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# Leadership Journeys: Reflections on Experiences and Challenges from Women in Academic Leadership

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## Abstract

Although the number of women holding administrative positions in higher education has risen over the past two decades, the gender gap in academic leadership in higher education institutions persists. Barriers exist to prevent women from entering these positions, including those related to workplace culture and personal considerations. This qualitative exploratory study interviewed 38 women leaders in positions ranging from Assistant Dean to President at universities in a mid-west athletic conference. It asked the following research questions: How did they enter academic leadership? What were their experiences in leadership positions? What advice would they offer to other women considering leadership positions and what skills

should they foster? These women described diverse journeys into their current academic leadership positions. Although every woman described a unique journey, few entered academia with the goal of transitioning from faculty to administration and instead became accidental leaders. Their experiences in these leadership positions included accomplishments, especially around student success, but also tangible, intangible, and self-imposed inequities. They recognized the value leadership development including formal mentoring, informal advice, and systemic training but also indicated receiving inadequate amounts of this development. This study offers implications to recognize, support, and foster the presence of women in academic leadership positions.

## **Introduction**

According to the American Council on Education (2017), only 30% of the top positions in colleges and universities are held by women. Furthermore, the types of top leadership positions held by women and men vary. For example, women are more likely than men to serve as presidents of 2-year community colleges (Ballenger, 2010; Reis, 2015). Over the last few decades, researchers have seen some trends in women moving into leadership positions. Ballenger (2010) found 23% of college presidents were women in 2006 but notes that the figure was just 10% in 1986. The number of women in administrative or managerial positions in higher education rose 62% from 1999 to 2009, while the number of men in those types of positions rose just 27% (National Center for Education Statistics, cited in Reis 2015). Women are also increasingly leading doctoral-granting institutions (ACE, 2017). However, the gender gap in academic leadership in higher education institutions persists.

Given the low number of women in academic leadership, it is clear that barriers may exist to prevent women from making this career transition. Redmond and colleagues (2017) identified barriers to female leadership that include the glass ceiling, bias and discrimination, invisibility, opting out, stereotyping, and personal barriers. Bradley (2013) further summarized barriers to two broad themes. First, the nature of the workplace served as a barrier, including workplace culture, how female authority is viewed by other workers, and the lack of mentors.

Second, barriers are discussed in terms of decisions women make (or are expected to make), prioritizing family responsibilities, career disruptions from children, and the reluctance women have in applying for positions unless they are completely sure they have the required skills and experience. These two broad themes provide a theoretical framework to investigate how women process the context of the workplace and personal life decisions as they considered moving into higher levels of academic leadership.

These barriers are not unique to academia. Media reports continue to support that females are consistently paid less than males and White men account for 72% of corporate leadership in Fortune 500 companies (Jones, 2017). White male representation on corporate boards follows the same patterns, with few women represented on such boards. Ernst and Young (2015) found that women held just 16% of board seats at S&P 1500 companies, with more men on corporate boards named John, Robert, William, or James than women on boards altogether.

### ***Contextual Considerations: Workplace Culture and Mentoring***

Workplace culture and the provision of mentoring have been found to impact women moving into academic leadership roles. As Kloot (2004) explains, men and women are perceived to be different at leadership skills even though no real differences exist. These perceptions lead to extra hurdles for women to overcome. In focusing on workplace culture, Ballenger (2010) suggests the ‘old boys club’ thinking acts as a barrier, with women often being excluded from informal meetings over coffee and lunches. These missed opportunities to contribute to the discussion can be referred to as the “meeting before the meeting or the meeting after the meeting” – informal meetings among only some leaders, typically males, to discuss either what should happen at the meeting or to process what actually happened at the meeting. Dominici, Fried, and Zeger (2009) have similar findings, highlighting the exclusion of women from informal leadership networks.

Helping women to establish those connections and networks that might prevent exclusion can be aided with informal and formal mentoring from other academic leaders. The lack of mentors was evident in a study of female college presidents; Reis (2015) found that all

participants had to find other ways to sharpen their leadership skills. Moreover, formal mentoring programs have been found to be more beneficial to women in enhancing their networks and social skills compared to males (Srivatava, 2015). Within the broad arena of high education, there are several high-profile programs for academic leadership such as the Harvard Leadership Institute, American Council of Education (ACE) Fellows Program, and the Higher Education Resources Services Summer Institute, that strengthen the pipeline for women to move into high level administrative positions. Yet it is likely that many more women faculty apply for participation in these programs than are selected each year. Therefore, local efforts on campus are needed to reach potential female faculty members that might be interested in academic leadership positions. Even when colleges and universities are committed to hiring women in academic leadership at their institutions, implicit bias of faculty needs to also be addressed or women in academic leadership will face severe hardships and stagnation (Niemann, 2020). With mostly males in top president or chancellor positions, their commitment to diversity and inclusion of women in leadership is critical. Male leaders must champion efforts and initiatives in the college and university workplace to formally combat implicit bias and support the development of systematic training opportunities to increase the number of women in academic leadership.

### ***Personal Considerations***

Even with interest, commitment, and qualifications, deciding to accept an academic leadership position may be a difficult choice for faculty members, particularly female faculty members. Although major cultural shifts in the sharing of home and family responsibilities have occurred in recent decades, research suggests that a substantial amount of home and family responsibilities still fall on women (Donnor, 2020). Weighting the commitment and time related to these home and family duties may impact women's willingness to take on leadership roles in academia. Dominici, Fried, and Zeger (2009) noted that leadership positions may be less attractive to women than men due to family responsibilities. Reis' (2015) study of four women presidents found that all negotiated their careers around family, such as delaying entering

leadership until after children were out of the home. Lepkowski (2009) found that geographic mobility, or more accurately immobility, constrained the career advancement of women. Marongiu and Ekehammar (1999) described the double track when women combine home and work responsibilities that can negatively affect career choices. While Sandberg (2013) famously suggested that women fail to 'lean in' to opportunities, Ward and Eddy (2013) described the situation differently: "women actually lean back from the ladder of academic progress, promotion, and leadership because of a perception that advanced positions in academe are not open to women, and particularly women who hope to make time for a family or life beyond work".

### ***Contextual and Personal considerations: The Pathway to Academic Leadership for Women***

The gender imbalance in academic leadership is not due to a lack of qualified female candidates. Johnson (2017) notes that since 2006, more than 50% of all doctoral degrees have been earned by women; in fact, women earn more than half of degrees at all ranks from Associate to Doctoral. Still, women are underrepresented in higher levels of faculty ranks; in 2015, women held just 32% of Full Professor positions (Johnson, 2017). College presidents have tended follow the traditional career path of advancing in rank from Assistant Professor to Professor, and Lepkowski (2009) suggests the gender inequity in the Full Professor rank impacts the pipeline to leadership. Yet others suggest that rather than a "leaky pipeline," women are hitting a glass ceiling preventing them from advancing into leadership positions. Eagly and Carli (2007) disputed the idea of a glass ceiling; the issue is not that no women have broken into academic leadership but that so few women have broken into it. Furthermore, this glass ceiling metaphor suggests an invisible barrier, but the reality is that women face many complex challenges throughout their career; the barrier does not only exist at the end. Eagly and Carli (2007) proposed the labyrinth as a more apt metaphor. A labyrinth depicts a long and difficult journey full of twists and turns, but despite the difficulty it is possible to successfully navigate it.

## ***Current Study***

In order to address these barriers and the gender discrepancy in academic leadership, there is a need to understand the experiences of women who have been successful in achieving and executing leadership positions in higher education. Many prior qualitative studies focused broadly on higher education in the United States (see for example Ballenger, 2010; Bilen-Green, Froelich, & Jacobson, 2008; Cardel et al., 2020; Reis, 2015) or on a singular state such as Minnesota (see for example Lepkowski, 2009). Thus, this current study was designed to sample female participants in academic leaderships positions all from universities in a specific mid-west athletic conference. All institutions from which the sample was taken are public comprehensive universities and ranked as either doctoral high or very high research activity. We examined the following research questions: 1) How did they enter academic leadership? 2) What were their experiences in leadership positions? and 3) What advice would they offer to other women considering leadership positions and what skills should they foster?

## **Methods**

To understand the experience of women in leadership positions in higher education institutions, a qualitative exploratory approach was used (Kim, Sefcik, & Bradway, 2017; Patton, 2002) to address the study research questions. This approach allowed for an in-depth study of phenomena from the perspective of persons being studied, offering understandings that can contribute to theory development and/or implications for institutional structures (Kim et al., 2017). This research was approved by university Institutional Research Boards.

To carry out this study, the authors developed a recruitment plan that included 12 higher education institutions in the mid-west that belong to the same athletic conference. The focus on this conference supported the goal of generating findings and specific recommendations to enhance opportunities for women leaders in that conference. To create a sampling frame of women to be recruited for the study, a website review was conducted for each of the 12 universities between the months

of September and October of 2019. This website review included gathering publicly available information in order to generate a list of women in academic leadership positions within the area of academic affairs (i.e. Assistant Dean, Associate Dean, Dean, Assistant Provost, Associate Provost, Vice Provost, Provost, or President).

This website review found that 41.7% of all Dean-level positions (including Assistant and Associate), 50.5% of Provost-level positions (including Assistant, Associate, and Vice), and 42.8% of all President positions were held by women; overall, 44.4% of leadership positions were held by women. We acknowledge some limitations with this frame. It relied on gendered assumptions surrounding names and photographs. In some cases, website biographies confirmed these assumptions through the use of gendered pronouns, but many websites contained either only names or only a name accompanying a photograph.

After this list was generated, a maximum variation method of sampling was used to identify at least two women at each institution at varying levels of leadership to contact for participation in the study (Patton, 2002). These identified women leaders were contacted via email, inviting them to participate in the study and providing the study's Institutional Review Board approved verbal consent document.

All thirty-eight participants identified as women in the study and were employed in the following academic leadership positions at the time of their interview: President (n=1), Vice President (n=1), Provost (also had a Vice President title at several institutions; n=3), Vice/Associate/Assistant Provost (n=11), Dean (n=16), Associate/Assistant Dean (n=6). All twelve of the institutions within the university athletic conference were represented (a minimum of two participants per university). These women had diverse career trajectories. Some women have been at the same institution for their entire career, while others came to their institution to assume a specific leadership position. This diversity extended into how long they had served in their position at the time of the study; some had held the position for less than one year, while others had been in that position for over five years.

After review of the literature and discussion, a semi-structured interview guide was generated that included interview questions on the various stages of the leadership experience. Specific questions included:

1. How did you get to your current position? I'd like to hear about your journey as an academic leader.
2. What challenges have you encountered as you have participated in your career trajectory?
3. Did you try to move into more senior leadership positions and encounter obstacles?
4. What supports, training, and mentoring did you have?
5. What are your thoughts on potential inequities in academic leadership positions due to gender/sex?
6. Do you have any advice for women who are considering entering academic leadership positions?
7. What skills should they be building to prepare for academic leadership positions?

Thirty-eight, one-on-one interviews were completed with each of the women who agreed to participate in the study. Interviews were conducted either in-person, via phone, or by videoconference (e.g., Zoom meetings) by one of the authors. The duration of interviews were 30-60 minutes each. Thirty-one of the thirty-eight interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by a contracted transcription company (rev.com). Seven of the interviewees chose not to have their interview recorded; in those cases, detailed notes were taken by interviewers during the seven interviews and inputted into a word processing document.

Transcripts and word-processed notes yielded approximately 250 pages of text for analysis. A qualitative content analysis was used to analyze textual data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this process of data analysis, the team of four researchers engaged in a day-long analysis session where each of the researchers hand coded copies of two transcripts separately. Individual coding consisted of highlighting and line-by-line coding of passages with a descriptive word or phrase. Individual codes were compared and discussed among researchers to generate a common coding scheme which included codes and operational definitions for each code. This coding scheme was used to code the rest of the textual data in the two months following the analysis session. In some cases, additional descriptive codes that were not included in the initial code list were added after email discussion among researchers.

After all textual data were coded, one of the authors and a trained graduate assistant, organized coded quotes by coded categories. For example, a category that emerged from the coding scheme was “Accidental Leader” and included codes of accidental leader “with goal,” “with no goal,” and “test it out.” All quotes with these codes were combined into one word processing document. Quotes within categories were examined to generate qualitative thematic findings which are shared in this manuscript (Charmaz, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In the following sections, we draw on our qualitative interviews to describe our participants’ journeys into leadership, their experiences of being a leader, and their reflections on these leadership experiences.

### **Journey into Leadership**

During interviews, participants described diverse *journeys* into their current academic leadership positions. We use the word journey purposefully to stress that these were not direct A to B paths from faculty member to leader. Rather these were circuitous journeys with multiple steps and stops along the way, including to positions that were not always clear promotions. Although every woman described a unique journey, one theme was common through most of the stories: they rarely entered academia with the goal of transitioning from faculty to administration.

Few participants described seeking out leadership opportunities in higher education, especially at the beginning of their careers. Instead, many of the participants described themselves as ‘accidental leaders’ whose journeys to leadership roles were unintentional. One participant described her experience in this way:

Initially I was a very reluctant leader and I remember my first opportunity was to be department chair, and I did not want to be department chair ‘cause I was really enjoying being faculty. But the Dean came to my office, sat down and talk[ed] to me and pretty much said, “Look, no one wants to do this. There is no one else that I can think of that’s qualified to do this. Everybody here has a lot of baggage and has been around for a long time. You’ve only been here one year. So how ‘bout it?”

Through analysis, this accidental leader theme became even more nuanced in the ways that participants described their career journey into leadership. While ‘accidental’ was the common refrain, they approached it in several ways. Some participants never intended to enter leadership but ended up there anyway while others were intrigued and decided to accept a position to test it out. And others saw administration as their end goal and strategically moved toward that goal taking intentional steps along the way.

For those participants that had no goal of becoming a leader, they described beginning their journey in various ways. When a position opened – from resignation, death, or just realignment – they were presented with the opportunity to step into that role. In some cases, it was presented as a choice, as the quote above illustrates. In other situations, they were encouraged to accept an opportunity that was available. As one woman described, “a lot of things I would never have thought myself qualified for, or even should be interested in, other people have been really good at nudging me and saying it was okay to think about that”.

Yet in other situations, some participants felt like they were not given the choice to decline a leadership position. One woman explained that a supervisor knocked on her door to say that they needed someone to take over a specific area and “we’ve decided it’s going to be you”. Another described a faculty meeting when the chair quit abruptly, and the remaining members nominated her to be the new chair and then promptly closed nominations; she was put into that position even though she did not want it.

As part of this ‘accidental leader’ phenomenon, some participants were unsure about taking a new leadership opportunity but decided to test it out without fully committing. Sometimes they embarked on these trial runs because they thought they had the right background – such as liking to do service, being a good citizen, and working well with others. Sometimes they just were not sure of their next career step. One participant described thinking she had nothing to lose so thought she might as well give it a shot. Another asked herself “why not”?

Some participants did actively seek out leadership positions, especially when they were already in one and wanted to advance. One participant described being in a room with a male colleague who was presenting his ideas. As she listened, she formulated her own ideas in her

head and realized that not only could she do his job, but that she was ready to take that step. Some did have definite leadership ambitions and accepted positions not because they were asked or pushed but because that was what they wanted. One participant specifically described her journey as following in the footsteps of another leader.

The varied journeys the participants described offer insights into the many ways women thoughtfully enter academic leadership. They may spend time considering a change, they may be nudged (or even pushed), they may test the waters first, or they may make purposeful moves. While each woman depicted a different journey, the majority of our participants did not come to higher education institutions to be academic leaders.

### **Experiencing Leadership**

Our participants shared various leadership experiences, ranging from positive to negative. In doing so, they identified areas where change could make leadership positions more attractive to others in the future. Although the interview questions specifically probed about more negative experiences such as inequities, our participants highlighted the positive aspects of their jobs too, describing what parts they enjoy and some of their accomplishments as leaders. A key focus for many of these women is their ability to make a difference and help others succeed, especially for students. For example, one participant stressed that the job is fun for her because she sees her impact on the university and students. She noted that she is still able to enjoy her position even when doing more tedious tasks because she keeps her focus on the big picture of students and revolutionizing education for them. Another echoed these sentiments by describing how happy she is to have the freedom to give her job purpose and allow her to live a “life of impact and difference”. Finally, a participant described what she likes best about her position – the ability to solve what she called ‘really thorny problems’. She approaches those problems by trying to find solutions that make everyone happy rather than having a dichotomy of winners and losers.

## *Inequities*

Although the participants clearly enjoy many aspects of their leadership positions, their experiences are not universally positive. In particular, they described inequities they face in their administrative careers, which we categorized into three categories: tangible, intangible, and self-imposed. Tangible inequities are those that are easily measured or documented, such as salary disparities. Intangible inequities are more nebulous and are defined as feelings or treatment the participants described as part of gender inequities. Self-imposed inequities are those decisions or choices made in anticipation of unfair treatment – even if it does not occur.

As part of this category of tangible inequities, participants described financial inequities, including gender disparities in salaries as well as stipends and raises. Overwhelmingly, our participants described being paid less than their male counterparts in similar roles at their universities and receiving smaller bonuses. One participant described the broader implications of these pay disparities:

But when I started my dean job, I was the lowest paid dean, which makes sense because I was the newest, but I was paid under benchmarks by fifty or sixty thousand dollars ... But when the new president came in and looked at equity, it really was an outlier. And it had not really occurred to me that I should care about that. Because I didn't care personally, but I didn't realize that salary was political currency. Right? So being paid less means you have less power to some people who care about those things, which with some established male deans was a thing.

When brought to the attention of higher-level administrators, some of these financial inequities were corrected. In one case, however, a participant noted that the resulting equity analysis conducted by administration “confirmed the inequity but it was not corrected due to budgetary constraints”.

In addition to salaries, participants also described tangible inequities in terms of promotions, roles, and recognition. They felt that

men tended to rise faster in rank than women and discussed differences in their assigned duties. Examples included women carrying a disproportionate advising load, having higher service and community responsibilities, and even being asked to take notes during meetings. They also felt that women received less recognition than men, including in being nominated less-frequently for university-wide awards. The perception of academic leadership being a “boys club” and thus not welcoming or accepting of women is part of these inequalities. One participant described this phenomenon:

I can tell you it's a very good old boys club, who's the smooth-talking guy that everybody just loves, certainly gets ahead and being a female in that role means you have to ... if you're not of a particular personality type, if you're not more what I considered docile or agreeable or backing your way into every conversation or statement, it can be difficult to get the recognition. There's been several things I've done for the university, for the campus and I haven't gotten any recognition for it ... I get very little recognition for what I do. Whereas I know there are deans who are males who get all kinds of notice and awards and it's very difficult.

Several participants did make a point to acknowledge that some of these inequities might be improving. There are more women in administrative positions, some units have addressed salary inequities, and one participant described a situation where her male colleagues spoke up publicly against pay inequity.

Our participants also described intangible inequities as ones that are not quantifiable but still very real. A common example described by several participants was their contributions in group meetings being overlooked. Over and over participants described proposing an idea that was ignored by the men in the room only to have a man propose the same idea a few minutes later to great acclaim. Along those same lines, participants felt that male contributions were taken more seriously than those from females. One participant discussed having to establish credibility on understanding budget issues when her male colleagues did not. They also described other differences in treatment.

They felt criticized while men were trusted. Their ambition was viewed as negative while it was considered a positive trait for men. Men's feelings were protected so they were not hurt, but being hurt was viewed as a way to make women stronger.

Some of these inequities revolved around everyday kinds of experiences. One participant noted that during summer months, male administrators come to meetings in jeans and short-sleeved shirts while female administrators dress in the same formal attire they wear during the academic year. Another participant described that the upper floors in her building are associated with administration and the lower floors house an education program. The upper levels only had male restrooms while the lower floors only had women's restrooms, suggesting a presumption that women would not hold administrative positions.

Beyond inequities in treatment, participants described inequities in how they were allowed to behave and express emotion. They repeatedly explained that they had a narrower range of acceptable behavior than men. For example, strongly voiced opinions are seen as aggressive rather than assertive. Participants described being expected to be docile and agreeable instead. One noted that if she made "a comment, sometimes it might be seen that I'm having a bad day, where my male colleague will just... be seen as he's just voicing his opinion". Another participant expressed a similar sentiment that while her male colleagues can yell, she cannot raise her voice without being seen as emotional or out of control. In some cases, participants described being told explicitly how to behave. One recalled a time when a male colleague told her she needed to be less emotional. Her response was to say "You know what? ... You can [expletive] off because I'm not emotional. I'm angry, and there's a difference". Overall, many of the intangible equities can be summed up in this one statement: "People talk about white privilege, [but] it's like a male privilege. I don't think males realize it".

A final category of inequities that emerged from our analysis was the description of self-imposed inequities. For example, one participant recalled a situation when she and her female colleagues asked a male colleague to speak on their behalf, recognizing that he could say things in meetings that the women could not. Another described doubting her abilities even while acknowledging that men overestimated their abilities. The salary inequities described above were also framed as

self-imposed in some situations. One participant noted that the pay discrepancy is not always because they are women but because they did not ask for more money while negotiating. The danger of these self-imposed inequities was summed up as “I think one of the pieces of advice that I often give everybody is to think about your whole life and not underestimate your own abilities. It’s been my experience that women will more often count themselves out too early”.

### ***Work-Life Tension***

The literature often discusses the challenges of achieving a work-life balance. Yet in our interviews, participants described it as a constant *tension* rather than an issue that can be solved or *balanced*. The tension appears early, impacting their career journeys. Women described life responsibilities outside of work that included caring for aging parents and children. It is important to note that children were not all young; one participant noted her adult children still call her at work for help.

Some women explained they decided not to apply to, accept, or even remain in leadership positions that they viewed as unfriendly to women, as women oftentimes had multiple life responsibilities to juggle. Examples included a position that did not offer the time flexibility to take an afternoon off to pick up children from school. Another framed this as implicit bias, meaning negative attitudes and stereotypes held toward women without conscious knowledge or intent. In these cases, the bias stems from the culture of a unit. An expectation of being in the office from 8am – 5pm may create problems for someone with child-care responsibilities; while childcare is not exclusively female work, much of that work does still fall on women’s shoulders. Still a few participants did explain that they accepted positions specifically to alleviate some tension. One applied to multiple jobs in the region as a way to be closer to an aging parent. Another chose a comprehensive university rather than a research institution to better fit her family responsibilities. She decided that some positions are not worth the disruption they would cause.

This work-life tension is a central part of many of our participants’ leadership experiences. One explained that she felt some responsibility to speak out about this tension to help others understand and prepare for what she described as “the constraints of parenting”. Another

described the doubts this tension causes her. If she is at home, she asks herself whether she is giving enough to the job. If she is at work, she asks whether she is doing enough for her children. Several participants stressed how important their partners are in managing this tension. Several participants discussed having a supportive spouse – who either does not work or has a flexible schedule – helps tremendously in navigating this tension.

### ***Leadership Development***

Our participants identified positive aspects of their leadership experiences alongside negative inequalities. The issue of leadership development emerged as a complex and nuanced experience. Our analysis drew distinctions between mentoring, social support, and more systemic training participants described as part of leadership development. We define *mentoring* as formal and purposeful advice from someone at a higher rank either inside or outside their institution. *Social support* is informal advice with individuals outside higher education, peer colleagues, personal relationships, and graduate school contacts. *Systemic training* is organized training for administrators either inside or outside their institution.

These three types of development emerged as a valuable aspect of the leadership experience. Participants indicated that the formal and purposeful advice that comes from mentors is important, and they offered opinions on who this mentor should be. They stressed the benefit of having multiple mentors and not limiting yourself to only female mentors. When seeking out a mentor, they highlighted the importance of finding someone who has actually been in that position or role. Participants who are people of color also explained the importance of having other people of color as mentors. They also noted that a mentor should cover social dynamics as well as career decisions. In explaining why mentors are important, one participant summed up the experience as “it’s because of her that all of this became possible, especially at my age”.

Although participants described how important mentoring is, they also discussed the lack of mentoring they received. Sometimes this absence was an issue of timing; one woman described how her institution implemented mentoring at different ranks, but the new initiatives

just never matched up with her career stage. Our participants recognized the negative impacts from this lack of mentoring. One explained that “as I think back, there are things I probably could have done better now, but really I had zero training, zero mentoring, just kind of was thrown off the deep end”. Likely as part of their own experience of a lack of mentoring, several participants indicated they prioritized serving as a mentor for others.

Alongside more formal mentoring, participants also highlighted the value of their informal social support networks. The actual supporters included their PhD advisors, their peers, friends from undergraduate and graduate programs, their spouses, and their children. This social support network serves as an informal sounding board, a way to express frustration in a safe space, hear different perspectives, and to share experiences. Several participants indicated that they purposefully created a support system external to their current employer. These outside networks allow them to share information with people who will not be impacted by their decisions or actions. One specifically described a Facebook group comprised of women in similar academic leadership positions. The group provides a space where they can talk frankly and get advice on particular issues. Beyond advice, these support networks can provide a practical value. A participant described her network at her current institution. Members of this network will roleplay meetings in advance to practice amplifying their voices and ideas.

Some participants indicated they received systemic training, both internally at their institutions and externally. Internal training included that provided to department chairs. External training included from their professional organizations and several well-known organizations including Harvard, the Higher Education Resource Services Leadership Institute, and the American Council on Education Fellowship. Training not limited to higher education administration was also mentioned including the Council for Advancement and Support of Education which is designed for advancement officers and the Athena Network which offers training for female executives and entrepreneurs.

Participants described experiences during interviews that ranged from the positive to the negative. Our participants described themselves as thriving in their positions when they had real impacts on those around them, especially students. They make clear though that not

all parts of their positions are enjoyable. They observed and experienced many types of inequities and sometimes their negative experiences cause them to impose inequities on themselves. They also recognized that even when experiences are beneficial, more leadership development is needed.

## **Reflecting on Leadership**

After sharing their journeys and experiences, we asked our participants to reflect on their leadership careers. Specifically, we asked them to identify skills necessary for successful leaders and to offer advice for women considering entering administration.

### ***Skills***

**Table 1** lists the skills necessary to be an effective leader as identified by our participants.

Many of these skills were unsurprising and would likely be listed as essential by leaders outside academia including communication, listening, conflict management, time management, organizational behavior, articulate, being responsive (especially with emails), and creativity. The most frequently identified skills surrounded budget proficiency. Participants noted the importance of knowing the numbers to show legitimacy (due to the intangible inequities discussed above) as well as knowing general financial terms. One participant contextualized the need for facts by explaining certain stakeholders will expect data and will not accept opinions. As part of budget knowledge, participants stressed the necessity of being skilled with creating and reading spreadsheets. Related, they also highlighted the importance of fundraising. As important as it is to master leadership skills, one participant noted that skills alone are not enough. She described what she sees as an inherent contradiction between higher education and effective leadership: “In order to lead effectively, you have to be open to ongoing self-evaluation, self-reflection, learning, and growing. But the reality is when you work in Higher Ed, you don’t have a lot of time for it. It’s just like you’re shot out of a canon every morning”.

**Table 1.** Necessary Skills Identified by Research Participants***Personal***

- Be present
- Communication
- Creativity
- Cultural awareness and sensitivity including on cultural upbringing
- Interpersonal
- Listening
- Self-reflection, learning, and growing
- Tough skin

***Professional***

- Budget and financial management
- Conflict management
- Fundraising
- Human resources
- Mediation
- Organizational behavior
- Personnel management
- Quick response, especially with email
- Statistics, data, and spreadsheets
- Time management
- Understanding leadership skills and management skills are different
- When an email will suffice versus needing an in-person meeting

***Advice***

**Table 2** lists the advice offered by the participants for women considering moving into leadership positions. In addition to advice designed to help women make this career decision, they also offered advice to help them be successful in leadership positions. Participants advised potential leaders to seek out opportunities and be willing to say yes to opportunities. As one participant noted, “you can always go back”. They also advised trying out a position even if you do not know how to do everything it requires because you can always learn these skills. Still, they also advised that it is important to also be willing to say no if it is not the right opportunity; someone should not accept an opportunity just because it is there. One participant noted a potential struggle of being viewed as a ‘token’ woman; she advised not being that token but also

**Table 2.** Participant Advice For Women Considering Entering Leadership***During Decision Making***

- Ask yourself why when opportunities come up
- Be prepared and get training
- Don't abandon research
- Look at what other leaders do
- Realized there is no one way to be a leader
- Take advantage of every opportunity
- Try at a small scale
- Try it out

***Once in Leadership***

- Admit when they are wrong
- Balance being faculty advocate and administrator
- Be authentic
- Be neutral
- Be willing to work harder than the man next to you
- Don't be afraid to fail
- Get over imposter syndrome
- Get support network
- Go home and let it go/leave work at work
- Learn policy
- Listen and learn from others (including outside academia)
- Make tough decisions
- Speak up
- Stay connected to students and the campus community (leave the office)
- Stay in control of your time
- Take criticism

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not saying no to every opportunity just because of that fear. Once in leadership positions, our participants offered advice about establishing support networks. Potential leaders were encouraged to ensure that it is a broad coalition and that it contains people who will be honest. Although it is important to have people who trust and believe in you, it is equally essential to include people who will “tell you when you’re full of hooey”. Participants also stressed the need for this support network to work both ways; you want people to help you, but you also need to be willing to help them when they need it.

The skills and advice offered by our participants reflect back on their journeys and experiences. Their accidental journeys into leadership contribute to their encouragement to others to be open to accepting new opportunities. Their recognition that a lack of leadership development can be detrimental contributes to their encouragement to develop a support network.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This research focused on women leaders at the 12 institutions of higher education to understand their journeys into leadership and their experiences in those positions. Further, it asked these leaders to reflect on these experiences with the ultimate goal of helping more women assume leadership positions. The thoughtful reflections shared by our 38 participants during interviews include various challenges and barriers. They experienced tangible and intangible inequities and recognize the importance of formal mentoring but receive limited leadership development. Most of these women never intended to become an academic leader, but either circumstances pushed them into positions or they decided to test out a position without the intention of permanence. The lack of planned entry into administration supports the literature that it is less a leaky pipeline or glass ceiling and more the labyrinth of leadership that makes these positions less appealing (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Lepkowski, 2009; Redmond et al., 2017).

This study does have some limitations. A first limitation are the gendered assumptions made when creating the sampling frame of women to be recruited for this study through a website review of profiles and photographs of university leadership position descriptions. However, all participants recruited did identify as women during interviews. A second limitation concerns the sample itself. While one athletic conference was purposefully used to recruit participants, findings may not be generalizable to higher education institutions in other regions of the United States and beyond. A final limitation is with the rigor of the study. Efforts were made to enhance trustworthiness of this research, including use of multiple researchers, maximum variation in sampling

to elicit perspectives from women in diverse academic leadership positions, and development of comparative coding scheme. However, additional measures could have been included to enhance rigor of qualitative findings such as a member-checking process with participants and peer review of findings outside the research team.

Despite these limitations, findings presented in this paper offer several implications to recognize, support, and foster the presence of women in academic leadership positions. First, there are implications for institutions of higher education prioritizing equity policies for hiring, promotion, and compensation as well as creating a culture of diversity, equity and inclusion to benefit all minorities and marginalized groups. Several participants described an intersectionality of identity (i.e. being a women of color in leadership). By colleges and universities undertaking bold initiatives to build institutional capacity for women and other minorities to be included in leadership teams, they can be more prepared to meet the needs of a diverse and global society (Longman & Madsen, 2014; Smith, 2020). Second, findings from our study offer insights for the creation of academic leadership development programs that include personal and professional skill development, such as budgeting proficiency, conflict management strategies, employment negotiation practices, and effective communication techniques. In addition, findings suggest that higher education leadership development programs need to address building a supportive team of mentors that meet specific needs, networks of peers, as well as social supports outside of academia.

Lastly, findings have implications for women in academia seeking or currently in leadership positions to reflect upon self-imposed inequities. Many participants in this study described hesitancy in making the leap into leadership, describing situations of being “nudged” by others, uncertainty of match between their skills and leadership position requirements, and falling into leadership “accidentally.” This finding suggests the importance of institutions creating opportunities for women to “try out” leadership roles as well as for women to “not count yourself out too early.” Our goal here is to highlight the challenges women leaders face as a first step in increasing the number of women administrators at these institutions. We believe that addressing inequalities, providing more mentoring, and providing more small opportunities to serve as

tests or trial positions might all help. As Benschop and Brouns (2003: 207) note, “adding women to unchanged academic structures and cultures is like mopping with the tap on”.

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