for Mentored Leadership, was designed to provide resources and support for African American men and women who were interested in assuming the role of president.

To date, I have participated in three official presidential searches. Two of the searches were with a large, statewide singly accredited community college system in the Midwest, and the other was an individual college that was a part of the technical college system for a rural community in the Southeastern United States. In two of the three searches, I managed to progress to the second round and in one, I was one of two finalists for the role of president. While I have not yet been selected as the final candidate in a search, participating in these types of interviews has given me valuable knowledge and experiences that were instrumental in my understanding of this research study.

As an African American male community college administrator, I also have a unique perspective with regard to how the experiences of racism and racial bias may be internalized by administrators who aspire to higher levels of leadership within community college systems. I have great interest in sharing the lived experiences of African American community college presidents in an effort to expand the opportunities that are available for others who seek the role.

**Definitions**

**Anti-Black Racism:** The type of racism directed against Black peoples (Kumas et. al., 2014).

**BlackCrit/Critical Theory:** A subcategory of critical race theory (CRT) specifically designated to describe how Black & African American people experience race, racism, and oppression within established systems (Dumas & Ross 2016; Roberts, 1999).
**Career Progression**: The significant advancement experiences and opportunities that occur at key developmental points of a participant’s career history.

**Community College**: An institution of higher education offering associate degrees, diplomas and certificates, career and workforce development, vocational and technical training, remedial studies, and continuing education classes (Vaughan, 2000).

**Community College President**: The chief executive officer of a community college who is seen as the face of the institution and responsible for setting the vision, mission, and goals.

**Critical Race Theory**: Focuses on the various ways in which the law adversely affects People of Color as a group. This theory suggests institutional racism exists in the dominant culture, and power structures are based on White privilege and White supremacy, which contribute to the marginalization of People of Color (Bell, 1995).

**Crits**: Researchers who apply critical race theory as a tool for theorizing around issues of race for People of Color, in their understanding of how race as an elusive force impacts the lives of People of Color (Cabrera, 2018; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Khalifa et al., 2013).

**Ethnicity**: A reference to groups that are characterized in terms of a common nationality, culture, or language (Betancourt & López, 1993).

**Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**: A qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

**Phenomenology**: A design of inquiry rooted in philosophy and psychology employed by researchers to describe lived experiences about a specific phenomenon as described by participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

**Race**: A social construct that artificially divides people into distinct groups based on characteristics such as physical appearance (Adams et al., 1997).
Racism: The belief that a particular race is superior or inferior to another (Sheared et al., 2010).

Summary and Organization of the Dissertation

This chapter provided a brief introduction to this study, its purpose, and the guiding research question. It began with a brief description of the community college landscape and outlined the challenges associated with the shortage of qualified leaders prepared to take the role of community college president. Information was also provided on the demographic makeup of the current crop of presidents and how it has changed or remained static over time. The rationale for the study was provided to address the contextual need to address the research question as stated.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was introduced as the methodological framework employed for this study. This qualitative approach is ideal for exploring the lived experiences of study participants that are deemed to be significant based on their unique perspectives. Using IPA, has helped me to understand how the everyday experiences of study participants form their understanding of career progression to the community college presidency. This study explores these experiences to identify what, if any, commonalities exist among Black males who have worked to achieve the role of president for a community college. IPA is paired with critical race theory (CRT) to focus the study on the experiences of People of Color with specific interest in men who identify as Black/African American. CRT is rooted in the criminal justice system and is designed to identify the systemic nature of racism in American society. CRT theorists work to create better outcomes for People of Color by calling out the inequalities within institutional structures. CRT and BlackCrit, specifically, provide a theoretical perspective that can be used to identify systemic barriers that may exist for Black males seeking to become
community college presidents. Definitions, limitations, and the researcher’s perspective were all provided to undergird the structure of the study.

In Chapter Two I will present a deep analysis of the research literature that underpins the basis of this study. I will provide a brief historical context on the role of community colleges in America and the evolution of the role, function, and demography of president. I will also provide further explanation of the theoretical framework of this study and introduce key elements that will form the core of my research design. In Chapter Three I will detail the methodological approach developed for this study including participant selection, data collection, and analysis. In Chapter Four I will discuss study findings and related themes. In Chapter Five I will conclude the dissertation with a discussion of significant themes identified from the findings tying them to relevant research. I will conclude this dissertation with suggestions for future research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Community colleges are facing a crisis of leadership that is, in part, the result of a massive wave of pending retirements at the senior leadership level (Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017; McNair et al., 2011). Not only are presidents considered pioneers of community colleges retiring, so too are those most likely to be the next in line to assume the role (Ross & Green, 2000). Although the work done by the AACC and other groups (e.g., deans for community college leadership graduate programs and human resources professionals) is significant, the number of new community college presidents is not growing at a pace able to balance out the massive numbers of expected retirements that will be coming in the years ahead. It should be noted that there was an expectation that many recently sitting community college CEOs would have begun to retire as early as the mid-2000s; however, challenges related to the 2008 recession and other economic forces pushed some leaders to linger beyond their initial stated exit plans (Appadurai, 2009; Hassan et al., 2009). While this did stem the tide and offer some measure of relief from the immediate need for new talent, the fact still remains that community college boards and the institutions they oversee have a problem: a lack of available talent.

A lack of diversity among the ranks of senior leadership has compounded the issue of a persistent lack of leaders prepared to take up the role of president (Gagliardi et al., 2017; Jaschik, & Lederman, 2018). This has created an even greater shortage of available talent prepared to take on the role of community college president (Evelyn, 2001; Shults, 2001; Vaughan, 1991). There is, however, a limited amount of information that addresses the experiences of African American community college administrators who successfully have assumed the role of president.
The purpose of this research project is to examine the career experiences of African American males who have successfully attained the role of community college president. By undertaking this study, I hoped to shed light on the challenges that African American administrators face on their journeys to become community college presidents. I would like for this study to add to the available research on community colleges and help increase the opportunities for African American professionals to navigate the process.

The Presidency

In 1640, Henry Dunster was elected the chief officer at Harvard College, making him the first college president on record (Wessel & Keim, 1994). Over the years, the role of president has been seen as a position of high esteem, viewed as the pinnacle of academic administration (Oikelome, 2017). This is particularly true of four-year masters and doctoral degree granting institutions. But, as priorities have shifted, the field of higher education has become much broader. In earlier years, the most senior administrative position fell to members of the clergy serving as teachers and disciplinarians (Wessel & Keim, 1994). This changed significantly as institutions began to focus more on economic stability and social issues, leading to a heavier influence on the part of the president as a chief administrator (Davis, 2018). Today, the chief academic officer is still more likely to be considered as a candidate for the presidency than other administrators, but socioeconomic influences and changing public perceptions have created more opportunities for those outside the traditional academic realm.

Much research has been conducted to understand the profiles of successful college and university presidents focusing on their career progression, academic backgrounds, and leadership styles (Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001; Cooney & Borland, 2018; Gagliardi, et al., 2017; Ross & Green, 2000; Wessel & Keim, 1994). As our understanding of the overall purpose and focus of
higher education has changed so has the nature of the role presidents play in higher education. As institutional leaders, college presidents are the ultimate champions of mission, vision, and purpose. They wear many hats and serve as many or more masters depending on the organizational structure of the chosen institution.

At the community and junior college level, scholars have focused on several areas, including the changing nature of the role (Cohen et al., 2014), career pathways and preparation (AACC, 2018; Eddy, 2010; Jones & Warnick, 2012, McNair, 2015; Weisman & Vaughn, 2007), and the need for diversification of representation (Gagliardi, et al., 2017; Jaschk, & Lederman, 2018; Shults, 2001). These studies have been at the forefront of the discussion regarding how to address this alarming situation caused by the considerable turnover that is occurring at the most senior levels of the community college administration. As the original pioneers who paved the way for the current iterations of the community college have begun to make their exits from center stage, the institutions they leave behind are left to reflect on the decisions of the past and how new leadership should look.

In the past, the president was almost a carbon copy of a single model regardless of intuition type, size, or structure. The archetype of a mid-to-late 50’s White male academic has held a firm place in the core of community college leadership (Shults, 2001). This is still the case, even despite the progressive strides that have been made to prepare underrepresented groups to assume the role in recent years.

Shults (2001), in a study conducted for the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), highlighted the troubling facts related to the pending retirement of CEOs as they related to the lack of diversity at the level of community college president. Shults found that the majority of presidents were White males with an average age of 56. He also noted that
gains were being made by women and minorities who were successfully achieving the role of president at rates of 22.3% and 12.3%, respectively. Gagliardi et al. (2017) expressed a similar concern for the low numbers of women and minorities nearly 20 years later. They found that the mean age had jumped to 62 and that women and racial/ethnic minorities were still underrepresented among the presidents. Three out of every 10 college presidents are women, and less than one in five presidents are racial/ethnic minorities.

Historically, the role of president has been held almost exclusively by White males. Recent studies have identified that current presidents feel that there is a lack of diversity in the current crop of potential replacements as well (Gagliardi et al., 2017; Jaschik & Lederman, 2018). In the case of African Americans, a study in 1991 found that they made up only 4.5% of sitting presidents (Vaughan, 1991). A follow-up study determined that those numbers had only increased slightly to 5% (Evelyn, 2001). In 2016, that number had grown to 8%, representing some upward trend but still a very small part of the overall pool and well below what would be expected given that the group as a whole makes up 13.4% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). It is also significant that as students, Blacks are overwhelmingly represented as a part of the community college enrollment demographic (Wood, 2014; Long, 2016). This, more than anything, should require a closer look at the current and past demographics of community college presidents to determine what opportunities may have been missed.

**Presidential Role and Responsibility**

The dynamic nature of the work expected from community college presidents makes it difficult to narrow to a list of specific duties. There is generally no one set of experiences that might lead to a typical day in the office for these leaders. Regional needs, reporting structures,
political climate, and a host of other factors play a role in what presidents might be expected to do or accomplish from one day to the next.

It is possible, however, to identify key skillsets community college presidents are expected to have that may form the core of their work at any given point. Pierce and Pederson (1997) argued that community college presidents are more than just chief problem-solvers. They are also expected to sometimes meet a governing board's need for counsel; inspire faculty and staff, champion quality curriculum and instruction; serve as a model of ethical behavior; and provide vision for the entire community (McNair et al., 2011). Eddy (2005) also pointed out that along with creating and championing the vision, the president is responsible for providing stability of leadership helping campus staff and faculty make meaning during periods of uncertainty. Vaughan and Weisman (1998) made similar claims about the importance of creating meaning in times of uncertainty as central to the role of community college presidents of the twenty-first century.

Weisman and Vaughan (2007) identified several key functions that were common to most community college presidents. Ninety-five percent of sitting presidents served on the boards for community-based organizations. This highlights the importance of the president as a servant leader who is responsive to the needs of the local community. This is further reinforced by their finding that 84% of presidents performed some type of community service. They also found advocacy to be a significant part of presidential work, noting that 52% of presidents spoke with state representatives more than 10 times per year and that they met with business leaders more frequently than they met with local school officials.

Eddy (2010) echoed similar findings, focused on the changing nature of mission for community colleges and the impact on presidents. She pointed to the expanding nature of the
competing pressures to meet the needs for transfer education, vocational training, and community service all as equally important priorities for a president to manage. She concluded that current community college leaders need to understand the details of faculty governance and collective bargaining along with balancing the multiple priorities of the local community, students, business partners, and legislators. Arguably one of the most significant responsibilities for presidents in the new millennium involves resource management and fundraising (McNair et al., 2011). In recent years, the president has moved away from the role of academic champion and toward that of a chief fundraiser responsible for ensuring that the colleges they lead have the funds and other resources to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population (Duree, 2007; McNair et al., 2011).

Community college presidents wear many hats. The murky expectations that are placed upon these leaders are representative of the many competing priorities that are set for the institutions they lead. Even under the weight of such expectations, most presidents report a high level of satisfaction in the work that they perform (Duree, 2007; Gagliardi et al., 2017; Weissman & Vaughan, 2007). Still, many also have expressed that training and preparation is still needed to prepare the next generation of leaders for the work that must be done in the years ahead (Jaschik & Lederman, 2018). Much work has been done over the years to address these needs, focusing on the development of skills that will help new community college presidents assume their roles with an eye toward success and longevity.

**Developing Talent**

Reille and Kezar (2010) identified three specific types of leadership development solutions for building presidential pipelines: (a) university-based graduate degrees, (b) short-term leadership programs such as institutes and seminars, and (c) college-based, in-house leadership
development programs, also referred to as grow-your-own (GYO) programs. Each of these programs has individual strengths and weaknesses and is designed to fill a specific need. Graduate degree programs, for example, have long been considered a necessity for prospective presidents, a fact that is evidenced by the high percentage of presidents that hold masters and terminal degrees. Graduate degrees are also highly regarded by boards of trustees when making a selection on potential presidential candidates (Plinske & Packard, 2010). Historically, graduate programs have been criticized for being too focused on theory and not enough on practical work experiences. This concern has been compounded by the lack of consensus regarding what specific topics should actually be covered in these programs, echoing the expansive set of expectations that are held for the presidential role (Brown et al., 2002; Eddy, 2008; Reille & Kezar, 2010).

Aspiring community college presidents have a number of opportunities for professional development along their career path. These development opportunities come in different formats however, many take the form of short-term training programs. Wallin (2007) defined short-term programs as those that have a timeframe of two days to one year and are not associated with academic credit. These programs were developed by states, professional organizations, consortia, and individual colleges as a way to fast-track new leaders and to prepare them for the rigors of leadership (Boggs, 2003; Wallin, 2004). There are many different formats for these programs. Some programs are also specifically designed to provide opportunities for underrepresented minority groups. The Thomas Lakin Institute for Mentored Leadership, for example, outlines its mission to prepare Black senior-level community college executives for positions as chief executive officers (Lakin Institute for Mentored Leadership, 2019). Still, while these programs have grown quickly in popularity, very few have clearly stated what they hope to
accomplish, why certain topics were covered, or the applicability of their presentations to the needs of participants (Wallin, 2007).

Another option for development of aspiring presidents might be a grow-your-own model. Reille and Kezar (2010) defined grow-your-own (GYO) programs as a leadership development program offered by a college or district to some of its employees as a way of preparing them for leadership positions within their institutions. They proposed that these GYO programs might be more effective at preparing new leaders for the role of president than the training provided by an advanced degree or statewide/national leadership development. This is because these types of programs can be customized to meet the college’s needs as defined by culture and goals (Stone, 1995). Hull and Keim (2007) identified that nearly 70% of sitting presidents espoused the benefits of expanding in-house programs; however, other studies have shown that few institutions actually had one in place (Jeandron, 2006). One of the benefits of GYO programs is the ability to identify and prepare current employees to become the future leaders of their home institutions (Stone, 1995). Jeandron (2006) outlined many additional benefits of GYO programs. She found that participants who participated in such programs were later promoted or took on leadership roles in their campuses. They were also more likely to become involved in campus activities and committees, increase their collaboration across disciplines, develop innovative projects, and improve their problem-solving abilities and self-confidence. It was also posited that leaders who participated in campus-based leadership programs had improved cultural competency within their organizations leading to better decision making and more effective communication.
The Competencies

Recognizing the need for a new crop of talented leaders, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), along with other stakeholders, embarked on a mission to establish criteria that would help guide the development of those seeking to build the necessary skills to step into the role. In 2003, AACC and its partners initiated the Leading Forward project to identify those characteristics that constituent groups identified as necessary for effective community college leaders. This became a two-year AACC initiative that was funded by a $1.9 million planning grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Implemented under the label of a lead the way project, the goal was to give trustees, institutional leaders, and recruiters a roadmap to prepare the next generation of leaders for their work (AACC, 2018).

The work began in 2001, when AACC kicked off the first of several exploratory activities at their leadership summit with the goal of developing a strategy that would assist institutions with understanding how an effective community college president looked (Ottenritter, 2012). The end result of this work was the development of the Competencies for Community College leaders (i.e., the competencies). The competencies were approved by the American Association of Community Colleges Board of Trustees. The competencies were presented as a document encouraging community college leaders, boards of trustees, and community college leadership development program managers to use as a roadmap for future prospects. The first edition of the competencies was collectively organized into six general areas with more specific behaviors, values, and characteristics described under each area. The broad categories included: (a) Organizational Strategy; (b) Resource Management; (c) Communication; (d) Collaboration; (e) Community College Advocacy; and (f) Professionalism.
The competencies for community college leaders were celebrated as a research-based framework designed to help aspiring and emerging leaders to chart their professional and career development and assist leadership development programs with career guides. They also were expected to guide human resources departments and boards of trustees through recruiting, hiring, and professional development of the next generation of leaders. Although the six competencies have been studied and evaluated across multiple lenses, the original guide was designed to be a living document that would change with the times and needs of the community colleges it supports. To date there have been two revisions of the competencies, with the most recent third edition released in 2018.

The current set of revised competencies for community college leadership was developed to provide community colleges with the tools they need to prepare for the next generation of leaders. In 2017, Walter Bumphus, AACC president and CEO, established the Commission on Leadership and Professional Development (AACC, 2018). One of their tasks was to recommend revisions to the second edition of the existing AACC competencies. The Commission was comprised mainly of sitting community college CEOs and vice presidents who have the experience necessary to make recommendations on the currently needed skills of aspiring leaders. Feedback was also solicited from the AACC Board of Directors, the 2018 cohort of Presidents Summer Leadership Institute, and other community college leadership development stakeholders (e.g., directors of doctoral programs in community college leadership, affiliated councils, and members of the AACC Faculty Advisory Council; AACC, 2018). The goal of the Commission was to create a comprehensive document that would guide the development of emerging leaders and the hiring of employees that are committed to the community college mission, vision, and values.
The current version of the guide includes 11 focus areas that the Commission identified as critical to the internal and external operations of the community college. Specific competencies are listed underneath each focus area to represent the skills desired for emerging, new, and established leaders. The newly introduced 11 focus areas include (a) Organizational Culture; (b) Governance, Institutional Policy, and Legislation; (c) Student Success; (d) Institutional Leadership; (e) Institutional Infrastructure; (f) Information and Analytic; (g) Advocacy and Mobilizing/Motivating Others; (h) Fundraising and Relationship Cultivation; (i) Communication; (j) Collaboration; and (k) Personal Traits and Abilities. These focus areas were divided into subgroups so that leaders could identify the development path that best suits their needs. The competencies were then designed with the following considerations and revisions in mind:

- **Student access and success is the North Star for community colleges**–Community colleges have a mission to increase the number of students earning certificates and associate degrees by 50% by 2020, while preserving access, enhancing quality, and eradicating attainment gaps associated with income, race, ethnicity, and gender.

- **Institutional transformation**–In order to maintain relevance, 2-year colleges must redesign educational experiences and operations to meet the needs of students in less traditional ways while still ensuring efficiency and effectiveness.

- **Guidelines for career progression and/or to improve current position**–The purpose of this revision is to provide useful information on the proficiency required to improve within one’s current position, and to show how their experiences have led to progression in how the competency as they navigate their career path. (AACC, 2018, pp. 3-4).
The Gap: Diversity Problems

As addressed in the competencies themselves, diversity is said to be embedded in the competency of collaboration. As was stated in the second edition, the collaboration competency establishes that the leader will “embrace and employ the diversity of the individual’s cultures, values, ideas, and communication styles” (AACC, 2016, p.10). The recently released third version of the American Association of Community Colleges Competencies for Community College leaders makes a point to call out the importance of diversity (AACC, 2018). It suggested that there are many institutions making great strides at creating inclusive environments as outlined in the excerpt from the organizations statement on diversity:

Community colleges by mission strive to create an inclusive environment where all students regardless of the basis of race, color, religion (creed), gender, gender expression, age, national origin (ancestry), disability, marital status, sexual orientation, or military status feel welcome and can achieve their educational goals. These institutions value the rich diversity that people from different backgrounds bring to the college and the community. While diversity and equity are not expressly outlined as a separate competency, AACC understands the importance of creating an environment that embraces diversity.

Within the AACC competencies there is a need to have a specific competency that addresses the concerns of a diverse population. The collaboration competency, which speaks to developing teams and appreciation of difference, is often considered the go-to answer when there is a question about diversity. There is a need for the leadership to have a deeper understanding of the underlying issues that students, staff, and faculty face in an effort to continue the work that
has been done to foster success for all populations. Community colleges have demonstrated the ability to address those needs with many examples found in contemporary research.

With regard to the needs of faculty and staff, however, there are challenges that remain unaddressed. The issues that faculty of color experience are similar across the higher education spectrum. These issues have been more widely explored in the four-year institution space, but the feelings of isolation, intimidation, and pressure to conform extend to the community college space, as well (Abiola et al., 2015; Barrett et al., 2014). This is an especially concerning theme for community colleges, at which a much higher proportion of their faculty is classified as part-time or adjunct (Stenerson et al., 2010). Those classified in this way already feel less engaged with their home institution than their fulltime counterparts. The additional consideration of issues related to race and ethnicity would seem to only make things more difficult in the long term. The potential here is that disengaged faculty of color will also have a negative impact on the student populations they serve.

Perhaps the most telling example of the lack of a focus on a diversity competency is the fact that, historically, the role of president has been held almost exclusively by White males. Recent studies have identified that current presidents feel that there is a lack of diversity in the current crop of potential replacements (Gagliardi et al., 2017; Jaschik, & Lederman, 2018). Weisman and Vaughan (2007) reported a race/ethnicity breakdown of community college presidents; 88% Caucasian, 6% African American, 4% Hispanic, 1% Asian American, and 0% Native American. Women have represented the greatest increase among the ranks of community college leaders.
Issues for African Americans Administrators

For many African Americans, the issues they experience during their career progression are unique to their awareness of their race and the constant perception of racial bias or anti-Black racism within their everyday lives. In the case of African American males, there is a considerable amount of research that outlines how this group encounters and internalizes instances of racial microaggressions, discrimination, stereotypes, and prejudice (Feagin, 2006, 2006; Feagin et al., 1996; Harper, 2006, 2009; Jackson, 2008; Jackson & Moore III, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; McCabe, 2009; Smith, Allen et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2006, 2007; Solórzano et al., 2000). Peirce (1995) uncovered the connections between racism as means of control and race-related stress. His research found that Blacks regularly deal with oppressive agents, environments, or situations that limit their Space, Time, Energy, and Motion (STEM). His work further outlines that White spaces can be considered Mundane, Extreme, Environmental Stress (MEES) (Carroll, 1998; Pierce, 1974, 1975a, 1975b, 1995). These stressors are considered mundane (M) because they are often taken for granted; they are extreme (E) because they are excessive and have influence on physiological, psychological, emotional, and cognitive reactions; environmental (E) because they are a part of the historical and institutional patterns that influence policy practices, behaviors, and cultures; this produces stress (S) because the combination of these elements are distressing and can take up valuable time and energy that could be used toward more positive humanitarian goals (Smith et al., 2011).

Smith et al. (2006) expanded on Pierce’s (1995) work by defining racial microaggression as subtle and nonverbal insults directed at People of Color—layered insults based on one’s race, race-gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname. Smith, Yosso et al. (2007) outlined the concept of Black misandric microaggression as those
racial microaggressions that are expressly aimed at and affect Black males. It can be understood that Black misandry is an exaggerated pathological aversion to Black men that is created and reinforced in societal, institutional, and individual ideologies, practices, and behaviors (Smith, 2010; Smith, Allen et al, 2007; Smith et al., 2007). Smith et al. (2011) further explained that the time and energy spent navigating hostile environments and dealing with microaggressions is a major cost to managing a hopeful disposition for African Americans. They explain these collective insults cause unnecessary stress to People of Color.

Smith (2004, 2008a, 2008b) developed the concept of racial battle fatigue to better understand how the systemic nature of racial oppression and stress impacts the experiences of People of Color. He defined racial battle fatigue as a framework that considers increased levels of psychosocial stressors and other factors that play a role in the lived experiences of People of Color in everyday life. Black men are said to be regularly presented with various forms of Black misandric discrimination, leading to limitations that are placed on the availability of space, time, energy or counterstrategies that help them to cope with and resist systems of oppression within which they live (Smith et al., 2011). Studies have shown that these facts lead to the many ways that Black men are depleted of personal resources to address the stresses of their reality (Dressler et al., 1998; Harper, 2009; Jackson, 2008; James et al., 1983; James et al., 1984; Smith, Allen et al., 2007).

This reality aligns with one of the core tenets of critical race theory: the belief that racism is a real and everyday phenomenon for People of Color (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). It is also clear that the systemic nature of racism that occurs within the education system would have a negative impact on those same People of Color who are seeking
to progress in their careers. Specifically, there are several challenges that faculty and staff of color experience related to issues of racism:

- **Feelings of separateness or difference.** Studies have shown that African Americans must find ways to navigate their daily experiences with the majority culture (Gardner Jr. et al., 2014). They also struggle to find balance between their personal and professional self, creating a pressure of double consciousness particularly for faculty of color (Levin et al., 2013).

- **Institutional factors.** Although many institutions have statements and policies about diversity and inclusion, the institutions remain ineffective and some seem unwilling to attack the issue of racial bias within the system head on (Gasman et al., 2015). This leads to an internalized feeling of lack of value on the part of African American faculty and staff. This increases the overall stress levels of these individuals and makes them more unwilling to seek higher levels of career progression over time as the institutions they work for do not see value in them.

These two ideas come together to influence the experiences of African Americans who seek to achieve the level of community college CEO. From the perspective of feeling separate, an individual who is involved in a search process must interact with campus personnel, community members, and likely members of the institution’s board of trustees. Typically, fit (as a concept) is understood as the degree to which an individual is able to mirror the norms and values of the institutional culture they seek to join (Olsen et al., 1995). The historical lack of focus on diversity at senior levels would imply that it might be difficult for an African American person to appear relatable when called to do so in interviews. This would thus create difficulty
for these candidates to seem ideal to decision makers and hiring committees responsible for selecting new leaders.

The question of who is responsible for creating the inclusive culture that might foster more opportunities for African Americans, then, is important as well. In the third edition of the Competencies for Community College Leadership produced by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2018), diversity as a concern for leadership still receives little attention. In the introductory sections of the document, there is a statement on the value of diversity, as well as a reference to the “good work” being done by some unnamed intuitions to foster inclusive environments (p. 5). Beyond that, however, there is no additional statement or expression of the need for valuing diversity within the institution as a skill that is needed for leaders to master. One could argue that this is then a direct example of an attempt within a system to repress opportunities for People of Color and keep Whiteness as a priority (Cabrera, 2018).

There has been a great deal of research presented regarding the needs and challenges for future community college leaders (Shults, 2001). The studies have related to the experiences of minorities and, more specifically, those of African American or Black people have been focused primarily on their challenges as faculty, staff, and administrators (Allen & Joseph, 2018; Han & Onchwari, 2014; Perna et al., 2007). There is scant detail on the experiences of African Americans who achieve the level of president at a community college, according to a study by Gagliardi et al., 2017, minorities as a whole made up 36% of all presidents serving at associates degree granting institutions. Thus, in this dissertation I explore the experiences of past and present African American male community college presidents.
I have selected this group for several reasons; First there are many barriers that African American males face throughout the higher education pipeline. The attainment gap that Black males face impacts their earning potential and economic status (Wood et al., 2016). Issues of race and racism have long been associated with the barriers to academic achievement for People of Color (Sheared et al., 2010). Racism has a well-documented history of negative impact on the education space that has been shown to adversely impact the enrollment, retention, and graduation rates for Black male students (Hall & Rowan, 2000).

Second, African American males make up a larger portion of the demographic than their female counterparts. In 2016, women identifying as minority as a whole made up less than 6% of all college presidents, which is half the number represented by minority males (Gagliardi et al., 2017). This relatively small population is further reduced for proportions of African Americans. Given these facts and my general interest in how the research relates to my personal experience, I have chosen to focus on the experiences of African American men.

**Theoretical Foundation: Critical Race Theory**

As a body of legal scholarship, Critical Race Theory (CRT) allowed practitioners to challenge racism at an institutional level, particularly within the criminal justice system (Bell, 1995). As a theoretical framework, CRT may be used to examine the way race and racism influence everyday society as experienced through the lives of People of Color (Bell, 1995; Crenshaw, 2011). To address the experiences of African American people, specifically, an African American critical theory perspective has been argued as a race-specific expansion of CRT (Dumas & Ross 2016; Roberts, 1999). Primarily focused on the narrative experiences of African Americans, the concepts are rooted in the legal system as scholars have attempted to
address the lack of representation of voices and experiences of People of Color in the social narrative.

Although the origins of CRT can be traced back to the work of noted scholars like W.E.B. DuBois, the movement really took shape in the mid-1970s through the efforts of individuals like Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, who sought a way to reinvigorate the Civil Rights movement which they and other scholars believed had stalled out with the passage of time (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Other legal scholars also joined the effort and a movement slowly began to take shape. In the summer of 1989, 23 legal scholars of color met for a week-long workshop to better identify the concepts and ideas related to CRT (Crenshaw, 2011).

As a general framework, critical race theory is separate from traditional theoretical frameworks to the extent that it seeks human emancipation and a disruption of the status quo (Leavy, 2014). Further, critical theory is also concerned with empowering people to move beyond the burden of race, class, and gender (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This focus on race is the sweet spot for CRT, which brings attention to the relationship between race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

**CRT in Research**

As a research framework, CRT seeks to study the impact of race and racism on the lives of People of Color (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Credited to Derrick Bell, CRT was a response to what Bell (1995) and other CRT scholars considered the stagnation of the Civil Rights Movement. Calling into question the lack of progress for African Americans, this group sought to push for more radical and ideological change to address systems that oppressed African Americans and other minorities (Bell, 1995; Crenshaw, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Initially designed to represent the experiences of African Americans in the legal system, CRT has
expanded to include other systems such as health care and education (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lynn & Dixson, 2013; Tate IV, 1997; Taylor et al., 2016). This focus on race is central to CRT, which brings attention to the relationship between race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

**Tenets of CRT**

At the core of most critical race theory (CRT) research can be found a general set of tenets that guide Critics, researchers who apply critical race theory as a tool for theorizing around issues of race for People of Color, in their understanding of how race as an elusive force impacts the lives of People of Color (Cabrera, 2018; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017: Khalifa et al., 2013). The tenets take slightly different forms that are largely dependent on the system under study and the focus of the researcher conducting the work. Generally speaking, they breakdown to the following:

- **Racism is normal**: Racism is a structured part of everyday life in the U.S. as opposed to an aberration or a function of a few racist individuals (e.g., Neo-Nazis).
- **Interest convergence**: It argues that the interests of People of Color will only be advanced to the extent that they also advance White interests.
- **Race is social construction**: Race is socially constructed and therefore should not be essentialized (i.e., there are no inherent characteristics of any racial group).
- **Differential racialization**: This examines the unique patterns of racial marginalization across racial groups (e.g., between African Americans and Asians).
- **Intersectionality**: It examines multiple, mutually-reinforcing forms of oppression that contextualize lived experiences (e.g., being Latina/o, poor, and gay).
• **Unique voices of color**: This argues that because of experiences with racism, minorities have a perspective that is markedly different than Whites and racial truth emanates from this standpoint.

• **Permanence of racism**: It argues that racism is an endemic, permanent feature of society.

• **Whiteness as property**: The thesis is two-fold. First, the U.S. legal system is founded upon property rights. Second, Whiteness has historically functioned and continues to function as a form of property.

These tenets taken together point directly to the challenges that are inherent in any discussion about race and racism as it is experienced by People of Color. At the base level, the understanding that racism is a normal part of everyday society, along with the idea that race in and of itself is a social construct, means that addressing the challenge is a seemingly endless uphill battle. The subtle shifts can be difficult for even the most conscious observer to detect, thus allowing the concept of interest convergence to support Whiteness and White supremacy as priority over all other groups (Cabrera, 2018). This can be evidenced by applications of critical race theory research in the education system where policy and practice often have a detrimental effect on Students of Color at all levels (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Detractors of critical race theory (CRT) cite several areas where it potentially fails as a research discipline. First, there is a general concern that CRT when applied to fields like education is often used as a standalone framework without a true tie to a specific theory on racism (Cabrera, 2018). Often the research conducted stated that CRT is the theoretical construct but uses no other formal tools to conduct the work. Crits respond to this concern by pointing out that CRT should be viewed as a counter narrative space where voices of minorities are used to
reframe how lived experiences of People of Color are viewed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano, & Yosso, 2001). From this standpoint, then, CRT is considered a theorizing space for analysis.

Another concern for critical race theory is that, while its origins are tied to the experiences of African American people as they have experienced racism and the negative impacts of race as a socially constructed reality, the framework has been broadened to include the realities of race and racism for all racial minorities (Dumas & Ross, 2016). Thus, CRT has become more about multiculturalism and the impact of Whiteness as a priority rather than challenging establishments on their seemingly anti-African American positionality. At the same time, separate branches of CRT have grown up to explore the specific interests of non-African American ethnic minority groups. Specifically, LatCrit, TribalCrit, and AsianCrit all explore the experiences of those groups applying basic tenets of CRT to the interests of LatinX, Native American, and Asian populations (Kolano, 2016; Krakoff, 2012; Museus, 2013; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).

Dumas and Ross (2016) have argued that if CRT has become a generalized space that characterizes the experiences of all groups, then it cannot serve as a specific tool for African Americans alone. Additionally, if there is a legitimate need to offer a specific branch of CRT for other racial minorities on the basis of their unique experiences, then there must be one specifically to address the needs of those who identify as African American. The concept of a BlackCrit or African American critical theory, then, should address the concerns and experiences of African American people in their day to day interactions with racism on a systemic level. As it relates to the experiences of African Americans or African American leaders in the community
college space, the use of BlackCrit allows researchers to consider how these individuals address their experiences that present barriers to navigating to the role of president.

**CRT and Education**

Ledesma and Calderón (2015) discussed the idea that critical race theory challenges the belief that education in the United States is based on a system of meritocracy. They highlighted that by tying the basic tenets of CRT to education, the framework has been used to expose racism as a deeply rooted influence in the American educational system. This is a reminder that racism is a real everyday occurrence, and it is experienced by People of Color in a way that is very different than the understanding of White majority counterparts. This holds true both for students and for staff and faculty of educational institutions. Through CRT, minorities are given a voice to express their experiences and shed light on a collective experience within a system that ignores and denies any possibility of separate treatment.

As a research methodology, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) explained that critical race theory seeks to accomplish five major goals: (a) center race and racism in all aspects of the research process; (b) challenge traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories that have been used to explain Students of Color’s experiences; (c) provide a liberatory or transformative response to oppression and subordination (racism, gendered, and classism); (d) focus on Students of Color’s racialized, gendered, and classed experiences; and (e) apply an interdisciplinary knowledge base, drawing from ethnic studies, women’s studies, sociology, history, humanities, and law to develop an enhanced understanding of Students of Color’s experiences in higher education. CRT as a methodology assumes that race and racism are normal (Mckinley & Brayboy, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).
Although CRT was originally established as a way to represent the experiences of African Americans in the justice system, the theories are generalized to represent all People of Color who deal with race and racism. Dumas and Ross (2016) made the case that because there are specific branches of CRT that are defined for other ethnic and racial minorities there must then be one that is specific to the needs of African American people. They further stated that CRT is not on its own intended to address the experiences of antiblackness, which is slightly different from White supremacy. Dumas (2016) identified antiblackness as a central concern of Afro-pessimism which theorizes that Black people exist in a structurally antagonistic relationship with humanity. Antiblackness then, is the break between blackness and any consideration of social or cultural regard. For this study, I will examine the experiences of African American male community college presidents as they reflect on their career progression to the presidency. CRT will be used as a filter to provide context for those experiences and determine how, if at all, race and racism might have been an obstacle faced on the way to success.

**Summary of Chapter**

In this chapter I reviewed and synthesized the literature related to the pending retirement of current community college leadership as it relates to the research focus of this study. The research question driving this study is how African American males experience their career progression to the role of community college president. I explored the history of critical race theory and how it can be used as a theoretical framework for this study. I also addressed how CRT is appropriate for use in research focused on education. In Chapter Three, I will describe the methodology used to conduct my study. I will describe the methods and explore the theory that guided the selection of participants, tools, data collection, and data analysis.
Chapter 3: Method

The first two chapters of this dissertation outlined the challenges associated with the increasing number of presidents who are retiring from their posts at America’s community colleges. Considerable research has been conducted exploring the nature of this phenomenon and its potential impact on the way community colleges will need to change in the years ahead (Amey et al., 2002; Evelyn, 2001; Gagliardi et al., 2017; Jaschik & Lederman, 2018; Shults, 2001). There has also been extensive research that explores avenues to prepare the next generation of community college leaders as a means of addressing this workforce need (Brown et al., 2002; Boswell & Imroz, 2013; Duree & Ebbers, 2012; Eddy, 2012; Hassan et al., 2009).

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2018) has worked to refine its competencies for community college leadership to provide a more robust roadmap for future leaders who seek to become presidents. The competencies provide a detailed guide for what a successful candidate for presidency might look like and allows professionals to look critically at their experiences to determine if they align with the challenges these institutions currently face. They also assist the colleges themselves to consider what their leadership needs are and how to attract the right candidates for the role. Since there is no single path to the presidency, guides like the AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders and other similar tools have the potential to provide some guidance for those uncertain about the career for themselves. They also present a quick way to highlight some of the gaps in either preparation or opportunity that keep some potential candidates from successfully making the transition to presidency.

One area of persistent concern among community college researchers, leaders, and human resources professionals has been the lack of diversity at the senior level (Schults, 2001). While the profile of the community college president is still significantly slanted toward older
White men, findings show that some progress has been made to diversify the pool (Gagliardi et al., 2017; Jaschik & Lederman, 2018). In 2016, a study by the American Council on Education found that minorities made up 17% of all college presidents; African Americans specifically represented 8% of that population. That same study found that of the African American presidents, 36% were serving as leaders for associates degree granting institutions. While this research shows that African Americans represent the largest minority group represented as community college presidents, they still fall well behind their White and female counterparts. According to the United States Census data from 2019, African Americans make up approximately 13.4% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). These facts highlight the historic lack of representation by African Americans in the role of president among community colleges. There is little research that explores the specific experiences of People of Color who make the transition to presidency at community colleges. This is perhaps in stark contrast to the amount of attention that is given to the demographics of the increasingly diverse students these intuitions serve (Long, 2016).

Given the limited scope of existing research that explores the experiences of minority community college presidents, this study expands the body of knowledge exploring the experiences of African American males who hold the title of community college president. I apply a phenomenological research design known as interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). The purpose of this research project is to examine the career experiences of African American males who have successfully attained the role of community college president. A single research question guides this study: How do African American males experience their career progression to the role of community college president? The first two chapters of this dissertation set the foundation for my phenomenological study. Chapter Three outlines my
chosen methodology. This chapter also includes my research design and approach to data analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the measures taken to ensure trustworthiness for this study.

**Methodological Frameworks**

The purpose of this research project is to examine the career experiences of African American males who have successfully attained the role of community college president. This also includes how these individuals deal with racial bias and persist through their careers to achieve the role of president. Creswell (2013) explained that qualitative research focuses on exploring a problem, rather than explaining it. This puts the focus on the experiences of the participant. Here, researchers use words and stories to answer the how and what of a particular question (Butin, 2010). Qualitative research methods can provide researchers with a way of understanding the meaning of experiences; phenomenology, which explores the lived experience, is an approach that can be used to address these types of questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hatch, 2002; Smith et al., 2009).

Creswell (2014) explained that quantitative research utilizes experimental and non-experimental designs. Experimental designs seek to uncover specific outcomes by using specific treatment conditions. Non-experimental designs examine trends, attitudes, and opinions through structured interviews and questionnaires. Quantitative research tests dependent and independent variables, experimental, and control groups, while minimizing threats to validity by seeking to establish generalizable results (Mertens, 2010).

Major strengths of quantitative research are generalizability, researcher detachment, and efficiency (Eyisi, 2016; Jackson, 2015; Mercer, 2010). It draws assumptions and methods from the natural sciences and concentrates on testing/rejecting the idea of a set of hypotheses (Boeren,
Perl and Nolden (2000) explained that quantitative research is objective—making generalizations and looking at data to eliminate outliers. They further explained that quantitative research allows for comparison and replication of data; it also can be used to explain behaviors and outcomes.

Eyisi (2016) identified one major weakness of quantitative research—its lack of flexibility and creativity. Gay et al. (2013) also identified limitations in quantitative research in its ability to adequately explore the richness of an individual’s lived experiences, not being appropriate for all research questions, and instrumentation constantly having a degree of error. Gorard et al. (2004) revealed that inaccuracies can occur within data that result in inaccuracies found in study outcomes. On the other hand, qualitative research is focused on descriptions of incidents, actions, and processes (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009) and requires in-depth analysis and coding of data. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) explained that qualitative research is the study of things in their natural settings and attempts to make sense of or interpret a phenomenon by the meaning that people bring to it. It is a collection of materials including case studies, personal experiences, introspections, life stories, interviews, and artifacts. Researchers must immerse themselves in a study through observation, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews while attempting to represent the participants’ worldviews.

Creswell (2013) detailed the strengths of qualitative research including exploration of problems or issues, empowerment of individuals to share their stories, flexibility within the style that information is shared, and the ability to help explain causal theories or models. He further explained that qualitative research is conducted in natural settings where the researcher is the instrument. Qualitative researchers have extensive interactions with participants (Gay et al., 2013) using inductive and deductive data analysis to give meaning to participants’ experiences.
Savin-Baden and Major (2013) noted that qualitative research generates lengthy observations with thick and rich descriptions.

For this study, I aimed to understand how the career experiences of African American male community college presidents have prepared them for the role and to learn how they potentially have perceived challenges throughout their progression related to their race. Employing a qualitative approach allows me to gain understanding of how these participants have experienced and have overcome challenges related to racial bias that exist within the community college environment. This research can then provide guidance for policy makers, community college boards, and human resource professionals who are interested in diversifying an already limited talent pool.

**Research Paradigm and Approach**

This study follows a constructivism-interpretivism paradigm. This approach supports the existence of multiple realities and seeks to shed light on the meanings of these experiences through a shared experience between the researcher and study participants (Ponterotto, 2005). Creswell (2013) explained that in this format the researcher is not a passive observer but is instead an active participant seeking to uncover meaning in a participant experience through a shared exchange. The constructivist perspective is appropriately paired with phenomenological inquiry as a means to explore the lived experiences of participants. My study seeks to understand how African American male community college presidents narrate their career experiences.

**Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is rooted in the work of Husserl as one of the discipline’s founding fathers, and who sought to understand human experience and consciousness by studying things
as they are ((Laverty, 2003; Moran, 2000; Oxley, 2016; Smith et al, 2009; Stewart & Mickunas, 1990). He pushed for a philosophical approach that drew attention to how individuals perceive the world (Savin-Baden & Major, 2012). He also believed that to study phenomena, preconceptions must be identified and reduced, or bracketed, to eliminate any cultural context or influence (Larkin et al., 2011). Heidegger, Gadamer, Merleau-Ponty, and others took issue with Husserl’s views related to bracketing and the role of interpretation (Laverty, 2003; Moran, 2000; Smith et al., 2009). They instead argued for the inclusion of interpretation of lived experiences in a research method that is associated with hermeneutics.

Heidegger’s view of phenomenology as outlined in his seminal work *Being and Time* (1962/1927), concerned itself less with Husserl’s subjectivity of consciousness, focused instead on broader ideas on the nature of human existence (Smith et al., 2009). Moran (2000), explained that Gadamer was influenced by Heidegger, made hermeneutics a major focus of his work. Moran’s work also showcased how Gadamer argued for the act of understanding how humans engage the world (p.250). These researchers held that interpretation allowed for deeper research and a more fully shared experience on the part of the participant (Dowling 2007; Larkin et al., 2011). Smith et al. (2009) explained how Merleau-Ponty’s work is a both a marriage of and evolution of the works of Husserl and Heidegger. They explained that Merleau’s work emphasized the fact that as embodied beings, humans give priority to their individual experiences and circumstances.

Merriam (2002) explained that phenomenology explores the common, characteristic experiences shared by individuals who belong to a certain group or population. As a methodology, phenomenology focuses on the essence of human experience to understand the nature of a specific phenomenon (Hatch, 2002). Phenomenology places an emphasis on thick
and rich description along with interpretation to create an understanding of what is to be considered the essence of an experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016; Crotty, 1998; Merriam, 2002). Because the researcher is considered an active participant, their own internal bias must be taken into consideration for this type of analysis. Creswell and Poth (2018) described a phenomenological study as a way to approach common lived experiences shared by a similar group of people. For this study, African American male community college presidents share the common experience of preparing for, seeking, and obtaining a presidency through their career progression.

**Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is traditionally associated with the social sciences, particularly psychology (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is often used to study patient experiences with illness but has also been applied to the field of education (Peters, 2016; Smith, 2011). Its roots can be traced to three primary philosophical underpinnings: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Smith et al., 2009). As previously stated, phenomenology research focuses on making meaning of lived experiences of study participants involved with a particular phenomenon. IPA extends beyond this underpinning of phenomenology and leans into hermeneutics by shifting the focus from simply description of particular phenomena to interpretation (Oxley, 2016). With hermeneutics, the researcher’s world view and experiences are blended into the way interpretation is found in participant accounts of experiences.

This work requires a reflexive process to ensure that the researcher is aware of pre-existing knowledge or preconceptions that may influence the interpretation and data analysis. Savin-Bade and Major (2013) defines reflexivity as a process that helps researcher to understand their position and influence during a study. It is a core concept in qualitative research and
focuses a researcher’s attention to how power and bias influence all aspects of research (Leavy, 2014). The exchange between the researcher and the participant should lead to a reflexive process of analysis to account for issues of internal bias and influence that might occur within the dynamic (Wagstaff & Williams, 2014).

As an African American male who has experience working in a community college and who has a desire to become a president, this reflexive process will be key to the study. IPA is ideographic in that it emphasizes smaller, homogeneous samples and focuses on the particular details of the individual. In this way, IPA allows each participant’s experiences to be explored independently, followed by a deep cross-case analysis to determine where commonality and divergence exist among cases.

This research is meant to understand how participants make meaning of their lived experiences by capturing and interpreting personal accounts (Smith & Eatough, 2007). The researcher is actively involved in this process by capturing the participant story in an attempt to get as close to their interpretation of the experience as possible. IPA researchers seek to understand both how their participants experience a specific event and their larger world view. To do this, they must go deeper than just description by providing their interpretation and in doing so finding value somewhere between the participants’ realities and their own (Larkin et al., 2006). Smith et al. (2012) identified IPA as a qualitative research approach committed to the exploration of how people make meaning of their major life experiences. In this case, the shared experiences are those that led African American community college administrators through their career pathways to the presidency.
Research Design

An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach was applied to this study in an attempt to explore and understand the common experiences of participants who, in this case, were Black male community college presidents. IPA is also considered an interpretative process that is rooted in hermeneutics as a theory of interpretation. IPA researchers are especially interested in what happens when everyday lived experiences take on a particular significance for people (Smith et al., 2012). Creswell (2018) described a phenomenological study as a way to approach “the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 75). This approach, paired with critical race theory (CRT), is used to explore if and how racism might be experienced by community college administrators who successfully achieved the role of president. The secondary focus seeks to amplify participants’ voices and allow them to share their experiences with racism throughout their career progression—if they perceived it to be a factor. One of the challenges to CRT is that it lacks a true theoretical framework from which to build research design (Cabrera, 2018). It is instead considered a theoretical counterspace through which lived experiences can be reevaluated to take into account how perspectives shift for People of Color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Pairing CRT with phenomenology allows me to use the voices of Black community college presidents to make meaning of their experiences with racism.

Pilot Study

While developing this study, a pilot study was conducted to assist with understanding the best approach for this research. The pilot study was approved by Ball State’s Institutional Review Board (IRB, 1202677-1). The purpose of the pilot study was to explore the experiences of African Americans who have successfully navigated the community college search process
and achieved the role of president. Participation was not limited by gender or age but instead focused on identifying those who had successfully achieved the role of president. The inclusion of both Black males and females provided a good insight that helped to inform the development of the current study. The study involved the use of a set of semi-structured interview questions that were developed in partnership with faculty to draw out specific aspects of the participant experience. The interview protocol from the pilot study was modified based on the responses provided by participants and with feedback from my instructor to assist with meeting the goals of the current study. Using the original study as my guide, I took questions that provided the best responses from participants and refined them based on the needs of this study. In particular, because this study focused on the experiences of Black men, I made sure to address that directly within the interview tool. In this dissertation, I also exclusively considered those who were successful in their efforts to become president which was different from the pilot which included those who had competed for the role but did not make it. I sought feedback on the pilot questions and from actual presidents who helped me to come up with new questions that would yield better responses about the participant experiences. I went through this process of review and revision several times until I had a complete version of the inventory that is used in this study. Using a modified version of the questionnaire from the pilot study allowed me to anticipate where potential pitfalls might occur in the current study and to make adjustments that improved the overall interview experience. Familiarity with the type of questions I wanted to ask also allowed me to focus more on building repartee with the participants and less on the content of the question being asked.

This interview process in the pilot study allowed for better understanding of the research processes and reveals gaps where they might otherwise not have been uncovered in a timely
fashion (Leavy, 2014). The pilot study interview process also provided confirmation of my own biases so I could address them and limit the extent to which they might influence conversations to be held during the current study. Finally, the pilot study interview process provided assistance to ensure questions asked accurately captured participant stories as desired.

**Participant Selection and Recruitment**

IPA typically requires exhaustive data collection and deep analysis, and, as such, the sample size is typically small. For these types of studies, a small sample size is considered ideal so that the researcher is able to build a deeper connection with the data. Smith (2004) explained that many IPA studies have a sample size of five to 10 participants. Alternatively, Smith et al. (2009) made the claim that an IPA study can be appropriately conducted with as few as a single participant. The goal with IPA is not to create a representative sample; instead, it is to apply purposive sampling of a homogenous group of participants that share a common experience of a given phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009; Wagstaff & Williams, 2004). Purposeful sampling is commonly used in qualitative research and means that the researcher selects the participants and sites for study because they can provide specific insight to a research problem or the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Brocki and Wearden (2006) also advised that a small sample size in an IPA study allows for sufficient perspective when given appropriate contextualization. A smaller sample size will allow more detailed and rich data to be drawn from participant interactions for interpretation of meaning. For the purpose of this dissertation, the sample size was eight participants. There were 23 invitations extended to potential participants using the recruitment letter found in appendix A. Due to timing of school year and other demands many declined participation. The final number of participants was eight which
falls within the acceptable range for an IPA study and allowed for the development of deeper understanding of their responses as shown in chapter 4 participant profiles.

Participants must have self-identified as a Black or African American male over the age of 18. The age restriction was less of a concern given that the average age of community college presidents is over 50 at the time of this study. I chose a focus on male participants because I wanted to gain insight that might benefit other Black men who, like me, aspire to become presidents. It is clear that the inclusion of Black females could also produce valuable insights, but for this study I chose to make the male voice my focus. Participants must have had experience as a candidate in at least one community college search that resulted in a successful placement into the role of community college president or the equivalent (e.g., chancellor), based on role, function, and responsibility. Since the role of president may look different from system to system, I made allowance for participants who may have had experience as individuals reporting directly to a board of trustees, as a system chancellor, or in similar structures. The key criteria were that the study participant identify as a past or currently-sitting chief executive officer for their specific institution and that he maintain operational, financial, and supervisory oversight as a part of his responsibility. All participants must have been willing to provide verbal consent via audio recording and in writing via signature on the approved informed consent document. Participants also had to be willing to participate in the study without any incentive beyond a desire to be included in the study.

Portney and Watkins (2009) highlighted the need to ensure selection of the right candidates for interviews. These candidates should have the appropriate amount of experience with the topic and have an interest in the work. For this study, I used purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Snowball sampling allows participants to suggest other individuals who
may want to participate in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this case, I sought individuals based on their common experiences as African American male community college administrators who had achieved the role of president. The use of a purposeful selection of participants was consistent with the techniques applied in IPA as a way to focus attention on the common experience that was the focus of this study (Gay et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2012). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) further explained purposeful sampling as choosing a particular participant to include because “they are believed to facilitate the expansion of the developing theory” (p. 54). In this case, the developing theory is that racism may play a role in the career progression opportunities and selection process for aspiring community college presidents. I took advantage of snowball sampling by asking each participant to provide my contact information to individuals in their network with similar experiences. In some cases, the participants opted to provide me with contact information for their close colleagues and made a warm connection between a potential participant and me as the researcher for follow up within my recruiting process. I also leveraged my own professional network to make similar referrals on my behalf. Bogdan and Biklen also explained the importance of building relationships and getting to know participants in order to put them at ease. Leavy (2014) also pointed to the need for “good rapport” (p. 279) with participants as an opportunity to uncover richer more honest qualitative data. This makes using familiar networks critical to my study, particularly given the relatively small overall number of possible participants.

I received IRB approval prior to making any attempts to recruit participants. Once approved, I first reached out to participants from my prior pilot study to help me develop a list of potential participants who met the criteria. Each participant from the prior study shared their preferred method of contact and a documented willingness to participate in future studies. While
they did not all meet the criteria for the current study (a Black or African American male over age 18), through working professional and personal networks, they did have access and knowledge of individuals who were ideal. I employed reverse snowball sampling to recruit participants via email. In reverse snowball sampling, participants share the researcher’s contact information with prospective participants so they might express their willingness to participate in the study. An initial email (Appendix A) or phone call in which I introduced my study with a description of its purpose was sent to all identified candidates.

Several individuals in my network were asked to share the recruitment letter for the current study; some opted to use the letter while others sent their own communication. A few opted to provide me with contact information for those in their network who might be willing to participate, but they did not want to make the referral themselves. It should be noted that I did not re-interview participants from any previous study. Candidates were asked to respond directly to me if they were interested in participating. I then made appointments according to the participants preferred availability. During each participant’s interview, I described the study more fully and addressed any outstanding questions or concerns before collecting the informed consent form (Appendix B).

**Description of Participants**

Each of the eight participants in this study were sitting community college presidents with a tenure in the role that ranged from two years to more than 25. All held the title of President with some reporting directly to an independent board and others reporting to a chancellor as a part of a larger system. There was consideration to institution geography with representation from the West Coast, Midwest, East Coast, and the South. Only institutions represented in the contiguous United States were included for participation due to study
limitations. Table 1 provides a description of each of the study participants as a snapshot, including self-reported age, years of experience, title of position immediately prior to presidency, professional development experiences, number of searches prior to presidential placement, and current location.

Table 1

*President Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age at First Presidency</th>
<th>Years of Service</th>
<th>Years in Community College</th>
<th>Prior Role*</th>
<th>Prior Professional Development</th>
<th>Number of Searches</th>
<th>Region/Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>VPAA</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>VP</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>VPSA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>VPSA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>West Coast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>AVPSA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>VPAA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Provost</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>VPWD</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes.* *Prior roles include Vice President of Academic Affairs (VPAA), Vice President (VP), Vice President of Student Affairs (VPSA), Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs or Academic Affairs (VPA/SA), Provost, and Vice president of Workforce Development (VPWD)*

**Data Collection**

Semi-Structured Interviews. For the purpose of the study, I conducted interviews with each of the participants. IPA researchers’ normally use individual interviews for data collection (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2003). Interviews were scheduled for one hour and followed a semi-structured interview protocol. Smith et al. (2009) advocated for the use of in-depth interviews with semi-structured interview protocols by novice and intermediate researchers or those new to IPA. Semi-structured interviews are the most widely used form of interview in social sciences (Brinkmann, 2014). Leavy (2014) also explained that semi-structured interviews
make better use of knowledge-producing potentials and more leeway for follow up. Both are necessary when trying to understand participant experiences. As stated above, the interview tool (Appendix C) was developed from a revised document used in a pilot study. The study was designed to collect the stories of study participants’ experiences. The protocol was also subjected to a peer review process to ensure the tool would make sense to prospective participants and would yield data that would allow me to address my research question.

Semi-structured interviews are ideal for data collection because they allow the researcher to create structure while also providing the participant the opportunity to lead the dialog into other areas based upon their account of a given experience (Oxley, 2016). I began each interview by obtaining participant approval to record their interview responses. I used two different methods of recording participant responses: First, I used otter.ai to record each conversation directly onto an online platform. Otter.ai requires a secure login to access recorded files and, therefore, I considered it an appropriate tool to initially store audio files for analysis. I also used the audio recording function on my iPhone as a backup to save audio files. The iPhone was password protected to maintain privacy. Once the interviews were completed and reviewed for completion, I uploaded the audio files to Box separated into individual folders for each participant using coded names to preserve participant privacy.

**Transcription.** Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using the service otter.ai. Transcripts were reviewed individually following a close line-by-line analysis to capture initial comments in an attempt to foster a deeper level of familiarity with the data and to ensure accuracy of participant meaning (Larkin et al., 2006). Key words and phrases were identified and then coded to organize data as they related to the research question. Codes were identified using a repetitive exploratory analysis process to develop deeper understanding of the participant
experiences. The codes were grouped into meta-categories based on my interpretation of each participant’s meaning. I used the audio recordings and my field notes to assist with the interpretation of codes and meta-categories. These meta-categories were grouped into larger themes. The identified themes within individual transcripts were compared across cases to build superordinate themes.

I used the transcription function in otter.ai to assist me with creating the interview transcripts for each participant. Once each transcript was completed I went through and performed a line by line review following along with the audio recording to ensure that the conversation was represented as accurately as possible. This review process helped me to build familiarity with raw data and to protect confidentiality (Smith et al., 2009). During the review and editing process, I removed participant names and other identifying information in keeping with the confidentiality expectation established with each participant. Once the transcripts were completed, reviewed, and edited to match the audio files, I made printed copies to use in the analysis for the study. The printed copies were collected in a one-inch, three-ring binder that was kept in a locked storage drawer when not directly in use. The audio files and edited electronic transcripts were uploaded into folders created in Box that corresponded to each participant. The original audio files and electronic transcripts were removed from otter.ai and my iPhone and destroyed.

Smith et al. (2009) explained that the existing literature on analysis in IPA does not prescribe a single method for working with data. They instead express that the approach to analysis must be characterized by a set of common processes and principles. These characteristic elements are ideal because they can be applied flexibly according to the analytical need of a study (Reid et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2009). Smith (2007) pointed out that the analysis
is a cyclical process that is both iterative and inductive. While it is acknowledged that there is no exact right or wrong way to conduct an IPA study, the approach suggested by Smith et al. is considered appropriate for novice researchers and fits with the goals of this study.

The idiographic nature of IPA also required a focus on the particular for each individual study participant. In this case, it is understood that participants each had their own unique set of experiences and perceptions independent from the others in the sample. Those experiences and perceptions were included and discussed as a part of the larger analytical process. In addition, if there were cases of phenomenological or hermeneutical divergences across cases, they were also included as a part of this study. As an example, the majority of participants in the study recognized that they experienced difficulty with their career progression because of their race, while one expressed no such feeling and, in fact, that his experience, while seemingly unique, was mirrored in the experiences of his peers. The difference in these perspectives was significant because it allowed for the consideration of alternative interpretations of data.

**Data Analysis**

I used an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as the methodological framework to interpret and understand a single research question: *How do African American males experience their career progression to the role of community college president?* I wanted to explore how these individuals perceived themselves and their experiences working their way to and through presidency and how they may have perceived their experiences to be different from those of their White male counterparts. Because the participants of this study were all Black males in America, there was a general expectation that the subject of their race or ethnicity might become a significant topic of consideration. With this general understanding, I employed critical race theory (CRT) as the theoretical framework that was used to undergird the study.
One of the basic tenets of CRT is the understanding that racism is a normal part of the everyday lived experiences of Blacks and other minority groups (Cabrera, 2018; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Khalifa et al., 2013). This approach allowed for the potential to explore participant self-perceptions and to discuss sensitive topics such as how these individuals may have internalized or combated anti-Black racism to persist through their career to achieve the role of president and how they may or may not have impacted each individual’s ability to progress professionally. Finally, because the participants are in fact Black males, the theoretical framework of CRT had to be refined further to the experiences of Blacks, specifically, and, thus, became BlackCrit (Dumas & Ross, 2016; Roberts, 1998).

I followed a step-by-step analysis process that borrows from and modifies the suggested methods of Smith et al. (2009). This involved a structured process of reflection, identification, description, clarification, interpretation, and contextualization (Smith, 2004). First, I reviewed the transcripts created in otter.ai to correct errors and ensure that the data accurately reflected the conversation, taking care to reflect tone and word usage correctly for each participant. Once I was confident that the transcripts accurately represented the conversations from the audio files, I created hard copies of each electronic document and performed a secondary review of the data. This second level review of each transcript involved a reading and re-reading process to catch any lingering errors and to get a better understanding of participant experiences. I regularly revisited the audio files to aid in this process of familiarizing myself with participant responses. Following this process allowed me to become fully immersed in each participant’s experience. The process also helped me to uncover insights that might be otherwise missed by reviewing the transcript alone.
Oxley (2016) explained that, unlike thematic analysis, IPA analysis starts with exploring the content and language of participants, before identifying themes. Smith et al. (2011) also noted that most IPA studies focus on the development of a detailed analysis of participant interview data before the identification of patterns or themes across cases. I followed a cyclical process of reviewing participant transcripts, highlighting phrases, and developing codes to represent those phrases in the margins of each transcript to describe each phrase. In this process, I applied codes to key words and phrases that I perceived to be significant to the participants representation of their experiences. I then used the codes to describe the participant responses, attempting to represent as much of the interaction as possible, including my own perceptions of what was being expressed. This involved paying close attention to the details of how participants used language and considering elements of speech, such as tones, inflections, volume, and pauses.

After building a connection with the transcripts through several in-depth reviews of the data, I began my initial coding strategy with a focus on aligning each participant's experience with my research question. The coding process was a critical part of the analysis, providing a link between data collection and the explanation of meaning (Saldanà, 2016). I used highlighters to search for key words and phrases that represented each participant’s experiences. I reviewed each transcript individually in an effort to bracket myself (reduce preconceptions) as the researcher from being influenced from one participant to the next. Significant statements were captured in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to which I applied multiple coding methods as a part of my analysis.

First, I followed an In Vivo coding method, pulling directly from the transcript identified quotes that I deemed significant and relevant to the study. I collected each direct code into an
Excel spreadsheet with tabs for each individual participant. In Vivo coding involves using words and phrases from a participant’s own language as codes (Saldanã, 2016). By using phrases directly from the participant transcript, In Vivo coding allowed me as the researcher to better capture meaning from each participant’s experience (Stinger, 2014). This method was appropriate for me as a new researcher and because my study depends on my ability to honor the voice and experiences of each participant (Saldanã, 2016). Figure 1 provides an example of the initial level of In vivo coding.

Figure 1

*In Vivo Codes*

<p>| | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Initial Codes (In Vivo Method)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>&quot;And she really was kind of instrumental and kind of grooming me for this job.&quot;*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>&quot;And the truth is, she saw something to me that I didn't really see in myself.&quot;*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>&quot;And the truth is, she saw something to me that I didn't really see in myself.&quot;*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>&quot;I had this conversation with her on numerous occasions that I really was not interested in becoming president. And you know, lo and behold, nine years after that first initial conversation about pursuing a job, I was able to get it and it really do in large part because of her mentoring.&quot;*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>&quot;I had this conversation with her on numerous occasions that I really was not interested in becoming president. And you know, lo and behold, nine years after that first initial conversation about pursuing a job, I was able to get it and it really do in large part because of her mentoring.&quot;*</td>
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*Note.* Example of In Vivo codes identified in study analysis.

Once the In Vivo coding process was completed, I went back through the identified quotes a second time, applying focused or selective coding techniques to further refine the data through a critical race theory lens (see Figure 2 below). Focused coding can generally follow when In Vivo coding is used as initial coding; it searches for the most frequent and significant codes to develop the most salient categories within the data. Focused codes also force a researcher to make decisions about which codes make the most analytical sense (Charmaz, 2014). Here words and short phrases taken directly from the participant quotes became the next level codes that formed the basis of continued analysis. The codes generated from this focused process were then grouped into unique categories based on similar meaning and intent as verified
from review of audio files and research memos (Saldanã, 2016). My use of an Excel workbook allowed me to properly organize the data from initial quotes to focused codes to grouped categories following the systematic process outlined above, see Appendix E.

Figure 2
Secondary Codes & Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Secondary Codes</th>
<th>metacodes/categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;groomed for the job&quot;</td>
<td>Mentor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>external motivator</td>
<td>Mentor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;she saw something in me&quot;</td>
<td>Mentor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I was able to get it (presidency) and it was really due in large part because of her mentoring&quot;</td>
<td>Mentor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>regular positive reinforcements</td>
<td>Mentor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. Focused codes and meta-categories used to develop themes.

Finally, the categories were reviewed again to identify themes within the data. I followed this process for each participant in the study. I created separate tabs that allowed me to manipulate data from each transcript independent of one another. Once categories were developed for each individual participant, I conducted an analysis across cases to find similar themes (Oxley, 2016; Smith, 2011). I reviewed the themes to identify shared experiences among participants and select themes that were represented in the interviews. This required searching for patterns, similarities, and overlaps that suggested connections across participant responses found in notes from interviews combined with those from the transcripts. I also searched for divergent themes that emphasized unique experiences for each participant (Smith et al., 2014). Additional information on the spreadsheet analysis is provided in Appendix D.
Toward Significant Themes

Interview transcripts were reviewed to ensure that they represented each participant’s intent as closely as possible. As outlined in previously in this chapter (Chapter 3), I followed a step by step coding analysis process to capture the essence of participant responses highlighting key words, phrases, and concepts relevant to the research question for my study. I followed an In Vivo coding process for initial analysis pulling quotes directly from participant transcripts to accurately reflect their voice and intent. I attempted to group these quotes into similar ideas to have a full picture of what concepts might be uncovered. Next, I revisited the text transcripts I had created, following a focused coding process for secondary analysis. Here again, I pulled out significant words and phrases with a specific intent of identifying where the thoughts and experiences represented by the participant intersected with my research question and the available literature. These focused codes were grouped again to form larger categories based on similarity of meaning. The categories were then folded into a final alignment to create themes for each individual participant. I followed this process in detail for each interview transcript individually and then reviewed them all collectively to identify places where there was a convergence or divergence of theme concepts. My completed analysis led to the generation of 13 individual themes. Table 2.0 provides a summary of the five most significant themes from the research, and the full list of themes can be found in Appendix F. To be considered significant, a theme must have occurred across at least half of all interview transcripts. I discuss the details of each theme in more detail in Chapter 4.
Table 2

**Significant Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency of Occurrence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black Experiences</td>
<td>8 out of 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can't Do it Alone</td>
<td>7 out of 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure to Perform</td>
<td>7 out of 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding The Path (to presidency)</td>
<td>5 out of 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism Exists But Not A Barrier</td>
<td>4 out of 8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Trustworthiness**

Creswell (2014) explained that trustworthiness is an essential aspect of any qualitative research. Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that trustworthiness is a process of validation attempting to “assess ‘accuracy’ of findings, as best described by the researcher, the participants, and the readers” (p. 259). A well-done study involves multiple strategies employed by the researcher and the participants to ensure accuracy and authenticity of the information presented. Generally accepted methods for ensuring trustworthiness include member checks, prolonged engagement in the field, reflexivity, audit trails, thick, rich description, collaboration, and peer reviews (Creswell & Miller, 2000). For this study, I employed various strategies to establish trustworthiness during both data collection and analysis. This has been an ongoing process that has required continual consideration throughout the course of my study.

First, as stated above, a pilot study was conducted with individuals who fit the criteria for the current study with the exception of the requirement that all self-identify as male. I used participant feedback and analysis from the pilot study to revise my protocol to more accurately capture the experiences of study participants. I also provided a draft of my current interview protocol to a panel of experts to assist with evaluation of the effectiveness of my questions.
Creswell (2013) suggested that both self-reflection and field notes can contribute to the validation of research. I kept extensive field notes throughout the course of my study. I also produced detailed write-ups after each interview in the form of analytical memos to capture my reflections and observations. This helped me to remember and understand each interview to assist me with ensuring participants were portrayed accurately. I attempted to capture within the transcript as much of the participant interaction as possible, making note of emotional moments expressed through inflections or changes in language as they appeared significant.

Another strategy employed involved the clarification of my own biases. As an African American administrator serving in a midlevel leadership role at a community college, I share a unique and specific connection with the participants in this study. In this study I kept a reflexivity journal to check my own biases, experiences, and beliefs to the extent possible. IPA recognizes that bias cannot be completely omitted or bracketed out but should instead be considered an essential part of the analysis process (Laverty, 2003).

Finally, as stated, my own experiences mirror those of my desired participant population in many ways; thus, I needed to be mindful of this fact as I provided interpretation of data to avoid eroding accuracy. As previously stated, I have some experience as a participant in the search process beyond the fact-finding experience. I have participated in leadership development programs that help to prepare professionals for the interview process and have spoken at length with many individuals who have been both successful and failed in their efforts to achieve the position of president. As an African American male, I am also uniquely aware of the presence of racism within the established structure of higher education management. My experience with anti-Black racism has motivated me to explore how it manifests within the
system in order to find ways to create positive change necessary to foster better outcomes for all People of Color.

Summary

This dissertation explores how African American male community college presidents narrate their career progression. In Chapter 1, I began the study with a brief discussion of the historical perspective of the shrinking talent pool of presidents. I introduced critical race theory as a theoretical perspective from which the experiences of African American community college presidents would be framed. I also identified BlackCrit theory as a sub-discipline of critical race theory that is specifically designated for research into the experiences that African American people have with race, racism, and oppression in established systems. In Chapter 2, I sought to provide a detailed exploration of the available literature related to the community college leadership crisis and how it has evolved over time. In Chapter 3, I outlined the details of my approach to the proposed study. I provided a rationale for the use of IPA and an explanation of the desired population, sampling methods, data collection, and analysis techniques that I used. This study sheds light on the experiences of African American community college presidents as they narrate their career progression to the presidency. The results of this study will add to the available literature relevant to the study of community colleges and challenge the conscious and unconscious biases that limit the opportunities for career progress for African American administrators.
Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this research project was to examine the career experiences of African American males who have successfully attained the role of community college president. In Chapter 3, I provided the structural design of my study along with the theoretical perspectives that undergird the research. In Chapter 4, I will provide an overview of the interview experiences, including my perspectives from participant responses. I will also outline the results of my study which include five key themes that were identified from data analysis. I will end the chapter with a summary of study findings in preparation for the discussion in Chapter 5.

Participant Profiles

The interviews I conducted for this study provided me with a unique opportunity to develop close connections to each of the participants. Each individual meeting was very different and provided me as the researcher with different experiences and challenges. Some participants were very open and willing to share information, while others were more concerned with the structure of my study and their desire for confidentiality. After each interview I used reflexive journaling in an attempt to keep as many of the details about the experience as intact as possible. I replaced each participant’s name with a pseudonym that was generated from the stories they told that were unique to them; this helped me to assure the confidentiality of their interviews and build trust in the process.

Participant One: The Hometown Hero

Participant One is the president of a small public two-year institution in the South. At 41 years old, he has served in the role of president for nine years and has more than 18 years of experience working in community college leadership roles. I first met him in 2014, when I was a participant in that year’s Lakin Institute for mentored leadership class. He served as one of the
mentors for the program and has provided me with his insights regarding the presidential search process as well as offering his advice regarding other professional development opportunities that should be taken as I consider my next role.

As my first interview approached, I had a considerable level of anxiety going into the meeting. I was confident in my interview tool and the relevance of my study; however, as much as I enjoy building relationships, I lacked the confidence in my ability to establish enough rapport with a participant in this type of setting. Also, as a novice researcher, I was unsure that the strategy that I had employed would actually work for my study. For these reasons, I had a sense of relief at having someone I already knew, even slightly, as my first participant. When I initially reached out to possible participants, I was unsure how quickly I might get responses—if at all. Presidents are notoriously busy, and it can be very hard to negotiate time on their ever-evolving schedules. Participant One was an early respondent to my request for participants. He was also notably one of the few to respond directly to me and not by communicating through an administrative assistant. I believe that part of this was due to our already familiar relationship making him more enthusiastic in his support. It is notable that once I made contact with a president and had the opportunity to explain the purpose of my study, they were generally more likely to agree to participate. Of the nearly 20 individuals that I reached out to, only five declined, while a few others pointed to scheduling conflicts that kept them from participating. Participant One, along with the majority of others, happily agreed to participate and shifted his schedules to make the meeting work. This interview was conducted around the holiday season, and I believe that helped me to work around Participant One’s usually limited availability.

Participant One is an individual who seems to have been groomed for the role of a community college president. This idea was reinforced by the fact that the institution he leads is
located in his hometown—a rural suburb in southeast. While detailing his progression to the presidency, he made a point to highlight the importance of his father as a well-known figure in this same community. His father had served as Commissioner for the schoolboard and was also a prominent attorney in the area for many years and, as such, developed a level of high regard among the community’s various constituents. Participant One pointed to his father and some of his own other key relationships as the reason why many in the local community thought that his assuming the presidency in his hometown was all but a foregone conclusion. He was almost apologetic about this in his tone and language as he recognized that others had to struggle a lot more than he did to assume their first presidency.

Despite or perhaps even because of the perception of ease with which his presidency was attained, Participant One expressed a constant pressure to perform on the job. He pointed to several examples of how he felt that he was being “held to a higher standard” or that the bar was somehow “higher” for him than it would have been for one of his White counterparts. He was clear to say that some of his perceptions might be self-imposed but that there was no doubt that because he was Black there was almost an assumption that he was not going to be successful. To that end, he communicated that he felt that he needed to always bring his “A-game.” He also acknowledged that his predecessor, a White female, had been very successful in the role and set a very high bar herself for what it means to be successful in the role. Despite all of this pressure, Participant One held the overall belief that, her accomplishments aside, he did not have the freedom to make the mistakes she had made when she was in the role. The concepts of having “pressure to perform” and having the “bar set higher” were tied to a sense of “isolation” many participants recalled experiencing. Participant One explained that his experiences as a Black male doing this work were not unique just to the job but were an extension of his everyday lived
experiences as a Black man in America. This echoes the critical race theory concept of racism being an everyday occurrence for People of Color and is a theme that reoccurred throughout my conversations.

The constant uncertainty and need to question if he was being treated different because he is Black or because of some other reason lingers and is threaded throughout every aspect of the lived experiences for Participant One. It was interesting to note that he attributed his success at managing this type of experience to his having successfully matriculated through a primarily White undergraduate and graduate school experience. He suggested that Black men without the experience of being in majority White spaces in their formative years might lack the ability to build relationships effectively and as a result be unsuccessful in this type of high-level role. As a person who attended a notable Historically Black College as well as attended several Predominately White Institutions (PWI) myself, I was a bit disappointed in his comments on the whole. It appeared more likely to me that this man came from a position of some privilege and may have had some assumptions about people who did not share his upbringing experiences. Even in this sensitive space it was interesting to hear him recount his perceptions of being treated differently based on his race and how he drew on his educational experiences to make a case for his success.

The interview tool I developed asked very pointed questions in an effort to draw out specific examples of a participant’s experiences with their race—if they did exist at all. When the subject of race or racism came up, I felt some internal hesitation about the topic as if it was in some way wrong for me to call these ideas out. I found validation for my question in this interview because Participant One not only was able to affirm the existence of his feelings of differentness and isolation but also provided clear examples of how it manifested in his everyday
life. The sensitivity that I had with the topic of race came up again over the course of other interviews; however, the more I talked about it and the more I found validation, the better I was at asking the questions and not feeling any discomfort for having done so. Overall, this first interview set a very positive tone for the rest of the meetings I had to look forward to.

**Participant Two: Mr. Blend in to Win**

Participant Two is the president of a small public college in the mid-west. With just over five years of experience in his role as president, he has one of the shortest tenures of the participants. Having said this, he also has one of the longest careers in community colleges at 26 years. This president and I had a previous relationship that dated back to my time in the Lakin Institute for Mentored Leadership. Participant Two was assigned to me as a program mentor for an individual who is interested in becoming a community college president. When we met, we found out that we had many points of intersection in our backgrounds, including attending the same undergraduate institution and pledging the same fraternity. At the time I attended the Lakin Institute, I was still very new in my role as vice chancellor of student affairs and to the community college in general, so while the program was helpful, I was not ready to take on the task of becoming a community college president. Participant Two and I had had a few surface-level conversations about career planning but ultimately lost touch within a year.

Participant Two offered a very different interview experience from that given by Participant One. Although he had not been a president as long, he had several years of experience in community college administration. Unlike Participant One, who seemed to have a very clear and direct line to the presidency, Participant Two told the story of an individual who had to make several difficult choices in order to achieve his ideal position. He rose through the ranks as a student affairs professional and had to transition through several institutions to get the
progressive experiences he needed to become a president. Participant Two was able to highlight many examples of how mentors and personal relationships were pivotal to his overall success, giving him the sense that he “could do this” as a community college president. He was also clear that the investments made by others in his success helped him to get to his desired goals.

Unique to Participant Two was an underlying idea that he needed to blend in so that he could avoid being seen as a stereotypical “angry black man.” He pointed out several times that he saw himself as a person that “didn’t like to make waves” and “only speaks when there is something to say.” There almost seemed to be a preoccupation with showing that he did not struggle with his race as an issue in his career progression. On the other hand, he clearly articulated that he understood that racism was a part of his everyday experience. He talked about being “the only Black person in the room” and having experienced blatant disrespect related to perceptions of his race. Participant Two chalked these recollections up to the general nature of being a Black male in America. This acceptance of racism as a normal everyday part of the lived experience for these individuals is threaded throughout the series of interviews and would suggest support for one of the overarching tenets of critical race theory. However, how they all choose to work through those feelings and assumptions is very different from participant to participant.

Overall, my interview exchange with Participant Two was very congenial. He was enthusiastic about participating in the study and was very clear that he thought the work that I was doing was important. Participant Two was the first to express that he initially did not want to be a community college president and that if it were not for the advice he received over the years from friends and mentors he might not have ever ascended to the role. I struggled internally when I heard him talk about his strategies for blending in. It seemed at times that he
was almost apologetic about the negative perceptions of his Blackness. This is, however, another example of the stress Black people feel in their everyday life that researchers also associate with stereotype threat. Participant Two felt the need to compensate for those perceptions of his White colleagues and counterparts by finding ways to over-achieve and distance himself from negative associations with Blackness. Also, similar to Participant One, Participant Two expressed that there was often a need to question if treatment received was related to his race or some other variable. The overarching theme for him was that—no matter what—race could not be a barrier to his success.

**Participant Three: The Inspirational Vet**

Participant Three stands out as one of the most well-known and accomplished members of this study. He serves as a system-level president for a large public community college in the South. With 34 years of experience in community college administration, he is also the second most experienced of the group. During the interview, Participant Three was congenial and approachable at all times. His personality and style made the interview seem less stressful than the prior two had been. I found myself feeling a little star struck by this experience, partially from seeing someone so accomplished in the role that I aspire to myself and also because of the level of success he has been able to attain across his years of service. Understanding that there is a great deal of work and pressure associated with his role, Participant Three was able to project a level of comfort and ease in the role that I did not see with others in the study. I attribute this in some ways to his overall experience and history with the work. Participant Three is also one of the few to have held several different presidencies and is one of only two that operates as the head of a full system.
There were two very significant aspects to the interview with Participant Three. First, he expressed very clearly that almost from the beginning of his career, he was very purposeful about working in the community college with the singular goal of becoming a president. He identified that he made the decision to become a community college president in his junior year of college. He further reinforced many times across our discussion that he had been particularly targeted in what positions he took and how much time and effort was spent in those roles to help him get to the position he ultimately desired. In his words “there was no reason why I shouldn’t be president” and he set out to achieve that goal. From that point of recognition, he followed a specific path that gave him the experiences he needed to attain the role.

Even with this focus and desire, he only ever applied for four presidencies over the course of his nearly 40-year career. He began his career work in student services and from there took on roles and responsibilities that filled in the presidential skills he knew that he lacked. He also looked for experiences with different types of community colleges that served diverse communities, including urban and suburban spaces as well as those with multiple campus operations. He maintained this very focused and strategic approach to the jobs he applied for and the work that he did over time to help him progress more quickly.

Two other significant themes that emerged from our conversation are the importance of fit for the role that you are seeking and the value of skills over the challenges associated with race. In his reflections on his career, Participant Three was very clear that 20 years ago he would have had more negative things to say about the impact of race, racism, and being Black as a president. Today however, people in general seem more concerned with a candidate’s level of skill than their race. He remarked that, over the course of his career, he had seen “truly, highly racist individuals” move past their bias when they recognize that a person they do not like could
do a job effectively and achieve results. Throughout the conversation, Participant Three was very clear that, as he sees it, skills, ability, and results are the factors that matter most for a person of any race in pursuit of a presidency.

When asked if the value of skill over perceived bias due to race was due to our progress as a society or to changes in the needs of the institutions he has served, Participant One was very clear that it was a bit of both. He underscored that he was not naive enough to say that race was not an issue; however, he believes that society has progressed to a point that other things have more impact. As community colleges have grown over time, so too have the needs of the various constituents that they serve, and that has ultimately led to a shift in what is and is not possible for anyone that desires to rise to the role of president.

As one might expect, Participant Three approached the interview with a much broader view of the industry compared to others in the study. He focused on the aspirational nature of the role and how in leadership there is a constant need to prove one’s value so that others will follow. He identified that this can be hard for Black men because there are simply too many obstacles that they face right from the beginning that some candidates are not equipped to overcome. He said, however, that if you have the right mix of skills and the ability to articulate how you meet the needs of the specific institution, the sky is the limit.

There was a very inspirational tone to the interview with Participant Three. It felt very natural and not at all as if he were trying to paint himself as the perfect leader. Instead, he was natural in the things he was saying. As the interviewer, I thought there was a genuine quality to his responses. It felt very much like he was doing the work that he was supposed to be doing and that he was doing it for the right reasons. I could not say this for every participant. The idea that racism exists but is not the barrier to success for Black men was repeated again here and has a
reoccurring pattern throughout this study. The desire to do the work and the understanding that to get there requires a lot of effort was a reoccurring theme in this interview. I found myself most drawn to this participant of any in the study.

**Participant Four: The Alpha**

Participant Four was the president of an urban community college on the West Coast. Without a doubt this interview was the most difficult of any in the study. From the beginning there was almost a combative quality to the discussion that I felt throughout the entire conversation. There was almost a sense that this participant needed to first prove that he deserved to be interviewed but also that he was going to be the smartest, most gifted participant that I had the privilege of meeting. Early in our discussion, as I was outlining the purpose of the study, Participant Four stopped me to ask why I had not provided him with an informed consent document explaining that in the many studies he had conducted that was usually the first step in the process. I laughed internally as I thanked him for that quality check before reminding him that he had already signed and submitted the form to me a month prior to the interview. I then proceeded to review the document with him again as I did with all participants prior to starting the interview. I think that interaction set the tone for us but also gave him a sense that I was not going to easily be caught off guard in this interview.

Participant Four spent the majority of our interview outlining his ideas for why he had been so successful at this work and why others had not. He saw himself as more successful because he had been able to achieve significant leadership roles—including his presidency—at what he perceived to be “a young age.” He attributed this to his high level of skill, leading to his ability to be seen by others, and himself, as an expert in his chosen field. He remarked that while he had achieved the presidency, he had not originally intended to pursue the role; he instead
focused on the fact that his goal was just to be the best vice president or director he could be, and he just kept getting recognized for his results. In his opinion, people, particularly Black professionals, spend too much time trying to chase a title and not enough honing their craft, and as a result, they get to jobs that they are not prepared for and fail.

Although he was more than simply complimentary of his own work ethic and experience, Participant Four was clear that he had the benefit of working with some very significant mentors and colleagues over the course of his career. He recounted his experiences working through several professional development opportunities and how the various instructors became mentors because they saw something in him that others did not possess. He also expressed that he, unlike others he had observed, was coachable and that also allowed him to succeed where others had not. There were also peer groups that he was a part of that shared similar thoughts and behaviors to his own. Participant Four was quick to label them all as fellow “alpha males” who, for different reasons, were drawn to each other and pushed the group to success. As the researcher, I interpreted his descriptions of his friends and mentors as “icons” and “gurus” typically came more from a desire to promote his own specialness because they saw something specific in him that got their attention.

The importance of mentors and close colleagues was an underlying theme in this conversation. More specifically, Participant Four believed that his experience was different. He expressed that he knew other Black leaders who had experienced racism, isolation, and pressure to succeed on their path to presidency, but those experiences were not his. He remarked that most of his mentors were successful experts in their field and that they were most notably Black. In his estimation, it was also important that he came through the West Coast community college experience where he had served at some of the most diverse institutions in the country. He
perceived that he had never felt the experience of being the only person of color in the room and felt that while this was likely a unique experience, many of his close colleagues had the same experience. Participant Four expressed that he had heard stories from other young Black professionals that were so different from his own experience that in a sense he was hesitant to talk about those perspectives for himself. In general, he felt that he was blessed to have had this welcoming exposure to Black leaders but also success at finding spaces where he could thrive, and this along with his unique skills were what gave him the path to his success.

Throughout the interview, Participant Four made a point to apologize for his potentially having come across as “arrogant” and to express concern that his experiences would “skew” the study. I made sure to reassure him that all experiences were valuable here and, in fact, that those that were unique would add to the richness and depth of the research. I think this interview was so jarring because it took place directly after that conducted with Participant Three. As already discussed, Participant Three had an inspirational quality that allowed him to always tie his experiences to the mission and vision of his work as a community college leader. Participant Four felt less genuine and attached to that mission, focusing more on what made him “better” or “more qualified” than other candidates. Ultimately, I valued this experience because it provided a good self-check for me to ensure that I was not applying my own biases and ideas to the research that I was conducting.

**Participant Five: The Big Guy**

Participant Five is a campus president who serves in a large metropolitan system in the Mid-West. This participant was very upfront about his experiences as a Black man and how they are different from those experienced by his White counterparts. As other participants expressed, he was very clear that the bar is significantly higher for a Black president, both male and female,
than for others. By this, he was clear that in his perception Black men and women are expected to fail. They are expected to be less experienced and less prepared for the role that they are seeking. Participant Five reflected that over time he was very conscious about how he was perceived by those with whom he worked. As a Black man who is 6- feet, 6-inches tall and over 270 pounds, his physical presence has always been a part of his personal milieu. He remarked that it was often difficult for him to create a space of accountability because he did not want to be seen as too aggressive or threatening to the people he worked with, even though he was saying things that any other leader would say. This was a point of frustration for him in that he was constantly pressuring himself to minimize the opportunity to be seen as a threat to others.

Participant Five also recounted that he had experienced several instances where he was very aware that his race was the reason he was not able to attain his desired goal of presidency. When he did ultimately rise to the role, he thought it was after considerable support from the prior president and other mentors that helped him to cross the gap. He was very transparent with the fact that without mentors and other supports he would not have achieved his first presidency. Participant Five also made a point that some of his mentors were valuable to him because they taught him what not to do more often than what he should do. He recounted stories of presidents he had served under that had had scandals and made mistakes, and he was very clear that had they been his scandals or mistakes, he would not have survived as president.

Another interesting topic that Participant Five brought out was that the challenges he had with racism in his role as president were part of a much larger national conversation. He was very clear that there was a wave of negative experiences and interactions that he called a “Blacklash” related to the election of President Barak Obama. He expressed that when he had to make difficult but logical decisions about budget cuts or program closures it was often viewed
through the lens of Blackness as a threat to the status quo. For Participant Five, this negativity resulted from a perception of the rise in the number of Black leaders and was believed to be a result of affirmative action, thus leading to a constant need to prove oneself capable and be aware of perceptions of others.

Participant Five expressed that he did not see the role as a title to attain. He underscored that someone who wanted to be successful in this role should not allow the role or the title to define them. Instead, he said that you have to be in this work to make a difference and use your gifts to help others. He, at one point, corrected me to say that he was not a college president but a person that serves in the role of president. The distinction he made was that he did not ever want to be so tied to his title that it impacted him personally. He pointed out that people are more likely to attack the position, but if they know you personally, they are less likely to attack you as a person. He explained that to help with his perceptions, his leadership style is one where he shares power and allows others to make as many decisions as possible. By doing this, he believes that he minimizes the idea that the job or the work is all about him and gives others a reason to become a part of his support team.

What I appreciated most about this interaction was that Participant Five was incredibly candid about his experiences. He was one that very clearly had opinions about race and racism but also about the experiences of being a president in general. His focus was more on the human experiences that come from the stress of the role as well as what he needed to do to overcome those challenges. Hearing him talk about love and marriage, interactions with students, staff, and faculty, and the need to be conscious of your health gave me some different perspectives on things that go into being a president and how the issues might be magnified for a Black man in the role. I could tell in our conversation how much work he puts into being approachable. He
had a very congenial and quiet tone but, at the same time, was able to get across a sense of excitement about his work and talking to me. He seemed like a person who cares about others and likes to mentor Black men and women who are interested in becoming presidents. The conversations about his personal experiences even went so far as having me share my own personal experiences with relationships and how it related to my desire to become president. Participant Five was the third individual with whom I had had a prior relationship. We met as a part of the same mentorship program in which I had met Participants One and Two. We had very little interaction after that program, but I appreciated his willingness to share perspectives with me—the good, the bad, and the ugly. I see him as someone I would like to continue to connect with in the future.

**Participant Six: The Career Professional**

Participant Six was referred to me by one of the other participants. He holds the distinction of having the longest career in community college administration at 35 years among the eight participants. He currently serves as the president for a large, urban community college on the East coast. Participant Six had what I consider to be the most traditional background leading to his appointment as president. His immediate prior role was that of vice president of academic affairs. It was interesting to note that he was the only one of the group that came from a purely academic background. We had no prior knowledge of each other, but because of the work that he has done and his professional network, Participant Six was recognized early on as a person who should be considered for my study. He is a very busy man who can be difficult to contact. This was a situation that very much depended on my ability to network my way to a contact and then to build a relationship with the participant’s administrative assistant before I was able to get time on the president’s schedule. The interview took place at the beginning of
the year just after the holidays, which was helpful; however, it also meant that I needed to work around his scheduled vacations.

Several themes came out of my discussion with Participant Six: the biggest was his perception of the general and expected difficulty of being a Black man in America and how this life experience has translated into his work as a community college president. Many of his career stories and examples were rooted in his perceived interactions, positive and negative, that were tied to his race. He expressed that people often saw his race and made judgements about him long before they actually saw his work. He felt this intently as a leader of academic units and even more so as a president. Participant Six pointed out that people seem more willing to accept you as a Black man in certain roles, in this case he referred to student affairs and even finance. However, his perception was that as you moved to more academic roles, there can be a sense of more resistance. All these experiences were again wrapped up in his perceptions that being Black—and specifically a Black man in America—requires a level of awareness of your surroundings that others simply aren’t required to have.

Tied to and perhaps a bit at odds with his perceptions of Blackness in America was the repeated idea that there is always a need to question negative interactions and experiences to determine if they are related to racism or other factors. As the researcher, I found myself questioning if some of the experiences that he shared and considered racist, through my lens, might not have been considered racist. In one example, he discussed his first contract negotiation as a presidential candidate. During that exercise he overheard a member of the search committee and faculty refer to him as a thug. For Participant Six this was a truly racist experience that he has held on to for a long time. Several times across the conversation I found myself reflecting on my own experiences and how they have shaped the approach I take to my
work and even the research I am currently doing. Regardless of how the experiences were felt, Participant Six was clear that there are times where Black men will always be reminded of the fact that they are, in fact, Black in America, and in the work of education that is often viewed as less.

Participant Six was very clear that he needed to be president in a place that fit his personal needs. He wanted to be around other People of Color in urban environments because those were the places where he felt he had the best chance for success. He also talked at length about the need to have a social life outside the work but that as president you must also be constantly aware that you are on display. Here again he brought up a difference that he felt existed for Black leaders in that you don’t get the benefit of a day off. As a Black leader you are always on and you are always being judged; because of that you must be careful of where you allow yourself to relax in public spaces.

This interview marked the point in the data collection where I began to feel that I was reaching the point of saturation with the participants. The responses to the interview prompts were starting to sound very similar from one participant to the next and often times served to build on reoccurring themes. In particular for this study, the idea of the commonness of the experience of racism felt by these leaders was intensely expressed throughout all of the interviews. To balance this was the sense that even with the feeling of racism there was a need to prove that these experiences would not stop the individuals from being successful. There was also the understanding that these individual experiences were not unique to the participants but were the types of things that happen to most Black professionals. Having these understandings helped me to gain confidence in my research for this study and to acknowledge that the concepts I was applying were appropriate choices for analysis.
**Participant Seven: The Dentist**

Participant Seven was a very unique individual. He started his career as a dentist and began working in the community college system as an adjunct faculty. He had always maintained a healthy appreciation for the sciences and was encouraged by friends and mentors to consider teaching as a profession outside his already established dental practice. A reoccurring theme for Participant Seven was being in the right place at the right time. He understood that he was always considered a bit odd as a health care professional who made the transition to the community college presidency; however, it was again the impact of having good mentors and connections that provided him with the encouragement he needed to actively pursue and achieve a presidency. Many times, Participant Seven remarked about someone “seeing potential” in him and the grooming he received as a part of his preparation. It appears very clear that he perceived a lot of his success was a direct result of his very close and very strong relationships with key individuals in the industry.

Another theme that reappears in this interview is the pressure that Black male presidents feel to perform and be successful in their roles. Participant Seven, like others in the study, discussed the perception that some people he worked with expect him to fail in the work that he does. There was a continual discussion about the “higher bar” and a “higher standard” for him as a black male president. As stated previously, the belief that people in general always expect the Black male president to fail was a very real concern for Participant Seven. A slightly different take here was the understanding that his Blackness was considered a barrier to success. This
idea was tied to the perception of isolation of this leadership role but also how Participant Seven internalized the experience at times.

In general, Participant Seven did not provide any new aspects to the study. Instead, he provided a continuation of the concepts that had been unearthed by other participants. His experiences were unique based on where he started his career and where he ended up, but ultimately, as the findings of this study began to take shape, the value of this interview was found in the affirmation that racism experienced by Black male presidents is common and generally accepted as a part of everyday life. The unique aspect of the conversation was how these experiences have an impact on the participant’s self-identity and perception over time. These individuals understand their place in the world and have found ways to adapt in order to create a path to success. There is still considerable frustration, stress, and dissatisfaction to be found in the underlying tone of the interview responses; however, these men generally seem to have accepted their struggle and found ways to succeed anyway.

**Participant Eight: The King in the North**

Participant Eight was my last interview and was by far the most fun to conduct. He serves as president for a large community college in the mid-west. His interview took place during a winter ice storm and we were both trying to make the most of a busy workday and still meet the requirements for this conversation. He was pleasant and professional and seemed like most others to be happy about being asked to participate in this study. I made a point to share with him that of all the people that I worked with to coordinate these meetings, his staff was by far the most helpful and supportive. I think he appreciated that acknowledgment and it set the tone for a very transparent and conversational interview.
Participant Eight is currently entering his third year of his first and only presidency. As a result, much of our discussion was balanced between focusing on the work experiences he had making the transition to the role and how those same experiences along with his perspectives have changed since taking on the work. One unique aspect of Participant Eight’s experience is that he had much more depth of work experience outside higher education and the community college than his other counterparts. He was much more involved in business and economic development work and in fact held the position of Vice President of Workforce Development immediately before becoming president. This experience and background came across many times during his interview which focused more on the external focus of his work including community engagement, board membership, fundraising, and general visibility—more so than any of the other participants. As an internal candidate he was very clear that it was his relationships with the community and strong mentors that helped him to achieve the highest office of his institution.

Several common themes came across during the interview with Participant Eight that were reflected in the responses of others. First, there was a clear understanding that he had been very thoughtful and critical about the roles and projects he took on as he prepared to become president. He remarked that he wanted opportunities that put him as close as possible to the presidency without becoming president too soon. Within this was the idea that “fit” in the role is very important. Fit for Participant Eight involved having a skillset that matched the needs of the institution. The fit to him was more important than location, challenges, and even salary potential. In his mind, if he had the right fit, all the other aspects of the work would fall into place. The desire for fit tied directly into Participant Eight’s perceptions about the pressures associated with the role. In the questions about his work, we came to explore in more depth
about how he felt as a Black man in the work. As with other participants, there was the understanding that there was a much higher bar for him to achieve success than others with whom he had worked. In particular, this was directed toward his predecessor whom he believed had done great work but made mistakes that Participant Eight did not believe his own career would have survived.

With the recognition that his skills were on par for the role of president and that he had the backing of key leaders, like members of his board, Participant Eight maintained that things were still harder for him than his White counterparts. He recognized that many times there was a difficulty on his part to know if he was treated differently from those around him in similar roles because of his race or for other factors. The everyday nature of his experiences as a Black man, how they further played into the way he perceived his interactions with others, and how his actions were viewed by them echoes the sentiments of other participants in the study leading to a set of general understandings about the experiences of the group collectively and as individuals.

**Significant Themes**

As explained in Chapter 3, I conducted an analysis of participant transcripts and used the responses to generate a list of significant themes that were connected across cases. These themes assisted in the development of an understanding of participant experiences as they recounted their progress to the role of president. The significant themes identified were (a) Black experiences, (b) can’t do it alone, (c) pressure to perform, (d) finding the path, (e) racism exists but not a barrier. What follows is a detailed explanation of each significant theme. They have been placed in a rank order from most to least referenced by the participants. For example, Black experiences was the most common theme uncovered through conversations with all eight study participants. Racism exists but not a barrier was the least common of the significant
themes but remains a valid point of discussion because it was uncovered through conversations with at least half of the participants. Other themes that were identified with fewer than half of the participants are discussed later in this dissertation. Figure 3 below provides a visual representation of the significant themes and the subthemes associated with each.

Figure 3

**Significant Themes**

![Diagram showing significant themes and subthemes]

*Note.* List of Significant Themes and Subthemes.

**Black Experiences**

The theme of Black experiences is a collection of reflections that participants as Black men held related to their daily interactions with others. These experiences can and do take many forms, from the numerous microaggressions that were directed at participants in their every day, to the large-scale structural inequities that attempt to impose barriers to professional and personal success in the role of president. The theme of Black experiences was significant as it was represented in some form within the transcripts of all eight participants; it was the only theme to
appear with that level of frequency. By this, I mean that each participant expressed that their negative experiences tied to race were recognized to be a part of the generally understood struggle of being Black in America.

It is important to understand that Black Experiences as a theme is a catch-all that covers the types of interactions that participants faced in their everyday life. The theme has a set of subordinate themes which were used as categories to organize the coded responses of each participant. The categories were (a) Lived experiences; (b) Racism then and now (c) Awareness of race; and (d) Blackness as a barrier.

Initially when the theme of Black Experiences began to emerge, I experienced some shock at how readily each participant expressed acceptance of these interactions and experiences as a part of their lives. They all recognized that they were treated differently than other people and were very aware also that it was due in some part to their race. Participant Six represented this recognition in his experiences as a leader: “you know, for many people, they see (race) first, before they recognize who you are in terms of a leader in the role of president.” The experiences were linked to stories of childhood and how early life resulted in the understanding of their difference due to race and how they must then come to accept it and find their own ways to circumvent the systemic nature of their oppression to achieve their individually identified success. In the words of Participant Five “so, being a young black being. I'm the guy in other circumstances you would be afraid of and here I am, you know, I'm responsible for the, everyone's livelihood and the successful students.” Participant Six also brought home the point with his thoughts:

It’s innate in who I am. There are characteristics that are innate, you know I don't think about being a black male, until I get pulled over, stuff that makes you think about being a black man. It just innate in who you are.
No one question or prompt represented this theme independently; instead, it came through at different times for different participants. Generally speaking, when asked about how participants perceived differences in their career experiences as Black men from those of their, most often, white counterparts, this theme came to the foreground of reflection. Some expressed that they knew they had it harder but chose not to highlight it because it was more important for them to be seen as solution finders in order to achieve their desired goals. Participant Two, referred to as “Mr. Blend in to Win,” gave his perspective as an example of this:

I know me as a professional. I try my best to. It's not that I dismiss those things where people were being derogatory or mean or rude. I couldn't always acknowledge it so, I don't dismiss it, but I don't always verbalize it out loud.

This perspective was shared by many of the participants who expressed generally that while they understood that racially motivated behaviors were present in those around them, it was generally thought to be better to ignore them or let them go unaddressed, focusing instead on the positive in order to thrive. Participant Two again highlighted this:

I know that it's reality (different treatment due to my race). So, I don't dismiss it, but I don't always verbalize it out loud. I've always known I was Black. Every day I walked through my, you know, that experience, and I don't try to treat it as a crutch.

It is important to note that while the majority of participants were clear they knew the challenges associated with career progression, some like Participant Four held that their race was never a source of alienation.

I was at a conference; I happened upon these three sisters were saying the exact same thing you did. I never worked for a Black person I never had a Black mentor. And I was like, wow, and I inserted myself into the discussion. And it winds up being a fascinating very fulfilling discussion but that's just not my life’s reality.

**Lived Experiences.** This sub-theme highlights the interactions and experiences that participants have had throughout the course of their everyday lives. In their stories, participants recounted interactions during different parts of their personal and professional lives that gave
them an understanding that they were perceived to be different. Participant Five explained "I knew that I was going to have to deal with being black in a majority white environment, both on the campuses and in the surrounding community. Yeah. And so, I was absolutely prepared." In some cases, the difference was described as something to be feared. As described by Participant Eight, “I'm the black guy walking down the sidewalk. You know, or I'm the black guy in the store that I see him coming and I'm going to look the other way because I don't want to make eye contact.” In other examples it was a reason to question or doubt capability for the roles they had taken on. As in the story provided by Participant Six:

You know, I don't I don't want to, you know, point to any particular things but, you know, it comes out every now and then, you're a black man in America, and you realize that . . . I can tell you; I won't tell you where who but when you know one of the negotiations. You know, it came across that one or two faculty refer to me as a thug.

Although often internalized differently, these experiences have a tendency to color how the participants feel society views them as Black men. These experiences range from the generic to the specific across participants. Regardless of the nature their interactions, the responses provided by participants reflect a general belief that they perceive themselves to be regarded negatively in most everyday interactions based on their race. Some discussed strategies that needed to develop for overcoming these perceived differences in successful and non-threatening ways. The strategies each participant employed varied from case to case; however, they included making changes in tone of voice, altering physical posture, and monitoring word choices. The goal for each participant regardless of which strategy employed was to find ways to shift narratives about their capabilities as leaders away from race so that they could more effectively do the work that they were hired to do.

**Racism Then and Now.** This category developed under the Black Experiences theme and was drawn out of discussions with those more experienced presidents. The average years of
service in community college for all participants was 21.75 years. About half of the participants had 22 or more years of experience. For those participants, there was a clear ability to distinguish a difference in the ways they as Black men and presidents are treated now when compared to how it may have been earlier in their careers. In particular, these individual reflections express that while racism does still exist and is a problem, it is much less of an issue than it might have been in the past. In his reflection, Participant Three stated:

Well 20 years ago I think it would be different, race would matter more, I mean man honestly, if you ask me that 20 years ago, 25 years ago, I would say yeah, I think, you know race had a major influential factor on doing that now. I think it's the quality of the work that you do. This is the leadership situation.

As stated above, Participant Three is an individual who has considerable experience at the senior leadership level in community colleges. He has served his entire career in this work and considered the role of president to be his career goal almost from the point where he graduated from college. When talking about the current state of the industry, Participant Three acknowledged that things are still difficult for People of Color in general, but as he compared today’s interactions with those of the past, he became almost joyful in his belief that America had achieved a place of balance in its treatment of minorities. Participant Three held very firmly to the idea that things were better while still not perfect for a Black man in the role of president. This president had one of the longest careers in both the role of president and in community college administration in general. He and those other participants who fell into the older demographic all shared a similar sense that while work still needed to be done to improve the experiences of Black men, things were still better than they had been in the past. The majority of the younger presidents with fewer years of experience expressed no such positivity in their outlook.
Awareness of Race. This sub-category steps away from the external indicators of perceptions held by participants and centers their experiences on the internal awareness they have of their race and how they felt it impacted their daily lives. It can be associated with a sense of acceptance of the individual realities that come from negative experiences these Black men have had in everyday life. The reflections provided do not in and of themselves hold insights that are unique to Black men alone but can apply to Black people in general. Participant Four explained:

It’s innate in who I am there are characteristics that, that are innate you know I don't think about being a black male, until I get pulled over, stuff that makes you think about being a black man. It just innate in who you are.

Participant Four was clear throughout his interview that he perceived his experiences as less negative when he compared them to his counterparts. He expressed often that as an expert in his chosen field it was difficult for anyone to present a case against his work based on race or any other factors. The self-identified Alpha male expressed that those close to him had similar experiences to his and that they were not hindered due to their race because they were all exceptional in their work. Participant Four also identified other factors, discussed later in the chapter, which gave him a different perspective from what he believed to be that of other Black colleagues. However, while Participant Four did not identify with these experiences himself, he did recognize that disparities due to anti-Black racism do exist for other Black male presidents, just not the ones he knew.

These life experiences appear to have been internalized by participants in a way that forces them to accept the reality of the situation as a part of life. Often the participants would tie their realizations about their race to interactions from childhood that carried on through
adulthood. There is a clear sense of frustration embedded within their reflections but no clear idea for ways around it. Participant Seven stated:

We are oftentimes seen as an intimidating and threatening presence because of how we talk. So, I had to keep that in mind when talking to employees and colleagues in some ways because I'm very direct, because it will be seen as a threat.

Blackness as Barrier. Connected to the awareness sub-theme, this concept addressed the statements made by participants to express how their Blackness was sometimes considered a barrier in their everyday lives. This was represented by Participant Seven in his expression of the “challenges” that come with success as a Black male in community college administration.

"I would say as you transition through the ranks, you face challenges. One, especially in areas where diversity is not as prominent. And you have not lived near or know many African Americans."

Throughout the interviews conducted there was a general awareness that being a Black man made it harder to progress through the ranks. Participant Seven was not the only member of the group to overtly express this sentiment. The majority of the other participants expressed the idea as a part of a generally accepted and mostly unspoken understanding about the expectation of negative experiences associated with being Black as a community college administrator.

This sub-category converges with the larger themes of Black experience and pressure to perform, as again, the majority of participants felt their race led them to a generally negative experience with regard to their career progression. It is also balanced against the larger theme that racism exists but not as a barrier to success. As stated above, while all participants understood the difficulty of their experiences as Black men, most of them agree that it did not dissuade them from pursuing and attaining the role of president. The barriers these participants
experienced were not those that would lead to a total abandonment of the goal; instead, they just made things harder in general.

It would be perhaps misleading to give the impression that there were no positive reflections to be found in this theme. There was some indication that individuals who had significant interactions with mentors or colleagues who were also black had a more positive view of their career experiences. Participant Four specifically highlighted the fact that he had never experienced personally any interactions nor seen specific examples where his Black identity resulted in a negative experience. He did acknowledge that he believed the ideas about negative experiences for Black men and other People of Color were real they just did not relate to him personally or those close to him. Participant Three also held a generally positive view of his experiences however, these reflections were provided in the context of the work he had done in roles beyond his first presidency. For Participant Three, the Black experiences were tied to the subtheme of “racism then and now.”

**Can’t Do it Alone**

This theme was uncovered through linkages within two subthemes: first, the importance of mentors and how they influence the career direction. Second was the subtheme of relationships with others and how they assisted participants find the path that best suited their needs. The larger theme can’t do it alone focused on the perceptions held by participants that they would not have managed to attain presidency without some form of assistance from others. In several cases, the participants expressed that they never even considered the possibility of becoming a president until they were coached and supported by a mentor or peer. This theme was generated based on responses from seven of the eight participants; it tied with one other theme as the second most common in its occurrence after the Black experience. Generally, this
assistance came in the form of mentoring and coaching either from direct supervisors or from outsiders who for various reasons were invested to push these men to seek higher levels of success.

From Participant Two:

I also got to meet people along the way, at different conferences and doing some other like work in on conference speeches or presentations, and suddenly people are in very prominent positions today. And not that they did anything other than maybe just have a brief conversation with me, but I hold these folks up as elders helping me get to where many of these people were African American. So, I've had some good mentors along the way too and just listen to people.

Participant Three shared "So, I really started this process my journey by looking at two of my mentors and a professor who actually helped me determine this was the career route, and I've been on that path ever since." Further, Participant Six indicated "[Mentor] as the one that was really pushing me for, you know, pushing for me to go for the doctorate to again to take more of a leadership role in terms of what I was doing."

Both Participant Two and Participant Three expressed a deep regard for their mentors because they attribute much of their success to the efforts made by these individuals. Participant Two underscored that from his perspective, race was not a factor in this regard because several individuals who he deemed key to his development were White men. Participant Two pointed to his amiable personality as the reason that he was able to cultivate these relationships even in environments which he knew were hostile for people who look like him. Participant Three took a different opinion that having Black and Brown mentors had been the key to his success. For him identifying these well-known and extraordinary leaders afforded him opportunities to be recognized as a talented leader himself, ultimately motivating him to achieve success in his work as president.
**Mentors.** It is important to note that there was no identifiable characteristic associated with the individuals who helped participants to find their path to presidency. Some influencers were White, while others were Black. There were some participants who were quick to point out that although they did experience racism, some of their biggest cheerleaders and motivators were actually White. Participant Two described this in his experience “[The president] actually paid for me to go to Lakin. And he was, he was a White man.”

The influencers were also diverse in their work in relation to experience with presidency. For some participants, it was an immediate supervisor serving as president themselves that uncovered and fostered the desire. In other participants, it was a coach like an academic advisor or member of the faculty from their undergraduate and graduate work who encouraged the journey. Still other participants had complete outsiders drive them to consider the work. Participant Four shared how he experienced this motivation from outsiders "And let me tell you what influenced me. I had two friends of mine that were mentors that were pursuing this field."

In several cases the presidents expressed that their desire to seek presidency was inspired by these mentors, many of whom saw the potential in these participants before they did themselves.

Participant One:

I had this conversation with (my former president) on numerous occasions that I really was not interested in becoming president. And you know, lo and behold, nine years after that first initial conversation about pursuing a job, I was able to get it and it was really due in large part to of her mentoring.

Participant One gave a great deal of credit to former supervisors and mentors even while recognizing that his proximity to a presidency was already established by the virtue of who his father was. During our conversation he showed a particular desire to highlight how much work went into convincing him to direct himself toward becoming a president. Here the role of his
mentor and supervisor was largely to serve as confidence booster so that he could find the path that had already been laid out for him.

Participant Five:

I called one of my mentors who I work for and she was best friends with the chancellor at the time and long story short, I was talking to her about that job she encouraged me to apply for the presidency and that I thought that was crazy.

Participant Five highlighted his ability to leverage connections with mentors who then used their connections to create opportunities where they might not have otherwise been. Here again the participant expressed that the idea of his becoming president was a foreign concept even as he was seeking support for consideration in the role.

Participant Six:

I think there were others, especially my former president, she, you know, I mean, sounds kind of weird that she encouraged me to do it, you have to wonder to me to just leave. But, you know, certainly her again she pushed me to succeed.

As with the prior two examples, Participant Six shared reflections on how the support from an engaged supervisor led to his decision to actively pursue a presidency.

Participants One, Five, and Six reinforced the underlying theme of needing the help of others to achieve the desired goal. Participant One has relationships that were the result of both his family connections and his professional work. As the child of a well-known community advocate, Participant One was aware that he had a less challenging road than someone else might have. He seemed almost apologetic about the fact that he was basically a hometown kid who finally made it big. Participants Five and Six had more typical interactions where a supervisor or someone with a similar investment pushed them to grow the skills needed to move to the next level.
**Relationships.** A secondary sub-theme embedded within the theme “Can’t Do it Alone” was the importance of relationships. Many participants expressed how they leveraged their personal relationships and their ability to cultivate them as a useful set of tools to assist in their progression to presidency. In some cases, these relationships were centered on the influences of friends and knowledgeable colleagues who encouraged these men to seek development that would ultimately lead to a presidency. Participant Two provided an example of this: "I also had this network of other professionals, a trio of professionals, whom I would say primarily were African Americans, and I was in this network of folks and they said, you can do this work, we will support you.” Participant Four made a case for these relationships as a resource that helped in his preparation for success: "I literally have been taught by people who are experts at this, so going into it I was prepared." Participant Six also shared similar reflections: "It was others who began saying, you know, you need to think about being a president you need to move forward you need to, you know, once people realize the depth of my resume my experience."

Some participants made statements that highlighted the nature of their relationships from the more focused perspective of formal mentors. These individuals provided not only encouragement but also coaching and development that helped the participants become more confident or skilled in preparation for presidency. From Participant Six, "[My supervisor] was the one that was really pushing me for, you know, pushing for me to go for the doctorate to again to take more of a leadership role in terms of what I was doing." Participant Four also shared how his mentor pushed him to success: "[I] would even say my mentors have encouraged me in some cases forced me to be committed to my professional development."

Some relationships did not fit any formal structure of supportive friends or formal mentors. Some relationships were drawn from community members and business partners who
advocated for the participant’s success. Participant Five provided an example of this: "These are people out in the community who offered me perspective to help navigating being a man, not only a man but a black man in this role." This relationship leading to presidency was not as common as those related directly to the career progress. These partners were more likely business connections and colleagues who saw the role as an opportunity but had no direct connection to the individual beyond those inside the college.

Participants One and Two highlighted again how their efforts to seek presidency were supported by their individual ability to make key partnerships in the community. Again, this was significant for Participant One who had both a mentor in his previous president and the support of his close relations due his familial relations. Participants Three and Five both shared stories about the influences of friends who pushed them to identify their career paths.

Two interesting observations were not as common in the conversation but still provided some insight into my understanding of how perceptions of race played a role in the different participant experiences. First, some of the participants’ reflections focused on the power of networking in an attempt to make White counterparts and employees look beyond their race to see them as more effective leaders. Participant One:

I spent a lot of time trying to build relationships on campus with people as part of the just my overall leadership style and facilitating change. And I think because of those kinds of relationships, there was a lot of support for me to, to make that make that transition.

Others shifted their observations about race to the mentors that supported them. The underlying idea from the conversation was that of some surprise that White men might support the participant despite perceived racial aggression. Participant Two seemed particularly interested in sharing this fact as a way to reinforce his belief that the strategies he used to blend in helped him to achieve the support of White men as mentors and coaches. He stated, “[The president] has
been a great mentor to me ever since. He helps me to different places. He actually paid for me to go to Lakin, and he was, he was a White man.”

**Pressure to Perform**

This theme is focused on the perceptions held by participants that they were often held to a different standard of expectation than their White counterparts. It was represented in the responses from seven of the eight participants and thus tied with Can’t do it alone as the second most common of the major themes. The specific focus of this theme is the interactions that participants have on the job that they believe put pressure on them to always perform, act, or produce results at the highest levels. Participants who resonated with this theme identified that because of their race they experience these pressures at every level on the job.

Participant One:

> [P]eople expect you to do more than your White counterparts do more than your predecessors and you have to think you have to come in with some high expectations for yourself in that that say you need to do everything and be everything. But I think you got to come prepared with your A game the day you walk in the door. In their individual reflections, participants discussed how their work is always scrutinized more harshly, judged more critically, and found to be less effective than their White male counterparts for no other reason than the fact of their race.

At times the pressure manifests in the overall expectation that a Black man will not succeed in executing the work that needs to be done. Participant Six highlighted his perception of the phenomenon, "So, you have to recognize that you know that there's an expectation that you that you got to fail." As with other themes, the pressure to perform was a persistent and shared experience that all but three of the participants expressed direct familiarity with.

Participant Five shared the concern as one that was at the top of his mind at all times:

> There's not a day that doesn't go by that I'm not concerned, how I show up in the room. There is pressure to perform is 90% that I'm a black, I'm a black man in
America….because as a president, you get a pass. I can be late. Right! Especially if there are meetings, they're my meetings. I can be late. You know I can, I can, you know, get away with saying a lot of things I should not say. But as a black president necessary, the same rules don't apply.

Participant Seven made the observation with a sense of frustration. During his interview he seemed to almost resent the fact that he would be assumed to be set for failure just because he was Black. In his words, “Yeah, slightly different. Okay. Even then, it's almost like you're under a microscope all the time looking for you to make a mistake.”

In some cases, this sense of pressure manifests from the belief that these participants lack the skills and ability to successfully perform as presidents. This creates an intense desire for them to prove themselves up and down their leadership structure. I drew this idea from statements made by individuals like Participant Six who stated:

So, you have to recognize that, you know, that there’s an expectation that you that you got to fail. I would say there's more of an expectation that you can't be successful. Because you're still dealing with issues of race.

Finally, while the general consensus of the participants was that race and racism played significant roles in their perceptions of difference in treatment, there was also expressed an acknowledgement that it was not always clear whether the perceptions were based on fact or their own insecurity. More clearly stated, a participant would express in the interview that they felt pressure to be better than their White counterparts, but they were unable to clearly point to specific examples that support their beliefs of different expectations and treatment. Participant One, who as stated above was considered to have been groomed for success as a community college president, had this to say:

You know, and the truth Chris, some of that may just be perception on my part. I don't know that. It may be they may not be founded on anything, but I just feel as if . . . that I've got to hold myself to a higher standard because they're looking for me to make a mistake.
While Participant Eight had a deep well of experience both outside and within the community college system, he expressed a similar sense of uncertainty:

> While I believe [the bar is different] that I cannot truthfully tell you that I believe it based on a specific experience. I believe it's based on just what I know historically. And what I know and what I perceive in terms of just our community at large. The pressure to perform manifested as a significant challenge among the participants in a way that highlights the negative impact that racism has on individuals of color. In this case, an individual is placed in a situation that makes them call into question every positive and negative interaction to run them through the filter of “is this because I am Black?” While the commonality of the sentiment should be considered an indication that it is a real issue, the fact that some could not even be sure what the issue actually was could mean that general life experiences have jaded the participant in a way that makes them suspicious of every interaction.

**Finding the Path**

Finding the path is a theme that was uncovered as participants explained how they approached their efforts to become a community college president. This theme was represented in the response of five of the eight participants. The theme was largely focused on career planning and progression. In this category, there was a consideration of the importance of professional development and planning. Figure 4 is used to visually represent the three main pathways uncovered by study participants. It should not be considered to be the only way to presidency or even the most common; these are singularly the mile markers that were highlighted by the participants as they recounted the experiences that led them to presidency.
Note. The three main pathways uncovered by study participants.

As represented in the figure, there are three distinct paths that participants identified.

Path One “From the bottom up.” This path is a reference to those individuals who entered the field with very little idea or intent to become president. These individuals were not intentional about career moves or progression to any degree. Typically, the individuals were working in an environment where their skills and talents allowed them to excel, which led them to a mentor who created the awareness of opportunity and then provided the inspiration that helped the participant to reach for and achieve the role. Participant Four expressed his experiences this way:

I've been fortunate that I never chase titles, I chase expertise . . . I never had a goal to be a college president I didn't even want to apply for this position, because my, you know my spouse was here.
The major theme of “Can’t do it Alone” and the subthemes related to relationships and mentors are important in Path One. This is because the individuals, though driven, may not have the confidence or vision that leads them naturally to the presidency. *Finding the Path* is another significant theme that could also surface here once the individual on Path One determines that the presidency is the right career choice for them. Finally, individuals on this path have the opportunity to develop their skills and become experts in their chosen field. For this reason the theme *Racism exists but not a Barrier* is also drawn to the surface. The specific acquisition of skills has the potential to draw individuals on this path into the attention of influencers who can open doors to presidency.

**Path Two “Guided hands.”** This path is similar to Path One in that the participants did not explicitly have a career goal that focused on the presidency. This path includes the individuals who may not even have initially worked in a community college when the opportunities leading to presidency were uncovered. Participant Five is a strong representation of this path. There were times during the interview where he almost seemed surprised that he was even in the room. "I've probably made one of the largest leaps in higher education history. Yeah, probably what made that possible was the relationships. I had with that community college system." As he identified, there were significant factors that played a role in his success. Again, there was a recognition that some form of work or his level of performance brought him to the attention of significant mentors, including supervisors who then encouraged the idea of presidency.

I called one of my mentors who I work for and she was best friends with the chancellor at time and long story short, I was talking to her about that job she encouraged me to apply for the presidency and that I thought that was crazy.
There were other factors that focused on community relationships and significant partnerships that assisted with this progress to presidency. These interactions do not rise to the level of mentorship or even coaching; instead, it was the adjacency to the opportunity and the right word in the right ear. "The person who hired me for the first presidency was one of my people I interviewed. So that’s how I even had a relationship with that chancellor, who was the president at the time.” Participant Five also stressed the importance of professional organizations. "So, the one that was the most impactful for me, as relates to getting prepared for the advancement in higher education was the, the American Association of blacks and higher education as a leadership and mentor institute." It is again significant to recognize that the organizations mentioned were not specifically tied to work in the community college as Participant Five had originally planned to remain a faculty member in a four-year college environment. There were hints of this from other participants, but Participant Five was the most transparent in his responses on how external influences led him to presidency.

Similar to Path One, this path draws on the Can’t do it Alone which speaks directly to the importance of influencers in the development and identification of potential presidents. As stated above, Path Two is not limited to individuals who start their career in the community college. They may come from business and industry or have some influence in the community that allows them to leverage their relationships to achieve the role of president. They may also have come from other higher education backgrounds such as a four-year university system. Their skills may not have been honed in their career progression related to community college. As such, the Pressure to Preform theme can be uncovered as these individuals must perform at high levels to avoid impact from negative perceptions of their race.
Path Three ‘Career planner.’ This path was uncovered by those individuals who stated very clearly that their intent from early on was to become a community college president. It was very clear that they recognized the opportunity and had some good idea of the steps it would take for them to achieve the role. In the words of Participant Three, "Okay. And I was very selective about where I wanted to go and where I wanted to work for." There was also the very clear sense that participants had to be very purposeful in their choices related to what jobs or projects to take in the hopes of gaining the skills they needed to become presidents.

Participant Four:

I have been intentional about the places I've worked that you know I worked at an HSI that has one of the largest populations of black students in the state I worked in [a college] which is might as well be an HBCU. Yeah, I worked in San Bernardino that again had a large population of black students.

Participant Eight followed a slightly different path, using his career journey to bring him closer to the experience he would need to become a president. “I've been a believer in my career that my philosophy has been to take on positions that afforded me the opportunity to be closer and closer to the presidency without being a president.” Participant Eight restated his strategy more than once: “I wanted to be on a. As I mentioned earlier on a trajectory that would put me close to the presidency without actually being in the presidency, so that I could see what that life was like.”

Path Three is linked to the theme Finding the path as individuals in this category take clear steps to boost their chances to become president. They attend professional development programs, make connections, and choose career moves that bring them close to the role. This naturally leads also to the theme Can’t do it Alone as the individual likely makes key connections that are necessary to assist them in their singular pursuit. As with the other two paths, there is
also a link to the theme *Racism Exists but not a Barrier*. This is due to the fact that again these individuals develop specific skillsets that can be showcased to help them achieve the presidency.

It is important to understand that the pathways that are presented here are not the only way for an individual to ascend to the role of president, they are however examples of how each participant in this study narrated their journey from the point of entry to work in the field of community college leadership to the decision to become president. Each path represents a set of decisions on the part of a participant that uncovers how they individually came to the choice to become a president, what steps they might have taken to achieve the role and what, if any outside help or support they might have received in order to make the transition. The pathways should be viewed from the perspective of the participant at their entry point and not from that of their decision point to become president. For example, participants that fall into path three knew from the beginning of their career that they wanted to be presidents. They established goals and set priorities that would bring them up through the ranks to the office of the president in the fastest way possible. It is possible that these individuals might follow a trajectory similar to those on path one who come into a career in as a community college administrator or faculty member with no desire to become president at all, however after proving their skill or displaying characteristics that were valuable to the institutions they served these individuals ended up in the seat in the same way as path three. The difference is the intent of the individual and when they decided to compete for the presidency.

*Racism Exists, but was not A Barrier*

The final theme acknowledges that racism does exist as a challenge for these participants; however, it is not a barrier to their success. Instead, the construct of racism was acknowledged as an obstacle that they all had to work very hard to overcome in different ways to achieve their
desired version of success. Within this theme, participants provided reflections on the various ways they have overcome stigma and negative attitudes themselves or provided their perspectives on the reasons for success of their similar counterparts. This theme was uncovered for four of the eight participants and represents the last of the key themes identified for this study. Within this theme there were two main categories: (a) the importance of skills and experience and (b) personal motivation.

As the needs and challenges of community colleges have changed, so have the opinions of key stakeholders on what they desire in an ideal president. The shift in priority placed on skills and experience over other factors is key to this dynamic. Moreover, even those individuals with specific dislikes for different races seem to be able to value good work over their racist ideas.

Participant Three:

Sure, you can earn respect people, people, as I said before, I've seen truly highly racist people respect people who do good work . . . I think they're more concerned about what is the best job you're going to do and if you can do a quality job, you can be accepted.

Embedded here is an acknowledgement that a certain level of skill and accomplishment must be gained before an individual can be judged on experience alone. The perceptions held by the participants indicate that this is not generally the case for their White counterparts.

According to Participant Four, “All these little white kids like Michael Jordan, not because he is black because he's an expert basketball player . . . I think in any genre of work. When you are a recognized expert in your track you begin to transcend race.”

Participant Eight:

I was blessed to, to have had a name, to a certain extent with this business, and community-based organization, communities, and so I've been able to, I've been able to jump any of those hurdles. Without those being very high hurdles.
It is important to note that while participants are very sure that skill, experience, and results matter more than other factors, they all are also very clear that racism still exists as they perceive it in their everyday lives.

Participant Three:

Quite naturally I'm not naive enough not to think that racism don't exist, but I am about to tell you that the quality of work you do far outweighs the racism. Not in today's society because they're not in positions to do so.

The second category that underpins this theme is the acknowledgement that participants needed a certain amount of personal motivation to assist them with overcoming the challenges with racism that they experience in everyday life.

Participant Six:

Now, I do not let that depress me or get me down. I think an awareness of consciousness about it enables you, you know, and, you know, makes you more determined and makes you be more prepared because you know what you're up against.

**Less Common Themes**

There were eight additional themes that were developed through the analysis process.

**Racism?**

Three of the eight participants expressed that they felt the negative impact of racism on their career; however, they were unable to clearly express what caused them to have this concern. An example of this was the response provided by Participant Six: "along the way, I think, you know, there were things like salaries that I felt I was underpaid, or not given consideration for my skills and experiences, especially early on." In these situations individuals appear to feel themselves being exposed to negative interactions in their everyday lives but are unable to determine if the experience is unique to them or related to some other influence i.e., a bad manager, a poor work environment, unclear policies, or something else entirely. As Black
men who constantly have had to navigate anti-Black spaces, there exists the potential for
preoccupation with racism as the root of all negative interactions.

In the study, some participants felt it best to ignore their negative interactions rather than
to call them out as racist. This behavior followed the understanding that the feelings were likely
valid but to voice them would not help the participant in any way to maintain their forward
momentum toward presidency. These individuals provided the clear examples of this type of
behavior. As discussed in his profile, for example, Participant Two preferred to blend in as
much as possible, relying on his ability to foster positive interactions and to look past those
experiences that might have otherwise left him feeling isolated; instead, he chose to focus on
ways to improve his skill and build closer connections to his professional community.

Isolation (It’s Only Me)

Three of the eight participants expressed a sense of isolation and loneliness in their career
progression as they were sometimes the only professionals who looked like them i.e., Black. It
was understood from participant responses that they perceived themselves to be an army of one
in most situations. Due to the expectations of their role, these individuals were placed in
situations that brought their differences due to race to the forefront. Working in rural
environments, serving on community boards, partnering with chambers of commerce or local
economic district leaders, these men were repeatedly forced to find ways to thrive in
environments that were potentially hostile to them in subtle and overt ways. These experiences
were not limited to professional interactions; they also extended into personal life.
Participant Two expressed this in his response.

I was always in the room where most of the time it was only me. I had nine counties we served and I'm dealing with nine different county commissioner systems, dealing with probably more than a half a dozen mayor’s dealing with. Chambers of Commerce, places where sometimes there was not a black person there at all. But I went in and I would have to sometimes just say, Okay, that isn't good but that's my reality. And I'm okay with that.

The potential for stress related to the sense of isolation can be tied to pressure to perform because these individuals feel a sense of obligation to prove false stereotypes about their race. This can be tied to theories on stereotype threat which is a sense of threat that can arise when one knows that he or she can possibly be judged or treated negatively on the basis of a negative stereotype about their group (Goff & Steele, 2008; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Although primarily applied to areas involving academic achievement, the concept may apply to challenges that racially marginalized individuals face as leaders as well.

**When It’s Time (to Lead)**

Associated with the themes “finding the path” and “can’t do it alone,” three of the eight participants provided some insight into their decision making and when they knew it was time to become a president. In this case, the participants identified the point at which they had determined that they had achieved enough significant work that they knew it was time to take the leap and compete for a presidency. There was no specific set of skills that were developed nor was there an event that drove the decision. Instead, the decision seemed to be associated with the sense of accomplishment that was tied to work outcomes and the belief that there was little to no more development or impact that would come from the previous role. Participant One:

I think by the time my former boss retired, I felt as if I was ready. I was at a point where I think in my current role, I'd probably done as much as I could it was time for me to begin to make that transition and apply some of the things that I've learned kind of on a broader scale.
For all three participants, the sense was that they had achieved all that they could, and when they looked to the next level, the logical step was to seek presidency. This ties to more significant themes: Can’t do it alone, finding the path, and racism exists but not a barrier. This is because at the point where the participants determined that they were ready to take the next step, they then needed to find the path to the presidency; this required them to leverage relationships, develop professional skills, and build a case that would give them the chance to become a stronger candidate for a presidency.

The remaining themes were significant in only single interviews but provided further insight into the obstacles each participant faced: (a) purposeful communication which was cultivated, obtained from one participant who explained how he needed to adapt his leadership style to avoid being seen as an aggressive threat in order to find success as a Black president; (b) perception of self (and Others), drawn from one participant who expressed significant disparity between his experiences, both positive and negative, and those of other Black leaders; and (c) professional development, elicited from one participant who shared his reflections on the significant impact of professional development in his success. Professional development as a theme did appear in other participant interviews; however, it was never expressly provided as a significant motivator; (d) stereotype threat, revealed by one participant who felt pressure to change certain behaviors to lessen the negative perceptions that others had about Black men; and (e) importance of fit, disclosed by one participant who provided his insight on the importance of matching an individual’s skills with the needs of the institution rather than to focus on the impact of race and racism. These themes, significant to individual participants, generally, however, did not provide any strong linkages across the majority of interviews. These themes do provide
more insight into the experiences of individual participants. All of the themes are covered in Appendix F.

**Summary**

In this chapter I outlined the findings of my study and identified the significant themes that resulted from participant conversations. The chapter began with a description of individual participants and provided insight into the interview experiences and takeaways that I, as the researcher, experienced in the process. A description of themes was provided that included examples taken from participant transcripts. In Chapter 5, I will discuss the significant takeaways from the study findings, tying them to the extant literature presented in Chapter 2. In that chapter, I will also discuss how this study is relevant to current conversations related to community college leadership and planning. I will end the chapter with suggestions for future studies.
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In Chapter One of this dissertation, I outlined the challenges that institutional leaders of community colleges, like boards of trustees and human resources hiring officers, face related to the increasing number of sitting presidents who are in the process of retiring or planning to retire from the industry (Shults, 2001). Simultaneously, research has shown that those most likely to ascend to the presidency based on succession planning are also approaching retirement and lack interest in assuming the role (Brown et al., 2002; Shults, 2001; Tekle, 2013). While the typical profile of a sitting president is described as a White male between the ages of 55 and 60, that profile is slowly changing with White women seeing the most advancement within the field (Evelyn, 2001; Gagliardi et al., 2017, Seltzer, 2017; Vaughan, 1991). Racially marginalized candidates on the other hand, both men and women, have succeeded in making the climb to the presidency but at significantly lower rates than discussed above (Evelyn, 2001; Seltzer, 2017; Vaughan, 1991). The purpose of this dissertation was to examine the career experiences of African American males who have successfully attained the role of community college president.

In Chapter Two, I examined the research to explore the role of the community college president and expanded on the understanding of what a traditional presidential profile looked like based on available demographic data (Duree, 2007; Gagliardi et al., 2017; Weissman & Vaughan, 2007). By reviewing the expected role and function of the president, I was also able to demonstrate how internal and external stakeholders have been attempting to expand the talent pool by providing a multitude of training and development opportunities. These partners have invested time, money, and other resources heavily into college doctoral programs, short-term trainings and institutes, and in-house/Grow-Your-Own (GYO) programs. All this investment has been made with the end goal of expanding the available talent pool of potential presidents.
While these programs have been met with varying degrees of success, sitting presidents and other leaders still remain pessimistic about the preparedness of the next generation of leaders (Jaskchik & Lederman, 2018). Chapter Two also provided an examination of the lack of progress the leadership development process has made in diversifying the talent pool. I explored the challenges that People of Color, particularly Black men and women, face on the road to presidency.

Chapters Three and Four outlined the structure of my study. I applied an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework to this research. IPA is a qualitative research methodology intended to extend beyond the basic principles of phenomenology for social research that provided me as the researcher with the tools to gain a deeper level of understanding of participant’s lives from the standpoint of recounted experiences. This information was used to understand how those same experiences came together to assist the participants in making meaning in their individualized realities. This research was specifically focused on the experiences of Black men who had achieved the role of community college president. To aid in this research, I chose to overlay a critical race theory (CRT) framework. CRT is a theorizing space that allows researchers to understand how People of Color experience racism in their everyday lives (Bell, 1995; Cabrera, 2018; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Because my study was specifically designed to address the experiences of Black men, I attempted to refine the theoretical focus further to fit within the designation as BlackCrit, which specifically addresses issues of race and racism for Black people (Dumas & Ross 2016; Roberts, 1999).

As a part of this study, I conducted eight individual interviews with sitting Black male presidents. Once the interviews were completed, I followed a specific set of analysis techniques
that supported the methodological framework established in Chapter 3. As a result of the analysis, I identified 13 themes related to the experiences of Black male community college presidents. Five of the themes were considered significant; the remaining eight themes provided valuable information, but I did not consider them significant beyond the individual experiences from which they were generated. See Chapter Four for a detailed discussion of the significant themes.

In Chapter Five, I provide a deeper analysis of the top five themes and draw connections to the literature identified earlier in my study. I also give consideration to implications related to the themes as they may apply for community college boards, human resources professionals, and other stakeholders interested in promoting a more diverse talent pool of potential presidents. I conclude the chapter by providing my recommendations for further research as an extension of this study.

**Discussion**

All of the participants in this study expressed an awareness that their lived experiences were different from those of their White counterparts. This came into play in nearly every aspect of their career progression to the presidency. The themes identified provide evidence of each participant’s association with and an awareness and resigned acceptance of a reality that saw them at best as inferior and at worst a threat. The five significant themes, (a) Black experiences, (b) can’t do it alone, (c) pressure to perform, (d) finding the path (to presidency), and (e) racism exists but not a barrier, tie to the research related to the professional experiences of Black men.

The expectations and roles of college presidents are vast and varied in relation to both the communities they serve and the constituents to which they are responsible (Eddy, 2005; McNair et al., 2011; Pierce & Pederson, 1997; Vaughan & Weisman, 1998). These expectations create
significant barriers for most who consider presidency as a career option. For the participants in this study, there was a recognition that expectations led to more significant obstacles for them, at least partially due to their race. The significant themes of Black experiences and pressure to perform uncovered how daily interactions drove the participants to create negative associations with the perceptions of their race as presidents. They were reflective of the research that has shown how Black people struggle in professional academic settings due to their sense of isolation, instances of racial microaggressions, discrimination, stereotypes, and prejudice (Feagin, 2001, 2006; Feagin et al., 1996; Harper, 2006, 2009; Jackson, 2008; Jackson & Moore III, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; McCabe, 2009; Smith, Allen et al., 2007; Smith, Yosso et al., 2006, 2007; Solorzano et al., 2000).

**Understanding the Black Experience**

It was evident that the theme of Black experiences could also be tethered back to the tenets of critical race theory as an acknowledgement that the racism and racist interactions Blacks encounter are normal and everyday occurrences (Cabrera, 2018; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Khalifa et al., 2013). Racism and racist interactions were common and accepted in the everyday lives of these men who had been chosen to serve in leadership roles as community college presidents. The second observation is that the language and tenor of the comments provided highlight a hesitation to call out this reality—even while it is accepted as fact across cases in this study.

For these presidents, these daily occurrences took the form of a constant shadow that they perceived clouded every aspect of their leadership. For some in the group, it was the intense pressure to perform, in many cases at levels perceived to be above those of their White counterparts. In other cases, it was a belief that they as professionals needed to adjust their
behaviors in a way that allowed them to show up as less threatening and more approachable among the people they led as well as among those to whom they reported. As individuals, there were acknowledgments from all eight participants that generally these experiences were expected and have been a part of both their personal and professional lives as long as they can remember. What was unique to each individual was how they internalized these experiences and used them to provide motivation, in some cases, to succeed. They all chose to pursue the career despite the expectation of obstacles. Some chose to blend into their surroundings and make the least trouble as they attempted to find their way to the top. Others allowed their opportunities to guide them closer and closer to the presidency until there was no better choice, even in spite of their race. Still other participants leveraged networks, connections, and personal relationships in order to land the right spot for them.

**The Impact of Racism, Isolation, and Pressure**

It is not surprising that these Black men struggled to gain the acceptance that typically comes so readily for most in the role of president, given the historic demographics related to the role—that of a capable White male leader (Weisman & Vaughan, 2007). It could be argued that the very nature of the community college administrative leadership structure and how individuals have historically been prepared for it provide limiting factors for minorities who may not share the background and characteristics of their White male counterparts. This then becomes an example of racism being used as a form of control at the institutional level (Peirce, 1995)

As they relate to the limited availability of opportunity for Black male community college presidents, the significant themes echoed the expected result of so few opportunities. In general, as addressed in the previous section, the participants felt pressure to perform at the highest standard, all while subjected to negative encounters that were tied to their collective
Black experiences. In addition, there is the sense of singularity or isolation that reflects in the understanding of Black experiences in professional settings. Gardner Jr. et al. (2014) discussed this topic in their work on the various ways Black professionals must adapt in order to achieve professional success. This all ties in then to the challenges that are associated with identity for these professionals as they attempt to balance a desire to be their authentic self with the need to be seen as approachable, non-threatening, and competent. These multiple identities lead again to undue pressure on participants to conform and apply a double consciousness to allow them access to the tools they will need to adapt to the majority White male supportive culture. Double consciousness is a constant part of research associated with Black identity in White settings. Originally introduced by D.E.B Du Bois (1903), double consciousness describes how Blacks must navigate their African and American identities and the psychological implications associated with both (Gonigs, et. al., 2018). Levin et al. (2013) discussed how some of the sense of pressure that faculty and staff feel is self-induced as a result of their attempts to build double consciousness.

It also appears that there is a generally accepted and perhaps unconscious negativity associated with these Black men because they are Black men. As outlined by Smith, Yosso et al. (2007), this is Black misandry, an exaggerated pathological aversion to Black men, able to manifest in ways that causes the participants to question their skills, talents, and very right to exist in these spaces and in these roles. Participants recounted stories of isolation, pressure-to-be-seen as an impossible-to-achieve standard of perfection, and general separateness that other studies have identified as typical of the experiences of Black men (Gardner Jr. et al., 2014; Gasman et al., 2015; Levin et al., 2013).
Leading through STEM and MEES

Each of the participants in this study recounted stories of encounters with anti-Black racism, aggression, and stress on both the macro- and micro-levels. These external pressure experiences mirror the concepts introduced by Peirce (1995), which refer to the fact that Blacks endure oppressive agents, environments, or situations that impose limits on their space, time, energy, and motion. In this case, these community college chief administrator roles, which have traditionally been white spaces, could be considered mundane, extreme, environmental stressors (MEES), further reinforcing Peirce’s research. Following an understanding of STEM and MEES as tools to reinforce racist culture expands room for a better understanding of Smith’s description of racial battle fatigue as a framework to explain the physical, mental, and social impact to People of Color as a result of persistent negative racial interactions.

The participant responses provided grounding for this study in the research associated with those same types of experiences of other Black faculty and administrators in higher education (Feagin et al., 1996; Jackson & Moore III, 2008; Smith, Yosso et al., 2006, 2007; Solorzano et al., 2000). Here, they provided a window into a still largely underexplored world that is the community college as it relates to marginalized leaders. In this case, by exploring these experiences, there is an opportunity to draw out ideas about how the structure may discourage Black men from seeking and therefore finding success in the role of president. This is reflected in the already established lower-than-expected population of Black male community college presidents as a reflection of their overall percentage of the American population as well as the disproportionately high density of Black male students that these institutions serve (Long, 2016; United States Census Beauru, 2018). Given the existing desire to diversify the talent pool and the need for new talent in general, there should be deep consideration for these responses as
they may shed light on some of the barriers that keep low the number of Black male administrators who transition to presidency. By understanding more about the experiences of groups like this, community colleges may be able to provide a more sustainable onramp for Black males as well as other minority groups.

It may be possible to argue that the challenges experienced by Black males are not related to race and instead an acknowledgement of the difficulties of the role to obtain, maintain, and ultimately succeed. The skillsets expected of potential presidents are significant and challenging for any individual to obtain regardless of race. Presidents are expected to function as everything from inspirational leader to community champion to money-making fundraising machines (Eddy, 2005; McNair et al., 2011; Pierce & Pederson, 1997). Any one of these aspects of the role might deter potential candidates from seeking to make the jump; however, taken as a singular opportunity, it is understandable why so much goes into training a large pool to achieve the hope of finding a qualified candidate. However, the experiences of these participants point to a consistent and sustained encounter with negative interactions that are tied to their race or racist ideas about Blackness leading to a general perception that Black males are less desired in the role and thus potentially less often selected to fill one without considerable critique and vetting. Even this level of scrutiny should not suggest that things get easier once they assume the role.

**Skill Building and Resilience as a Response to Anti-Blackness**

To achieve the success necessary to ascend to a presidency, the participants of this study highlighted many different influences, tactics, and strategies. Each of the eight participants had to find and navigate their own path to success. Here, the themes shift from a concept related to resilience into a purposeful decision-making process that allowed all of them to develop their skills and leverage personal relationships to rise through the ranks. The themes that rose to the
foreground were (a) finding the path and the acknowledgement that (b) racism exists but is not a barrier. As discussed previously, it is understood that Black professionals in higher education suffer from a number of challenges that make it difficult for them to thrive in their careers. According to the themes uncovered, to achieve success, the participants of this study found ways to overcome traditional expectations. This required a purposeful and specific set of action steps to allow them to transcend the limitations that they perceived were tied to their race.

Of particular importance was the ability to foster and maintain strong relationships with invested influencers who had the ability to open doors that may not have been accessible by other means. Each of the participants held a recollection of some individual, or in some cases individuals, that had a guiding hand not only in their belief that the participant could ascend to the presidency but even that it was a path to consider at all. They also pointed to their close relationships with peers that provided them with an outlet for expressing frustration, a sounding board for ideas, and examples of what should or should not happen under their individual watch.

Also, in an effort to overcome the perceived pressure to perform that many of the participants felt, there was a focus on the development and mastery of skills that have been identified as essential to the role of president. These individuals sought training and development opportunities to help them build their skills. The trainings included national affiliations, like the President’s Roundtable, and local programs, like the community college president training programs offered on the West Coast. All these programs focused on building the skills of the candidates and helping them to be more prepared to present themselves in a way that would build confidence in their abilities. Some of the programs focused on how these individuals could overcome the negative perceptions of their race by addressing common
mistakes in the interview process along with hands-on practice to help achieve the desired outcome.

Along with the steps taken above, there was also a general mindset that had to be developed for these individuals to persist in their roles as presidents. It was necessary to acknowledge that the racism they experienced did exist and then to find ways to handle it head on. There were also participants who acknowledged the issues they faced but internalized and compartmentalized them so that they could focus more on the work of the role. This highlights the importance of the positive experiences to outshine the negative interactions related to their race in order to continue in the work. These individuals understood that racism does exist; however, they chose to ignore and internalize the experiences in favor of being their best possible version of a president without the burden of stress associated with the racial battles they experience on a daily basis. There were those that held that their experiences were unique in that they never struggled to achieve the role nor to be seen as qualified. These examples should not be used to rationalize the idea that racism is not something to be overcome because, again, these presidents acknowledge that the negativity exists at least in part due to their race. This racism could, however, be mitigated through the leveraging of networks and opportunities that may not be available to everyone. It should be stated that a few participants were able to reconcile the current environment by comparing it to their experiences in earlier years of the community college story. They acknowledge that things are better now than they have ever been, but that did not mean that there was an achievement of a post-racial society.

*Telling the Story*

This dissertation was driven by a desire to understand the experiences of Black male community college presidents by asking the question, “How do African American males
experience their career progression to the role of community college president?” Based on the findings from the study, it is clear that these participants shared many similar experiences. They each came to the profession from different paths and with different motivations but ultimately ended up in the same place. The journey to the presidency exposed them to obstacles that created both external and internal pressure that the participants at least did not feel would have been the experience for their White counterparts. The general perspectives provided by the participants uncovered what could be perceived as the systemic nature of racism in the community college leadership development structure and how it has the potential to limit opportunities for Black men. While some were more hesitant than others to name the negative experiences as direct results of a racist system, their collective stories all uncovered an awareness that there was some level of difference in their experiences that was in part related to their race being perceived as negative. Indeed, even those who shared that they had mostly positive encounters in their careers still expressed the understanding that their experiences were unique and that most other Blacks, men and women, had to deal with racism in their work as they do in everyday life.

In their responses, each participant shared the steps that were taken and the lessons learned that helped them to navigate their way through careers in community college administration and leadership to end up as president. The underlying belief was that—yes—that there was an issue with racism and—yes—that issue created challenges for their success; however, those challenges were not insurmountable barriers. The racism experienced by these men had to be overcome through a great deal of work in different aspects of life for each individual. For some, there was a need to develop a level of skill in the field that would leave no room for questions regarding their fitness or preparedness for the role. For others, it was the
strength of their networks that opened doors that might not have been available to them by other means. The relationships and strength of connections were varied and multifaceted but again were tied to a recognition that there was a particular skill or talent held by the participant that was worth supporting so that they could achieve greater success.

As they reflected on their achievements, some of the participants shared that while things are difficult now, they are much better than they once were. The longer-term leaders shared that the aspirational goal of a more equitable society was alive and well in the community college and could be seen through the efforts of leaders that came before them and the institutions that they left behind. The more experienced participants appeared to be more positive overall about their career progression with a generally hopeful outlook toward the future. Those who were newer, within two to five years of attaining their presidency, were less optimistic. These less experienced leaders appeared to feel the pressure to perform more directly than their counterparts. It may be possible that the difference in perception has less to do with a change in racial attitudes and more to do with the phase which the individual participant was in with regard to their career progression. More directly stated, more experienced professionals appeared to be further away from the struggle of needing to prove their ability and closer to reflecting on the accomplishments they had achieved over the course of their tenure as president. Younger professionals did not yet have the span of success and thus felt that pressure more directly than others. The limited amount of research on the experiences that Black presidents have in community colleges may be expanded by further work in this area.

Implications and Recommendations

It is clear that these individuals perceived that they had been subject to extreme and persistent negative interactions and experiences as a result of having been Black men in the
role. CRT as a framework stresses that racism is built into the fabric of American life including the legal system, education, media, and entertainment (Ladson-Billings, 1998). This then might suggest that racism is one of the prevailing factors in the lack of representation of Black men in the role of community college president. This information along with an understanding of the state of decline in the existing pipeline of presidents should be a concern to anyone seeking to identify and hire future talent for the role.

Black males already exist in the role of community college president in percentages much lower than that of their percentage in the larger community of the United States. When they do manage to find a path to success, it is often riddled with the traps and snares of a racist system that has attempted to limit their success at every stage, including the basics of educational attainment. By maintaining this current structure, it is possible that community colleges may further limit their access to one group as viable candidates for the role of president in a space where the institutions need as many different faces as possible. Also, although the findings from this study are not meant to be used to make generalizations for any particular group or theme, they could provide a path to study the challenges for other minority groups that also struggle with representation within the ranks of presidency.

**Recommendations**

What follows is a set of recommendations based on data that can be used to assist community college boards, human resources professionals, and educators to assist with improving success for Black men seeking to become presidents. They may also be useful to aspiring community college presidents who are interested in identifying their path to the role.

**Increase Opportunities for Mentorship.** Aspiring community college presidents can benefit from having strong role models who can provide advice and guidance to them. By
providing these opportunities for development built on the basis of personal relationships, community college boards of trustees and human resources professionals can have greater confidence in their available talent pools’ ability to address their specific leadership needs. They may also be able to provide clearer onramps for those who may not be certain that the presidency is even an option for them. Increasing the opportunities for mentors can have an immediate positive impact on the potential development of new leaders.

Each of the participants in this study was able point to at least one positive relationship with a former supervisor or mentor that helped them to successfully attain the presidency. This suggests that there is a benefit to fostering the cultivation of informal and formal relationships to aid in the wellbeing of Black males with the potential to become presidents. This relationship does not require the mentor to be Black or male; rather, it is a genuine desire to help the individual realize their own potential and tailor support to the individual that allows them the courage to take the next step. Having access to individuals familiar with navigating the path to the presidency can provide Black men with a greater understanding of the expectations of the role and give them the confidence that they can be successful, sometimes in spite of detractors and negative stressors. The concept of mentors is not new to the professional development of future presidents or Black males. Many of the short-term professional development training programs have a mentorship component to their programing; however, there are not often enough mentors who are skilled at the expectations of the work and, as such, the potential connections that could be made are limited. Detractors might also argue that identifying and cultivating mentor relationships should be the responsibility of the individual seeking the presidency; however, as already stated, some of these individuals did not even know presidency was an option until someone else gave them the vision and helped them to see it too.
As a part of the work being done to build the pipeline of future community college presidents, several private and public organizations have developed short-term training programs that recognize this need for mentor relationships and have incorporated this opportunity into their training. One that was highlighted by several participants was the Thomas Lakin Institute for Mentored Leadership. This program provides specific training in the experiences, positive and negative, that African Americans have as they prepare for and transition into presidency. Once a participant finishes the weeklong program, they are paired with a mentor who is either a currently active sitting president or a retired professional with significant experience. This program has significant potential to have a positive impact on the preparation of young Black professionals who are interested in becoming community college presidents. As already stated, being assigned a mentor may not always be the most effective approach because the relationship may be forced and may not foster the type of development that is necessary to help the mentee in the desired way.

There are several other nationally focused short-term training programs that have a similar format including the Aspen Institute and the League for Innovation. There are also state- and locally-funded training programs that assist with similar development opportunities and mentorship that is more tailored to the local communities served. These programs are again designed to prepare future leaders for their potential to successfully transition to the role of president; however, unlike the Thomas Lakin Institute, these programs are not directly focused on the experiences of African Americans. Mentor relationships could benefit both individuals who have a clear career goal to become president as well as those who have entered the field of community college leadership but do not have a specific goal in mind. The professional mentor is a benefit because they may recognize strengths and weaknesses of the individual that the
individual may not see in himself. As was evidenced by the participant responses, these relationships will help participants identify their path and provide a bridge to opportunities for future success.

**Expand on Opportunities for Relationship Building among Black Professionals.** As with mentors, this recommendation applies to both the aspiring president and to the institutional decision makers. It is clear that there is a need for aspiring professionals to build connections with other professionals in their network who may share similar desires to ascend to presidency. By doing so, they may be able to share experiences, build collective knowledge, and identify ways to assist each other during their journey to and through presidential selection. Institutional decision makers may find opportunities to foster and promote a more inclusive environment overall through the support of relationship building among professionals. This may be done by supporting opportunities for professional development with other aspiring presidents, encouraging participation in national organizations, and developing local training programs for identified cohorts.

Similar to identifying the importance of mentor relationships, participants also stressed the need for a peer group with which to build community through the mutual understanding of shared experiences. Helping Black men to make connections with others who share their experiences can provide a buffer for the constant onslaught of racist interactions. Peer groups also provide opportunities to validate and ground these individuals in their lived experiences by sharing their own encounters. Providing a platform for the development of relationships that highlights commonality of experiences helps to build safe spaces as a refuge for Black males as presidents who are often criticized and micro-examined for the slightest sign of concern. Again, as with mentorship, there is criticism applied to the idea that helping to foster peer groups should
not be the role of the institution; however, because there are already so few programs and opportunities for those bonds to build naturally, it is work that others must take a hand in building in order to support the best development of future leaders.

Again, short-term development programs play a significant role in establishing these professional relationships. Generally, these programs are executed in a cohort-based format that forces interaction among participants. The Aspen Institute, for example, establishes assigned participant groups and fosters interaction through program work and project-based learning opportunities. The program also encourages informal relationship-building through networking events and other activities. While this program is not specifically geared toward African Americans, the program is still valuable with the assumption that there are reasonable efforts made to include a more diverse population of participants in the program.

These types of programs are important for individuals who are unsure about their fit or desire to become president because they provide real world examples of the work expected and allow participants to draw on each other’s experiences. The goal is to help participants to make better informed decisions about their potential for success. As already stated, the relationships that are established in these types of programs can carry on through the career progression and serve as a resource once the individual has attained the role. These relationships may also assist in addressing the sense of isolation that presidents sometimes feel, as echoed in the responses provided by participants of this study. On the other hand, the benefit of these types of short-term programs may also be strong for participants who have a clearer understanding of their career trajectory because they may be more likely to leverage relationships in an effective way to navigate their way to the presidency.
Disrupt Anti-Black Racism by Making Equity a Core Competency of Community Colleges. Institutional decision makers who are interested in expanding their pool of potential candidates must find ways to disrupt the anti-racist structures that discourage Black and Brown administrators from considering leadership roles. This requires a consistent effort to invest in the training and development of all faculty and staff to promote an equitable environment that supports differences and destroys practices that seek to marginalize racial groups. The work involves thinking critically about policy and practice at all levels in order to ensure that pathways are clear for anyone who might consider the role of president as a possibility.

The competencies for community college leadership developed by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) do not go far enough in addressing issues of racial bias on community college campuses. In their guidelines, AACC makes the point to discuss the importance of diversity as a part of any campus strategy; however, little more is said to assist campuses with building a culture of appreciation for difference. By naming the issue as racism and promoting ways to disrupt the occurrence at a systemic level, AACC has the ability to help Black men and other minorities to find relief from the constant onslaught of negative experiences. Normalizing the appreciation for difference and providing a roadmap fostering belonging for all levels of the community college campus can alleviate some of the issues associated with the hiring and promotion of Black men.

Build on the Awareness of Opportunities and Pathways to Community College Presidency. Institutional decision makers, higher education leaders, and professional organizations can have a positive impact on the available talent pool by building awareness of presidential opportunity among a more diverse population of administrators. The opportunity to become a community college president is generally saved for those with years of experience that
have been identified by sitting leaders or others who have a greater level of familiarity with the role. By providing more information and support to those who may not know about the opportunity, there is potential to build more interest and draw in candidates that might not otherwise be discovered. This may be particularly helpful for drawing in more talent from racially marginalized communities.

The majority of the participants in this study expressed that they did not seek the community college presidency as a career prior to exposure to the idea from a friend or mentor. One significant way to positively impact the number of potential new presidents is for there to be more light shed on the opportunities of the role and the potential career paths that lead to it. It is understood that there is no one single way to achieve the role; however, the earlier individuals can be exposed to these career opportunities the more likely they will be to see a path for themselves and begin working to navigate it. As stated earlier, the role and function of mentors can assist with this as can professional development programs that provide education and immersive experiences. All these resources are available today; however, if a potential candidate is not aware of the career in the first place, they will have no information about these types of supports that are already made available. Expanding the talent pool will come from the effort made to build awareness and the preparation taken to support the people who show up to learn more.

In this case, the work done by organizations like the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) can provide a great deal of support. As discussed in Chapter Three, the competencies for community college leadership have been promoted as the basis for establishing the skills necessary to become a successful community college president. Also, while diversity is listed as a chief concern for the community college within the competencies,
the document does not speak directly to the challenges and needs of Blacks and other marginalized groups. If the purpose of the competencies is to provide individuals with the tools necessary to ascend to presidency, it may be possible for the competencies to provide information that specifically addresses ways that People of Color may strengthen their chances at becoming presidents.

**Future Study**

This dissertation focused on the experiences of Black males who—as an isolated group—have successfully attained the role of president. By understanding how these men narrated their career progression, I believe that there could be some guidance that leads to areas for future study. In particular, there needs to be more exploration of the experiences of African American female community college presidents. As a companion to this study, adding the voices and experiences of Black women might reinforce the concerns about anti-Black racism, stress, and fatigue experienced by Black men. How might African American females narrate their career experiences as they navigate a path to the presidency? It may also help to further our understanding of how Black people as a collective endure negative associations related to race, racism, and racial bias within the community college leadership structure. A critical feminist approach then might lift and enhance the work of critical race theory to expand the literature on community college leadership and increase the representation of Black and Brown voices in the data. Other questions that might be significant seen through this lens might focus on how the experiences of Blacks, male and female, differ from those of other marginalized groups as they seek the presidency. This is significant because it speaks to the understanding that some groups in some situations have been more successful in expanding opportunities for the presidency than others.
Specific to the expansion of work from this study, there is a need for better understanding how Black men in community college leadership roles develop the resilience necessary to thrive in these highly scrutinized positions. It is clear that the participants in this study were able to overcome obstacles that were sometimes significant in order to reach their career goal. What is not fully developed is an understanding of what strategies and characteristics unique to them or in common might have played a role in their success. What coping strategies are necessary for Black males to successfully navigate a path to community college presidency and how are they developed? By understanding how these factors work together, there can be the potential to create a more holistic structure that enhances positive attributes of Black men and minimizes their exposure interactions that can become a deterrent to their success long term.

As presidents, these men all held a certain amount of power and privilege that is inherent in the role. One area of future study might be to explore how Black men managed their power in spaces where they were seen through the lens of their race. What changes in behavior, speech, and tactics might they have to undertake to be successful in these significant roles and to wield their power without being seen as a threat? How does the intersection of power and privilege cross with issues of racism for Black men in positions of power? How do these men understand their experiences and what meaning do they make from them. What management models are effective in helping to navigate these uncomfortable spaces?

Since the focus of this dissertation is on the experiences of sitting presidents, there is room for more exploration of the experiences of Black men and women in mid-level leadership roles. These are the individuals who are most likely to be considered for the presidency and, therefore, would likely have a keen set of insights related to their career progress and desire to become presidents. How might Black men and women in mid-level leadership positions narrate
their career progression to presidency? Also, of interest, what influences most impact the potential for Black men and women in mid-level leadership roles to seek presidency.

Finally, how do Black men and women in mid-level leadership roles develop coping strategies for success in majority White spaces? Exploring these experiences might allow community college boards and other key hiring-stakeholders to promote better success for internal talent as future leaders for the institutions they serve. A broader level of understanding at the midlevel might also shed light on how deeply the racial bias, more specifically anti-Black racism, is able to infect institutions and might also allow for more solution-finding at all levels.

Conclusions

Developing and executing this study was incredibly validating for me as a Black man who seeks to eventually become a community college president. Having the opportunity to talk with and hear from highly regarded individuals in this field who look like me and have similar backgrounds was very empowering. There were times where I felt intensely connected to the participants as we shared our common knowledge of people and experiences. There were also interactions that forced me to check the motivations and assumptions behind Black experiences in the community college. My hope is that by continuing to elevate the voices of People of Color we can have a greater impact on the systemic racism of our daily lives that, in turn, will lead to improved experiences for all people. Further, facing my own internal struggle with talking about race and becoming centered in research helped me to expand my awareness of key issues and become both more resilient and more vocal about opposing oppression in any form.

This dissertation explored how eight Black male community college presidents narrated their career progression. Each individual expressed a familiarity with regular racist interactions that they had to overcome in order to achieve and maintain success. Taken together, the
interview responses are enhanced by an understanding of critical race theory which tell us that racism is a part of the everyday lived experience for Black people. Connecting the participant responses through critical race theory builds the argument that these experiences are likely not unique to these individuals but are the result of a culture of oppression and control so deeply embedded in the American education system it is almost impossible to identify where one begins and the other ends. There is more work to be done at all levels to continue uncovering similar experiences for People of Color in an effort to disrupt the systemic nature of racism that may go unseen. By elevating Black voices and sharing more Black stories, researchers can have an active role in changing the narrative around higher education experiences for minorities and serve as champions for social justice for all.
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Appendix A

Recruitment Email

Subject Line: Request for Participation

Dear (President Name),

My name is Chris Cathcart, and I am a doctoral student at Ball State University. I am currently conducting a study for my doctoral thesis, and I would like you to be a participant. The title of the dissertation is: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES THROUGHOUT THEIR CAREER PROGRESSION TO THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENCY

I am researching the experience of African American males who have achieved the level of president of a community college. My goal is better understand the contributing factors that lead to successful transition to this important position. It is my hope that by shedding light on these experiences, community colleges will be better informed about the challenges and opportunities that exist in the preparation of African American males to assume the role of president.

If you choose to participate in this study, I will be interviewing you by phone about your experiences. The expected time commitment is about one hour. We will determine a time and date that is convenient for your schedule demands. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

If you would be willing to participate you can reach me by email wccathcart@bsu.edu or by phone at 770-329-3513 with the best time date for your participation. If you have any questions between now and the time we schedule our meeting please do not hesitate to reach out to the Office of Research Integrity, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-5052 or at oirhelp@bsu.edu, Thank you for considering participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Chris Cathcart

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Ball State IRB [1529028-1]
Appendix B

Informed Consent

Study Title: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES THROUGHOUT THEIR CAREER PROGRESSION TO THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENCY

Study Purpose and Rationale
The purpose of this research project is to examine the career experiences of African American males who have successfully attained the role of community college president. By agreeing to participate in this study you will be asked to take part in one interview. The focus of the interview is on the experiences that African American males have as they make their career progress to the role of president.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria
To be eligible to participate in this study, you must be over the age of 18. You must have served as a past or currently sitting community college president within the continuous United States. You should also self-identify as an African American male.

Participation Procedures and Duration
For this study, you will be asked a series of questions about your experiences throughout your higher education career with a primary focus on those serving with a community college. It will take approximately 60 minutes to complete the interview.

Audio or Video Tapes (only include if applicable)
For the purpose of accuracy, with your permission, the interviews will be audio recorded. Any names used on the audio recording will be changed to pseudonyms when the recordings are transcribed. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents, including audio recordings, with their answers will be destroyed.

_____ I consent to audio recording my interview

_____ I do not consent to audio recording my interview

Disclosure of Alternative Procedures (only include if applicable)
No alternative procedures are available.

Data Confidentiality or Anonymity
All data will be maintained as confidential and no identifying information such as names will appear in any publication or presentation of the data. You will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. When the results of the research are published, or discussed in conference, no information will be included that would reveal your identity. All data will be stored in a
password protected computer only accessible to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents, including audio recordings, with their answers will be destroyed.

**Storage of Data and Data Retention Period**
Paper data will be scanned and stored on the researcher’s password-protected computer and then shredded. Only members of the research team will have access to the data. The data will be stored for 5 years in order to be used in conferences and publications.

**Risks or Discomforts**
There is no perceived risk for participating in this study. You will be informed during the interview process that you may choose not to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable and you may quit the study at any time.

**Who to Contact Should You Experience Any Negative Effects from Participating in this Study**
Office of Research Integrity, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-5052 or at orihelp@bsu.edu.

**Benefits**
There are no direct benefits of participating in this study. However, our answers may help us learn more about how African American males can transition successfully to the role of community college president. This information may be helpful to other African American males and/or to policy makers supporting the development of a more diverse leadership pipeline.

**Voluntary Participation**
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw your permission at any time for any reason without penalty or prejudice from the investigator. Please feel free to ask any questions of the investigator before signing this form and at any time during the study.

**IRB Contact Information**
For questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Office of Research Integrity, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-5052 or at orihelp@bsu.edu.

**Study Title**
A phenomenological study of the experiences of African American males throughout their career progression to community college presidency

**********

**Consent**
I, __________________, agree to participate in this research project entitled, *(Study Title)* I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I
have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate. I understand that I will receive a copy of this informed consent form to keep for future reference.

To the best of my knowledge, I meet the inclusion/exclusion criteria for participation (described on the previous page) in this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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Appendix C

Interview Guide

Date:
Time:
Interviewee:

As we discussed earlier, I will be asking a series of questions designed to allow you to share your experiences as an African American male who has served as a past or present community college president. There are no right or wrong answers; just share your thoughts with me. Your responses are completely voluntary. If at any time I ask you a question that you do not want to answer at any time, you simply have to say you prefer to skip the question. All of your responses will be kept confidential as a part of this study. Please be assured that if you mention anyone by name, it will not be shared with anyone and those names will be changed, as well as your name, and the institution(s) which you led. If you feel uncomfortable using names you may instead say, “my associate,” “my colleague,” “my team,” etc.

As you agreed on the informed consent, our interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. We will follow the structure outlined in this interview protocol. We will begin with a set of short answer questions to situate your experience within this study, then we will move to an exploration of your career progression starting with your early years, preparation for presidency, and the search process. We will conclude with questions that allow you to reflect on your entire career progression and fill in any information or thoughts that you feel were not captured elsewhere in the discussion. Before we begin do you have any questions? OK, let’s begin.

Short Answer Questions

1. What year did you attain your presidency? ______________
2. How old were you when you assumed the role?
3. How many years have you served in this role (combined)? ______________
4. What is your institution a part of a system or operating independently?
5. How many years have you worked with community colleges?
6. Have you worked in higher education your entire career? ______________ _________
7. What was your most immediate title before assuming the role of president? __________
8. Where you an internal or an external hire? __________
9. Do you report directly to a board? __________
10. Did you participate in any professional training programs that you feel helped prepare you for presidency? __________ Which one(s) __________
11. Did you relocate to assume the role of president? ______________
12. Did you have a mentor that helped prepare you to assume the role of president? ______

13. How many searches did you participate in before assuming the role of president?
14. Did location or institution type play a role in your decision to accept your presidency? __________ Why? ______________
15. Was your family a part of your decision to assume the presidency? ____________ How?

Now I would like to discuss your career experiences prior to assuming the role of president.

**Early career in higher Ed**

1. Walk me through your career path leading up to presidency
2. Who were some of the most influential figures in your career progression to presidency? Why?
3. What were some of your more memorable experiences early on that contributed to your desire to become president?
4. Were there challenges you experienced that you believe were unique to you as an African American male working in community college administration?

**Preparation to pursue presidency**

- What factors led to your decision to pursue a presidency?
- What if any challenges did you assume you would face once you decided to pursue a presidency?
- What considerations did you have to make when deciding if becoming president was right for you?
- What if any advice did you receive that influenced you positively or negatively in your decision to pursue presidency?
- As an African American male, were there experiences in your preparation that you feel were different from those of your white counterparts in your preparation to pursue presidency?
- How did you perceive your race may or may not play a role in your decision?

**The Search**

1. How prepared do you believe you were for your first presidential search?
2. Describe your preparation process for the search process
3. Describe your understanding of the selection process for your first presidency
4. Can you describe how you might have perceived your race was a consideration for your selection?
5. As a Black male describe how you perceived your experiences in the search process might have been different from those of your white counterparts
6. As an African American male were there things you weren’t prepared for in the search process?
7. As an African American male, what considerations did you make that influenced your decision to accept your first presidency?

**Final Thoughts**

1. Do you feel your experiences as an African American male influenced your decision to become a community college president?
2. Do you feel participating in professional development prepared you for the search process?
3. If you had to give advice to African American males who are aspiring community college presidents, what would it be?
4. What improvements/changes need to be made in the preparation process that can assist more African American males with their success in achieving a presidency?

5. Describe your confidence in your continued success as a community college president?

6. Is there any information that you as an African American male community college president feel to be important that we did not cover?

This concludes our interview. Thank you again for taking the time to participate in this study.
Appendix D

Attribute Coding Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P</th>
<th>Age at first presidency</th>
<th>How long in role</th>
<th>Years in CC</th>
<th>Most immediate prior role</th>
<th>Internal/external hire</th>
<th>Prior presidential prep</th>
<th>Number of searches prior to president</th>
<th>Campus location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>VPAA</td>
<td>Internal</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Southeast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Campus VP</td>
<td>External</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>VPSA</td>
<td>External</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Southeast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>VPSA</td>
<td>External</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>West</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>AVPSA</td>
<td>External</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>VPAA</td>
<td>External</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Provost</td>
<td>External</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>VPWD</td>
<td>Internal</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Attribute codes capture demographic information about the eight participants in this study. Eight categories are used to examine unique characteristics for each participant and to identify any patterns that may exist among the group.

- Age at first presidency – focuses on the age that each participant reported for when they ascended to their first presidency.
- How long in role – explains how long the individual has served as a president of a community college. It is inclusive of all presidencies across the participant’s career.
- Years in CC – captures the number of total years the participant has worked in community college administration.
- Most immediate prior role – identifies the last role that the participant had prior to becoming a president.
- Internal or external hire – explains if the participant was made president from inside their own institution or at a different institution from their immediate prior role.
- Prior presidential prep - explores what if any professional development related to preparation for community college presidency was completed.
- Number of searches prior to president – focuses on the number of searches the participant reported executing prior to becoming a president.
- Campus location – provides a geographic indicator of the institution where the participant first served as president.
Appendix E

Coding Process Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Codes (In Vivo Method)</th>
<th>Secondary Codes</th>
<th>Metacodes/ Categories</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;And she really was kind of instrumental and kind of grooming me for this job.&quot;</td>
<td>groomed for the job</td>
<td>Mentor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;and the truth is, she saw something in me that I didn't really see in myself.&quot;</td>
<td>Cognitive assess</td>
<td>Mentor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;the other thing that I think played into this, and I've talked about this a little bit before that the former president really was good about allowing me to do some of the things that a president normally would do.&quot;</td>
<td>Provided opportunity to learn</td>
<td>Mentor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I had this conversation with her on numerous occasions that I really was not interested in becoming president. And you know, lo and behold, nine years after that first initial conversation about pursuing a job, I was able to get it and it really do in large part because of her mentoring.&quot;</td>
<td>Success tied to mentoring</td>
<td>Mentor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;And the other thing that I think played into this, and I've talked about this a little bit before that the former president really was good about allowing me to do some of the things that a president normally would do.&quot;</td>
<td>Support gained from all levels</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I spent a lot of time trying to build relationships on campus with people as part of the just my overall leadership style and facilitating change. And I think because of those kinds of relationships, there was a lot of support for me to, to make that make that transition.&quot;</td>
<td>Building relationships to create success</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;You know, I had my father was a superintendent in this area. So I knew about people in this area because of him. And I think the underlying assumption in a lot of conversations that I had with folks in the community was that I was going to assume this role.&quot;</td>
<td>Connections with significant people</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;But totally from the President, I got support from her, but also from members of the faculty and stuff, you know.&quot;</td>
<td>Support gained from all levels</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The coding sheet was used to capture the process followed to extract key statements from participant interview transcripts and how they were refined to become study themes.

- In Vivo coding was used in thematic analysis to capture quotes from participants that directly reflect their experiences throughout their career progression.

- Secondary codes were grouped into metacodes or categories that captured the meaning behind participant statements identified through In Vivo coding.

- Themes were generated developed based on groupings of categories with similar elements.
### Appendix F

#### List of Study Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>Groupings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black Experiences</td>
<td>8 out of 8</td>
<td>Participant's daily interactions contain evidence of differential treatment due to race that is common and every day for Black people.</td>
<td>Themes common across at least half of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can't Do it Alone</td>
<td>7 out of 8</td>
<td>Participant's reflect on the need for mentors and other key relationships that assist in their professional development toward presidency.</td>
<td>Themes that occurred more than one participant transcript but less frequent than common</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure to Perform</td>
<td>7 out of 8</td>
<td>Participant's express a sense that there is a higher level of expectation and pressure for them to succeed as Black men in community college presidency.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding The Path (to presidency)</td>
<td>5 out of 8</td>
<td>along with &quot;can't do it alone&quot; Participants reflect on how after finally making the decision to become president the path they took to achieve success.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism Exists But Not A Barrier</td>
<td>4 out of 8</td>
<td>Related to &quot;Black Experiences&quot; participants underscore that racism is normal and everyday however it does not stop them from seeking to achieve success.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism?</td>
<td>3 out of 8</td>
<td>Participants express that there are times when they believe racism may be at the core of their challenges but are unable to or unwilling to name it.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation (It's only me)</td>
<td>3 out of 8</td>
<td>Participants identify with the feeling of aloneness as the singular or one of a very few Black males in the role and in the surroundings. (relates to Black Experiences and Can't do it alone)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When It's Time (to lead)</td>
<td>3 out of 8</td>
<td>Related to &quot;Finding the path&quot; Participants highlight when they decided they were ready to lead - also related &quot;can't do it alone&quot;.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purposeful Communication</td>
<td>1 out of 8</td>
<td>Participant reflects how he must adapt leadership style to achieve success as a Black male president.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of Self (and others)</td>
<td>1 out of 8</td>
<td>Participant expressed significant differences between his experiences (positive and negative) related to race and identity and those of other Black leaders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>1 out of 8</td>
<td>Participant reflects on the significant impact of professional development in his success - while this idea was reflected elsewhere it did not rise to the level of significance.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotype Threat</td>
<td>1 out of 8</td>
<td>Participant pressure to change certain behaviors to lessen the negative perceptions of others.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Fit</td>
<td>1 out of 8</td>
<td>Participant reflects on the importance of matching skills with the needs of the institution rather than focus on race/racism.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The chart shows the complete listing of all identified themes, the frequency with which they occurred and a summary of meaning for each. The groupings column explains how the themes were separated based on frequency of occurrence among participants.