African American Female College and University Presidents: Experiences and Perceptions of Barriers to the Presidency

Sandra Jackson
*Tyler County Hospital, s.jackson@tchospital.us*

Sandra Harris
*Lamar University, sandra.harris@lamar.edu*

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African American Female College and University Presidents: Experiences and Perceptions of Barriers to the Presidency

Sandra Jackson and Sandra Harris

This study was an investigation of the experiences and perceptions of barriers to the presidency of 43 African American female college and university presidents. Findings suggested that exclusion from informal networks, lack of preparation and lack of career goals were primary barriers. Strategies to overcome these barriers included exceeding job expectations, being visible and developing leadership skills. Mentoring was also suggested as a way to overcome barriers.

In 1999, Dr. Shirley Ann Jackson was appointed president of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, the first African American woman to head a national research university. In November, 2000, Dr. Ruth J. Simmons was selected as president of Brown University, the first African American woman to head an Ivy League Institution (Stewart, 2002). Despite these "firsts," African American women continue to be underrepresented in higher education leadership roles (Ross & Green, 2000; Ross, Green & Henderson, 1993; Rusher, 1996; Walton, 1996). Even though there are qualified, interested and capable African American females in the education field (Gregg, 2004; Grogan, 1996; McFarlin, Crittenden & Ebbers, 1999), few African American females hold the position of college president. Women who seek leadership positions face barriers and often give up because they are overwhelmed in dealing with either visible or invisible obstacles (Cotter, Hermnsen, Ovadia & Vanneman, 2001; Giscombe & Sims, 1998; Growe & Montgomery, 1999; Kochan, Spencer & Matthews, 2000).

The lack of studies available regarding African American females in higher education leadership positions makes it difficult to obtain a clear picture outlining experiences and perceptions of barriers that these leaders have experienced (Shakeshaft, 1999; Wilson, 1989). Another difficulty is that the limited number of African American female college and university presidents makes it difficult for aspiring leaders to find African American role models who have been successful in breaking through the barriers of race and gender. Still, we know more about the barriers, i.e., glass ceiling,
About the Authors

Sandra Jackson, Ed.D., is nurse administrator at Tyler County Hospital District in Woodville, Texas. The district is made up of an assisted living center, rural health clinic, hospital, foundation and vocational school of nursing. She also serves as a part-time pastor of the United Methodist Church for the Livingston Circuit. Email: sjackson@tchospital.us.

Sandra Harris, Ph.D., associate professor, is a former public and private school teacher and administrator. She is currently director of the Center for Doctoral Studies in Educational Leadership at Lamar University, Beaumont, Texas. Email: sandra.harris@lamar.edu.

gender and race discrimination, than we do about effective responses to these issues (Shakeshaft, 1999).

Therefore the purpose of this study was to explore the barriers and the strategies used to overcome those barriers that African American female college presidents have used to access these higher education positions. Research questions were:

1. What are the barriers that African American female college and university presidents perceive as preventing African American females from acquiring a presidency?
2. What are some of the experiences that African American female college and university presidents faced in dealing with the glass ceiling?
3. What strategies have African American female college and university presidents used in becoming presidents?

Literature Review

African American College and University Presidents from 1990–2002

In 1993, the American Council on Education (ACE) profiled the chief executive officers of higher education institutions in the United States who had held office during 1986–1990 (Ross, Green, & Henderson, 1993). In 1990, 13.5% (18 out of 133) of the African American university or college presidents were women, up from 7.4% in 1996. Of these 18 African American women, 14 presided at public institutions of which nearly half were public two-year colleges. Only two were presidents of independent baccalaureate colleges.

ACE studies in 2000 and in 2002 indicated 38 African American women presidents (out of 148 participants) and 36 (out of 149 participants) were women (Corrigan, 2002).
Barriers to Black and Minority Females

Race and Gender Discrimination
There are few women administrators in colleges and universities in the United States (Stewart, 2002; Watwood, 1995). Shakeshaft (1989) attributes this to stereotypical attitudes toward women and beliefs that women are not as competent as men. Basset (2000) reiterated Luckadoo’s (1986) claim that many people presume that minority women experience subtle race and gender discrimination from higher education colleagues and students and, regardless of qualifications, are often perceived as tokens. Clearly, race and gender discrimination still continue as barriers in the selection process (Brunner, 1998; Carter, 1988) even though laws have been passed to prevent discrimination (Rai & Critzer, 2000).

Gate-Keeping
Chan and Wang (1991) found that women have been faced with subtle sex discrimination that is less visible and harder to prove, such as gate-keeping, which has been used in recruiting and hiring faculty. For example, they identified Asian-American faculty most likely to be hired as those who would not rock the boat. After being hired, these individuals never found their way into the inner circles that governed the university. Yet, hiring Asian-American faculty was considered safe because they did not rock the boat and this increased the visibility of affirmative action in the workplace.

Another effective gate-keeping technique is the argument that qualified women and minorities are not available for hiring. Mickelson and Oliver (1991) identified numerous Black and Latino candidates who had graduated from non-Ivy League universities and who experienced difficulties in getting job offers. Even when women and minorities are hired, informal gate-keeping practices may prohibit their upward mobility as gatekeepers act independently or within a larger group.

Glass Ceiling
The glass ceiling effect can be observed at every rung of the academic career ladder. Nationally, women constituted more than half of all college students, but less than one third of the faculty (Chliwniak, 1997). The majority of college presidents were white males with African American women and other ethnic minority representation negligible. The few women deans were clustered in nursing, education, continuing education and home economics (Quinta, Cotter & Romenesko, 1998). The overall experience has led to the belief that the glass ceiling representation of barriers is responsible for women’s inability to climb the higher rungs of academic success (Quinta, et al., 1998).

Myths
There are many myths, barriers and obstacles women face which men do
not realize exist (Growe & Montgomery, 1999). Myths include the inability of women to discipline older male students, the emotionality of females, physical weakness, and resentment among males working with females. Additionally, frequently females are identified as being non-task oriented and/or too dependent on feedback and evaluations of others while lacking independence. Harrington (1991) noted that women who are younger candidates affect the decisions in the hiring process because younger candidates are often dismissed or devalued because of less experience.

Lack of Encouragement
Women receive little or no encouragement in seeking leadership positions, while men are encouraged to enter administration to a greater degree than women (Growe & Montgomery, 1999). This lack of encouragement exists even though women who earn doctorates are more likely than men to desire an academic career. Additionally, Evelyn (1998) noted that historically they have not been exposed to the programs that lead to the positions of leadership in higher education.

Lack of Networking
The lack of female formal and informal social networks, or being a member of a male club, results in the lack of recognition that often leads to advancement. The lack of support from other women administrators, “we don’t hire the competition,” the isolation associated with minority status, sex-typed expectations, gender bias, the enormous amount of stress that is part of the job and the “lonely at the top” feelings are barriers many women face (Evelyn, 1998; Tallerico & Burstyn 1996; Williams, 1990).

Board/Trustee Relationships
The mind set of boards is considered a barrier to women achieving positions of power. Boards tend to favor candidates for their “fit,” select candidates most like themselves in this traditionally male-dominated environment (Ebbers, Gallisath, Rockel & Coyan, 2000). Additionally, Basinger (2001) noted that board members are not accustomed to working with women if and when they do achieve positions of power.

Family Responsibilities
Administration involves hard work, long hours and in-house politics, which can be stress provoking, especially when childcare and home responsibilities are added. A woman’s 70 hour work week as an administrator may conflict with family responsibilities (Evelyn, 1998; Tallerico, 1998; Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996; Williams, 1990). Often family responsibilities make it difficult for women to relocate. Evelyn (1998) reported that African American women as well as white women are often asked in interviews if their family would be willing to relocate, something which rarely is asked in an interview with a male.
Organizational barriers
Quinta et al. (1998) identified barriers to promotion. This was done through workshops with 90 university employees funded by the U. S. Department of Labor (USDOL). Their findings indicated that barriers to advancement in academia appear to be similar across job classifications, commonalities of experiences, and pervasiveness of an institution’s problems. These barriers included:

1. power within the system,
2. hiring and promotion practices,
3. lack of professional development,
4. tracking women in stereotypical areas,
5. lack of available information,
6. attitudes toward and stereotypes of administrators,
7. perceptions of peers and administrators,
8. family issues, and

Nidiffer (2000) reported that “structural barriers, and organization culture can thwart women presidents with overt criticism, harassment or more subtle forms of discomfort” (p. 121). Vaughan (1989) reported that women are taken less seriously in the most stereotypically male aspects of the job, such as fiscal affairs or management of the physical plant. Eagly, Makhijani and Klonsky’s (1992) meta-analysis on the evaluation of leaders found that women were more frequently criticized than men and the criticism was even harsher if women adopted a masculine style of leadership. Chliwniak (1997) identified that cultural artifacts in higher education, such as tenure-track standards, pedagogical practices, and marginalizing of certain studies and scholarship preserve appropriate and different spheres for men and women in academe.

Strategies for Women Administrators in Higher Education to Break Barriers
Madsen (1998) suggested several ways for women to prepare for the challenge of administrative work. Of importance is being a curious scholar while understanding the mission of the institution. She noted that they must be people of vision staying current with world, national, regional and state movements and trends and have a keen interest in the entire university community. Women administrators also must develop a cooperative spirit, be willing to listen to the ideas of others as well as receive those ideas, retain a sense of humor to relieve pressure, and hold a respect for all people at all levels. Related to these, Clay (2005) identified the importance of work ethic, sense of self-worth and self-confidence, and leadership style.

Madsen (1998) also recommended that female administrators speak as-
assertively and forthrightly and choose battles carefully. She listed the importance of math skills, budget understanding, financial management, time management, public speaking, research and writing skills. Energy levels achieved by good health, exercise, proper nutrition and rest were also recommended as key factors or skills that Clay (2005) noted brought balance in life. Finding mentors, developing and sustaining the “right” attitudes, and establishing general proactive stances are critical strategies.

**Find a Mentor**

Madsen (1998) and Wood (1994) emphasized that networking through mentoring is essential because it provides access to significant information and opportunities for career advancement. In a survey of female community college presidents, Vaughan (1989) reported that key role models and mentors are major influences for women seeking leadership positions. She noted that the single most important source from which new community college presidential candidates are selected is the pool of deans of instruction. The lack of mentors, both by university faculty and senior administrators, is another barrier that keeps women out of administration, since those with mentors are more likely to have job offers (Hart, 1995), therefore, women must personally and willingly sponsor less experienced mentees (Tinsley, 1985; Wood, 1994). Growe and Montgomery (1999) noted that mentoring significantly enhances income and promotes possibilities, attracts and retains women and minority professionals, accelerates assimilation into the culture, and supports women and minorities with advice and inside information.

**Develop the Right Attitudes**

Wolverton, Bower, and Maldonado (2006) interviewed five women university college presidents and found three tenets as most important in breaking barriers and assuming leadership positions: competence, credibility, and communication. Collins (1991) asserted that often African American women adopt an “out-sider-within” stance (p. xii). Women must seek to overcome the contradiction between their beliefs and experiences and the dominant group’s actions and ideologies, and, in the process, create a new angle of vision about their role and their institution. African-American women must become accustomed to people watching to see how they react, how they deal with faculty, with students, with the media, the trustees and the legislature. Basic survival skills and development of spiritual values are also encouraged (Clay, 2005).

**Other Ways to Become Proactive**

Women must proactively address the tangible and intangible inequities that continue to exist. Educational leaders should not be passive recipients of structural and cultural barriers (Glazer-Raymo, 1999). Tinsley (1985) and Wood (1994) noted that females must foster interactions with male colleagues to promote gender-neutral networks, professional development
opportunities, and effective communication systems. They also suggested the value of proactive recognition of subtle, unintentional discrimination and inequity through gender-awareness training.

Watkins, Gillaspie, Stokes, Bullard and Light (1995) suggested that as educational leaders work together within a non-competitive environment they would be able to change the organization structure of the university. It is in this way that “the barriers to the advancement of women can be removed as one life touches another” (p. 137).

Methodology

Sample
A descriptive research inquiry design was utilized for this study of African American female college and university presidents. The population for this study consisted of African American female presidents from the year 2002. Subjects for the study consisted of 100% of the population of presidents at two and four year colleges and universities in the United States who have African American female presidents. The subjects were drawn from historically Black institutions and traditionally White two and four year colleges and universities (both private and public). We used the list of 59 Black female college and university presidents identified in Black Issues in Higher Education (2002). Forty-three of the 59 presidents participated in the study.

Of the 43 participating presidents, 25 had a Ph.D., 15 had an Ed.D.; 2 had a MS and 1 had a MA degree. Thirty participants had their highest degree in education, with 4 in humanities, 3 in social science, 2 in business, 2 in health, 1 in agriculture, and 1 did not specify.

Data Collection
The survey instrument was developed from preliminary discussion with Black women administrators, examination of existing survey instruments and a review of the literature. To test for content validity, the instrument was submitted to a panel of experts. Educational leaders reviewed the instrument for content validity.

A pilot study was conducted with 10 presidents selected from the 1998 Black Issues of Education list of African American female college and university presidents. Data were collected and the survey was refined based on their input.

The Educational Leadership Chief Executive Officer/President’s Study I (ELCEOPS) was then sent to all 59 African American female college presidents in office in March, 2002. The 2001 ACE survey data were made available to us to use in the demographic portion of the study. The response rate was 43 (73%). Presidents participating in the pilot study did not participate in the main study.
Data Analysis
Statistical analysis included descriptive statistics. Data coding was used to systematically reorganize raw data into a format for Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). A detailed codebook was created and an identification code assigned for each case. A second person double checked numbers entered to avoid errors in transferring information. Descriptive analyses were completed for the study. Various data were applied to the appropriate research questions in order to identify barriers, experiences, and strategies to the presidency.

Findings
Research Question One
The first research question investigated the barriers that African American female college and university presidents perceived as preventing them from acquiring a presidency. The presidents were asked to list the top three barriers to advancement to the presidency from a list of items under the heading of "Your Barriers Affecting Advancement." The presidents made selections from such choices as male stereotyping and preconceptions of women, female stereotyping and preconceptions of women, ethnicity and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barriers</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exclusion from informal network</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career development</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of management experience</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male stereotyping and preconceptions</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender discrimination</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female stereotyping and preconception</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal recruitment</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inhospitable institution culture</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family commitment</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical practices</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: All participants did not list three barriers.
gender discrimination. Data were entered by first, second and third choices. The list of suggested barriers came from a review of literature (Brunner, 1998; Carter, 1988; Catalyst, 1996; Chaffins, Forbes, Fuqua & Cangemi, 1995; Growe & Montgomery, 1999; Shakeshaft, 1989) and interviews with former African American presidents of colleges and universities.

We combined the presidents’ selections for all barriers. Table 1 reflects a composite of barriers selected. Data revealed that exclusion from the informal network was the most often cited barrier. When all barriers were tallied, it was listed 13 times (13.68%). The second most frequently selected barrier was “Other” (12.63%) to which the presidents responded with additional barriers such as lack of doctorate, lack of access to multiple levels of management related to professional goals, exclusion from top management positions, lack of a mentor, lack of experience in instruction and learning to manage people. The third barrier selected by the presidents was career development planning (11.58%).

Presidents were asked to comment on barriers in an open-ended format. Comments were varied and no common themes emerged as illustrated by the following quotes.

• I do not think that any of these items (barriers affecting advancement) are applicable. I believe the following obstacles are barriers to the advancement of women: Women don’t apply; They don’t network; We must be more aggressive.

• This question is not clear; while I experienced some issues in the road to my presidencies many of the “barriers” as you listed them were not relevant. The following barriers are more relevant: Women don’t aim for presidencies; they stay in a job too long before seeking the next; Married women are hesitant to apply because of husband and family.

• Unfortunately some of my most trying moments came from “sisters” as I advanced. Still, some of my biggest support came from “sisters”—truly both ends of the spectrum. My spouse has been my biggest supporter. He is a faculty member on another campus. And since this is a race-based study—he is White and Jewish—Our daughter who is 21 was a great help to me as my career grew.

• I am a president today because my husband (second) supported and encouraged me to aim higher. Without his positive attitude I probably would not have responded to the invitation to apply.

• I strongly believe that African American female educators are not receiving the best preparation to thrive and survive in the presidential culture. While prejudices and racism are huge barriers, they can be bridged with the right tools and training if the desire is to achieve and sustain the position.

• African American women have a track record in community college leadership. The examination of reasons for success may be worth exploration.
To be successful, I feel it is absolutely important to have high self-esteem and to have a vision for the university. It is also imperative never to compromise your standards of excellence, ethics and morality.

My administrative career was unique and different from most. No doctorate, internal/one district movement only, part of "grow your own" program. I did participate in a competitive internal interviewing process. Challenges would have been greater had I applied for a position outside of the system.

I am currently in a historically Black college. My first four experiences were in White institutions. My answers might be different if I were in one of those institutions.

Exclusion from top management positions is a barrier; people in those positions tend to choose persons like them.

Race and gender are always barriers.

Next, the presidents were asked to report their marital status. Twenty-six (60%) of the presidents reported they were married and 10 (23.3%) reported that they were divorced. Four had never married, 2 were widowed and 1 was separated at the time. The presidents were asked if the job of president of a college/university affected their marital status. Only 5 (11.6%) of those that responded felt that their marital status was affected. For example, one president pointed out that the job of the president "required my husband, a math professor, to assume family responsibilities that I could not manage." Another president wondered that it was possibly "difficult for my husband to accept the independence." Twenty-nine (67%) indicated that the job of presidency did not affect their marital status.

Research Question Two
The second research question explored the experiences that African American female college and university presidents face in dealing with the glass ceiling. Respondents were given a list of 12 experiences that could affect advancement and were asked to indicate the effects of these on their advancement to the presidency by using a Likert scale of 1 (not important at all) to 5 (very important). Table 2 displays the means and standard deviations of the group's responses. Presidents chose female stereotyping and preconceptions of women as the most frequent experience with a mean of 3.06. The category of male stereotyping and preconceptions of women was second with a mean of 3.03. Informal recruitment was third with a mean of 2.83. Ethnicity was fourth with a mean of 2.78.

Research Question Three
The third research question explored strategies African American female college and university presidents have used in becoming president. Respondents were given a list of 11 statements. The presidents were asked to indicate on a Likert scale of 1 (not very) to 5 (very) how important these variables were in attaining their presidency. Table 3 displays the means and
standard deviations. The presidents chose “exceeding job expectations” as the top strategy for attaining the presidency ($M = 4.76$). Holding positions that provided visibility was second ($M = 4.58$). Developing leadership skills outside of education was third ($M = 4.08$). The category of upgraded education skills was fourth ($M = 4.0$).

Presidents also were asked if a mentor or informal network influenced their job selection and to specify what other influences were important to their selections. The presidents selected mentoring (34.9%) as the top influence in their job selection. The presidents’ comments regarding their job selection and the influence of other categories were varied; however, common themes of experience and credentials emerged. Comments follow:

- Preparation and previous job experience.
- Long-term experience in community college education, national visibility and involvements in publications.

### Table 2
Experiences Faced in the Ascension to the Presidency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiences</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female stereotyping</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male stereotyping</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal recruitment</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inhosiptable culture</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender discrimination</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusion from informal network</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career development planning</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>1.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal recruitment</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women not in pipeline</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational sex segregation</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginalizing of studies</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of management experiences</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical practices</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>1.32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tenure track standards</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>1.22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Job posting</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of internship</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual harassment</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>1.03</td>
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</table>
Table 3
Strategies Used in Obtaining the Presidency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exceeded job expectations</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positions with visibility</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership skills outside of education</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upgraded educational skills</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midlevel management positions</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male mentors</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed institutions for advancement</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female mentors</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style males are comfortable</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussions of career aspirations</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chose not to have family</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Previous employment at institution; established reputation in educational community locally, regionally.
- Experience and “fit” with institution.
- Met criteria; successful through series of interviews; reputation of previous college and its president (mentor).
- ACE Fellow network.
- Nominations by others—strong interview.
- Resignation of former president and next in authority with proven record of accountability and achievement.
- Mother was founder of our institution; upon her death the Board of Trustees elected me president.

Discussion and Implications

Research Question One
A variety of barriers were perceived, such as exclusion from informal networks, lack of preparation and lack of career goals. Yet, African American female college and university presidents used tools and training to develop strategies that bridged race and gender. Clearly, African American female college and university presidents strive for excellence and refuse to let the pressures of race and gender discrimination prevent them from attaining their goals.
Brunner (1998) posited that race and sex discrimination continue as barriers in the selection process, and Shakeshaft (1989) identified stereotypical attitudes toward women and beliefs that women were not as competent as men as a major reason that women were not hired in school administration. Chan and Wang (1991) identified gate keeping as a barrier in recruitment and hiring.

A composite of all the barriers in this study suggested that the African American female presidents perceived exclusion from informal networks to be the primary barrier preventing African American females from acquiring a presidency. Other important perceived barriers were that African American female educators are not receiving the best preparation and that women were not aiming for presidencies. Lack of career development planning was the third barrier perceived for ascension to the presidency.

Study findings suggested that African American female college and university presidents have become familiar with the higher educational system, are prepared for the competition and understand the challenges they must overcome (Blevins, 2001). They strive for excellence and refuse to let the pressures of race and gender discrimination prevent them from attaining their goals. African American female presidents have capitalized on their strengths, recognized their weaknesses, sought leadership training and upgraded their educational skills. Equipped with positive attitudes and tenacity in the face of adversity, these women turned challenges into opportunities.

Research Question Two
The second research question examined the experiences of African American female college and university presidents faced in dealing with the glass ceiling. We found that, although a variety of glass ceiling experiences were faced by African American college and university presidents that included stereotyping (both male and female) and informal recruitment, generally, African American presidents sought ways around the glass ceiling through leadership training. Generally, African American female presidents did not view the glass ceiling as a deterrent in their ascension to the presidency.

In this study, the presidents chose female stereotyping and preconceptions of women as the top experience affecting their presidency. Male stereotyping and preconceptions of women was second on the list of experiences affecting their presidency. In earlier studies, Moseley (1980) and Quinta et al. (1998) suggested that white males and females felt uncomfortable dealing with minority women and, therefore, whites sometimes acted from a variety of false assumptions. Aguirre (2000) suggested, “The organizational context of the academic workplace portrays minority women faculty as anomalies” (p. 61). This study finding was consistent with the literature review.

Informal recruitment was the third experience the presidents identified. Amey and VanDerLinden (2002) stated, “Internal hire continues to be the most common means of appointing most high-ranking community college
administrators” (p. 13). Mickelson and Oliver (1991) identified informal gate keeping practices as prohibiting the upward mobility of minority females. Findings from this question reported that while the majority of the presidents list experiences faced in dealing with the glass ceiling, they were collectively not as strong with only 3.06 being the highest mean. This suggests that African American female presidents do not see these experiences as deterrents in their ascension to the presidency.

**Research Question Three**
The third and final research question examined in this study explored strategies African American female college and university presidents used in becoming president. They used a variety of strategies that included exceeding job expectations, being visible, developing their leadership skills and finding mentors.

*Catalyst* (1996) conducted a survey of 1700 minority women executives and CEOs of Fortune 1000 companies to examine strategies for navigating barriers and obstacles faced. The minority women CEOs consistently selected “exceeding performance expectations” as their primary strategy for navigating obstacles. The presidents in this study reflected the information from *Catalyst* by selecting “exceeded job expectations” as the primary strategy used in obtaining the presidency. The category of “holding positions with visibility” was the second strategy enlisted to obtain the presidency. The *Catalyst* (1996) survey reflected that 50% of the CEOs sought difficult or challenging assignments to navigate barriers.

Developing leadership skills outside of education was third on the list of strategies used by African American females in becoming a college and university president. This finding may be attributed to African American women holding key positions outside of education where skills for leadership would be developed. McDade (1997) posited that in higher education, as in most fields, formal and informal professional development opportunities are believed to contribute to skill development and career advancement. The majority (93%) of African American female college and university presidents held a doctorate. This supported the findings of the college and university presidents who identified upgrading educational skills as the fourth strategy used in obtaining the presidency.

Vaughan (1989) reported that key role models and mentors are major influences for women seeking leadership positions. Hart (1995) identified that those with mentors are more likely to have a job offer for university faculty and senior administration. Findings in this study also verified the importance of a mentor in the ascension to the presidency. Thirty-five percent of the presidents reported that a mentor affected their current presidency.

**Implications**
The African American female presidents in this study were unique women who pioneered in positions generally held by males. They had few role
models before them. Commonalities emerged from these 43 African American female college and university presidents in their experiences, noting barriers, and identifying strategies to succeed. These women entered the career track to the presidency with the assumption that they would have to exceed job expectations, hold jobs that had high visibility, obtain a doctorate and develop leadership skills outside of education. They also had a mentor or became part of a network to improve their career opportunities.

Although African American female presidents remain in the minority at universities and colleges, there has been a gradual rise in their number (Stewart, 2002), which suggests that they can become university presidents, but they must recognize the barriers before them, work hard, and develop strong mentoring relationships.

Strategies to overcome barriers include implementing a rotation system that enables both men and women to perform different jobs to increase women’s chances for development (Wood, 1994), being committed and actively involved with CEOs and governing boards (Tinsley, 1985), conducting research that elucidates gender-linked barriers, and attending conferences, joining organizations, and volunteering for committees (Benton, 1980). Marshall (1993) noted that senior female faculty and executives must assist younger professionals in making well-informed choices, a benefit available to male professionals, but often not available to females.

Other suggestions for African American females aspiring to the presidency include:

• Efforts must be made within higher education circles to not exclude African American females from the informal network.
• University preparation programs need to provide ways to encourage and prepare African American females for higher education leadership.
• Search committees and universities need to seek African American females in a variety of positions by expanding recruitment alternatives, such as K–12 superintendents and state agencies (Ross et al., 1993; Vaughan, 1989).
• African American females need role models (Benton, 1980).
• University preparation programs, as well as staff development opportunities need to provide training in leadership programs that educates regarding stereotyping, male, female, and racial.
• African American females should attend seminars, internships and workshops designed to improve management and leadership skills.
• African American females who aspire to positions in higher education should recognize the perceived importance of educational preparation to career achievement.

**Conclusion**

Although African American females are making progress in the ranks of higher education, inequity still exists. Yet, the visibility of female minority
leaders in positions of leadership has the capacity to bring change to the look of leadership in their institutions, but even more importantly to influence the look of other organizations in the future. As African American university and college presidents navigate the barriers of race and gender, they encourage and pave the way for future generations of women and minorities to move into leadership positions.

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