

## **Women Presidents of Higher Education Institutions: A Mixed-Methods Phenomenological Study of the Relationship Between Self-Efficacy, Transformational Leadership, Gender-Based Barriers, and Support Structures**

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### **Abstract**

In the United States, approximately one-fourth of university presidents are female. The lack of women in senior leadership roles at higher education institutions mirrors other industries, and research has shown that institutions and organizations which lack female representation are less effective. To ascend to senior leadership roles, including the presidency, women persist through existing macro, meso, and micro levels of gender-based barriers. Thus, the primary research question guiding this study was: *What factors contribute to the self-efficacy of women presidents in higher education?* The theories of self-efficacy and transformational leadership provide the framework through which the concepts of women as leaders, American college presidents, gender-based barriers, and support structures were explored. This study resulted in six major findings: (a) Women presidents in higher education institutions are highly self-efficacious yet aspire to even greater levels of efficacy and professionalism; (b) Women presidents in higher education institutions are authentic, relationship-focused, and goal-oriented; (c) Women presidents in higher education institutions experience a multitude of gender-based barriers on their leadership journeys and in their presidencies; (d) Mentoring and leadership or professional development programming are essential components of the leadership journey for women presidents in higher education institutions; (e) Misalignment exists between the gender-based barriers and support structures identified by women presidents of higher education institutions; and (f) Women presidents of higher education institutions are committed to supporting the next generation of leaders.

*Keywords:* female university presidents, gender-based barriers, higher education administration, self-efficacy, transformational leadership

## Introduction

In the United States, approximately one-fourth of university presidents are female (American Council on Education, 2017; Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Diehl, 2014; Hannum et al., 2015; Northouse, 2016). The lack of women in senior leadership roles at higher education institutions mirrors other industries, and research (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Hannum et al., 2015) has shown that institutions and organizations which lack female representation are less effective. To ascend to senior leadership roles, including the presidency, women persist through existing macro, meso, and micro levels of gender-based barriers. As women overcome these obstacles and adversities, a higher sense of self-efficacy is developed. Research (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Eagly, 2007) also has found women to demonstrate the characteristics of transformational leadership more frequently than men. Through a series of survey and interview questions with women presidents in higher education, this mixed-method phenomenological study explored the relationship between self-efficacy, transformational leadership, and existing gender barriers and supports.

## Statement of the Problem

Northouse (2016) defines leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 6). Similarly, Eagly and Carli (2007) acknowledge leaders “influence and inspire the activities of others to foster the progress of a group, organization, or nation toward its goals” (p. 9). While leaders are influenced by experiences and interactions with various constituents and followers, leadership itself is a process, not simply a trait or characteristic (Northouse, 2016). Hannum et al. (2015) expand on this definition by emphasizing the process is most effective when “there is a diverse mix of skills and perspectives represented and able to work well together” (p. 66). Navigating this diverse process, which also includes various obstacles and support, is essential for effective leadership. Indeed, the most effective leaders are those who adjust to meet the particular situation (by overcoming barriers and adapting to change) while moving toward an established goal.

By these definitions, then, leadership can be assumed by all individuals who engage with followers toward a common goal, and yet women are underrepresented in the highest ranks of leadership across industries, including within higher education administration (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Cook & Glass, 2014; Diehl, 2014; Hannum et al., 2015). Indeed, within the United States, women hold approximately 30% of the presidencies in

higher education institutions. The merits of having women in positions of senior leadership are far reaching and significant, while the alternative is sobering and detrimental. Lack of diversity limits the full potential of both women and the institutions they serve, denying the benefits that come from gender diversity (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Hannum et al., 2015).

As women navigate various leadership pathways, obstacles and adversities are encountered. When overcome, these barriers contribute to a stronger sense of self-efficacy. Thus, by better understanding how the unique barriers faced by women presidents contribute to their self-efficacy, higher education institutions may be able to dismantle existing systems so that women can lead.

### **Importance and Significance of the Study**

Former Congresswoman and first female Vice Presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro once said, “some leaders are born women” (Chisolm-Burns et al., 2017, p. 312). In its simplicity, this quote is a blunt reminder today (just as it was decades ago) of the struggles women face in pursuit of leadership roles. That is, there is an expectation and normalcy around male leaders whereas women are still considered the anomaly. As they ascend to and hold senior leadership roles, women persist through a labyrinth of barriers by engaging in various support structures. Universities which seek to best represent its employees and students must consider the benefits of women in senior leadership roles and acknowledge (and actively seek to alter) the existing barriers hindering women from attaining these roles. For systemic culture change, organizations should seek out transformational leaders who facilitate change through direct relationships between leaders and followers.

Women presidents in higher education lead fewer than 30% of American colleges and universities, and yet females comprise the majority of the student populations (American Council on Education, 2017; Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Chisholm-Burns, et al., 2017; Diehl, 2014; Hannum, et al., 2015; Northouse, 2016). Institutional leadership should be reflective of the populations served, and yet the highest positions are still predominantly held by men. For the women who have ascended to these highest ranks, it is assumed that they possess or have cultivated a high level of self-efficacy and have honed leadership characteristics relevant to the academy. By understanding the barriers that are frequently faced by women presidents, and the ways in which they addressed and overcame the barriers to enhance their efficacy, then higher

education institutions will have a responsibility for identifying and dismantling these barriers in their own institutions.

### **Purpose and Methodology of the Study**

The purpose of this mixed-method phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of women who serve as presidents of higher education institutions in the southeast. Women, generally, navigate barriers during their leadership journey, and each obstacle contributes to a deeper (more robust) sense of self-efficacy. This study explored the experiences of women who have ascended to the role of president in higher education institutions in relation to (a) demographics of women presidents, (b) perceived self-efficacy, (c) factors influencing self-efficacy development, (d) characteristics of leadership self-efficacy, (e) gender-based leadership barriers, and (f) lived experiences of women university presidents.

This mixed-methods study included a sample population of women presidents, chancellors, or chief executive officers (or interim) representative of SACSCOC-accredited higher education institutions. SACSCOC (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges) is the regional accrediting agency for degree-granting higher education institutions in eleven southeastern states. While the literature on leadership and self-efficacy is robust (Bobbio & Manganelli, 2009; Eagly, 2007; McCormick et al., 2002), the specific intersection of female presidents and their self-efficacy needed to be explored. Through the analysis of data collected via a survey and interviews, the experiences of female presidents, as well as their leadership and self-efficacy, will contribute to higher education research.

With nearly 60% of current presidents over the age of 60 and nearing retirement (American Council on Education, 2017), many president positions will be vacant within the decade. Higher education practitioners must identify who is in the leadership pipeline, and which of those individuals possess the experiences and leadership skills to best guide the institutions during transitional times. By focusing on current female presidents, this study sought to illustrate those experiences and skills which either hindered or enabled their leadership journey. Higher education institutions, then, must commit to dismantling those obstacles which maintain gender inequity, and also commit to promoting and expanding those services and experiences which enable advancement. If this can be done, the gender disparity among higher education presidents will shrink, and the leadership composition will be more reflective of the student population.

**Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

This study anticipated four assumptions regarding study participants. That is, it was assumed study participants would be active participants and provide honest and candid responses to the survey items and interview questions; represent the population of women presidents in higher education institutions; have experienced and overcome gender-based barriers; and be able to identify or articulate perceived self-efficacy and leadership self-efficacy.

With approximately 30% of all college presidencies held by women (American Council on Education, 2017), the population size for this proposed study was limited. The researcher focused this study on those women who serve as presidents at SACSCOC-accredited institutions; thus, the study was limited to a specific region. Participants were identified based on publicly available information; the accuracy of contact information and access to the intended participants was relatively limited. The sample population was contingent upon those women presidents who volunteered to participate in this study. Because of the current global-wide COVID-19 pandemic, participation was limited as higher education leaders committed to addressing the immediate and emergent needs of their institutions. Though the population was limited, the experiences of these women contributed to a robust understanding of the phenomena of leadership, self-efficacy, and gender-based barriers.

The population for this study was women Presidents, Chancellors, or Chief Executive Officers (or interim) of SACSCOC-accredited institutions of higher education. SACSCOC (2020) identifies and regularly updates a list of all accredited institutions, and its website (SACSCOC, n.d.) identifies the “CEO Name” affiliated with each institution. With the information about accreditation status and CEO name, the researcher then accessed each institution’s website to confirm the name and contact information for women presidents. The delimitation of this study excluded a request for all SACSCOC-accredited presidents to identify gender; rather, this study focused on the shared experiences of women presidents.

**Research Questions**

Women are underrepresented in positions of leadership across industries, including within higher education institutions. The following overarching and supporting research questions guided the study.

***Overarching Research Question***

What factors contribute to the self-efficacy of women presidents in higher education?

**Research Question 1.** What are the demographic characteristics of women presidents in SACSCOC-accredited higher education institutions, and what are the characteristics of the institutions in which they serve?

**Research Question 2.** What are the perceptions of self-efficacy identified by women university presidents?

**Research Question 2a.** What experiences and sources influenced women presidents' perceived self-efficacy?

**Research Question 3.** What are the characteristics of leadership and leadership self-efficacy most frequently exhibited by women presidents?

**Research Question 4.** What gender-based barriers do women presidents face most frequently at the macro, meso, and micro-levels?

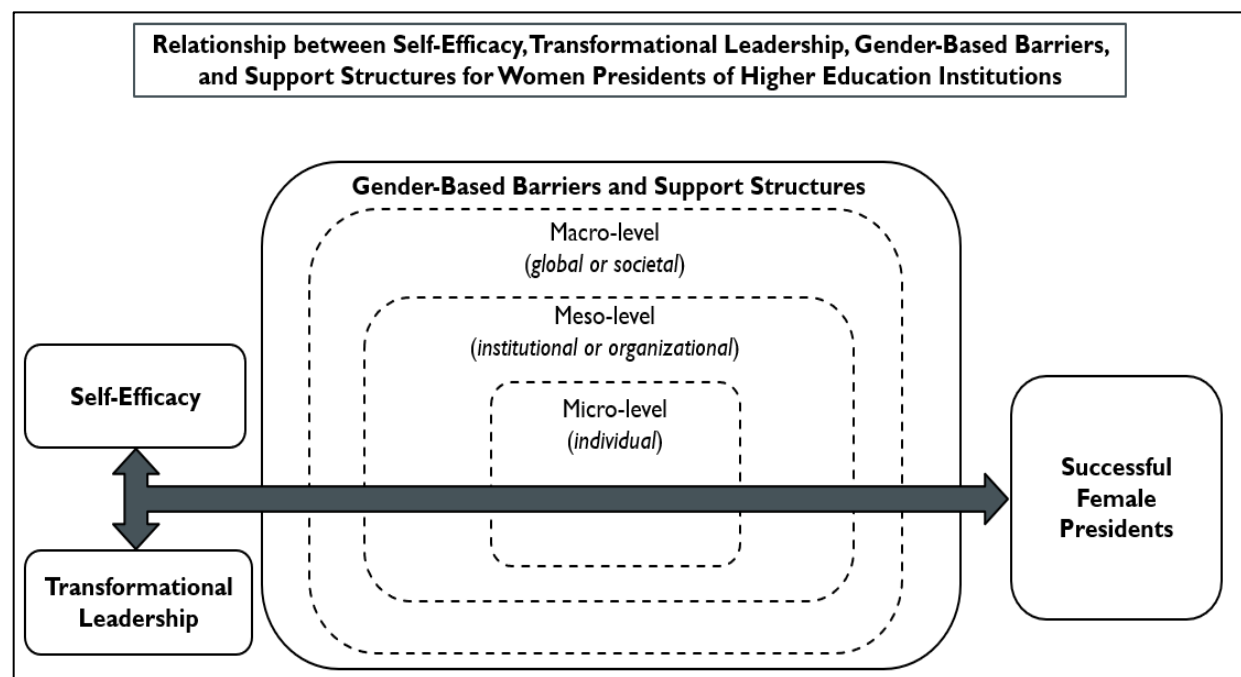
**Research Question 4a.** What strategies and support structures are used to overcome gender-based barriers?

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework (see Figure 1) illustrates the relationship between self-efficacy, transformational leadership, gender-based barriers, and support structures for female presidents of higher education institutions.

**Figure 1**

### Conceptual Framework



On the left, two parallel boxes are labeled with the traits commonly associated with female leaders: self-efficacy and transformational leadership. In the center, a series of boxes are embedded within each other; the largest of these boxes is labeled Gender-Based Barriers and Support Structures. Within this construct are three embedded boxes representing the three levels of barriers and supports. The largest of the three boxes is labeled Macro-level; it represents societal and cultural barriers and supports. Within the Macro-level is a smaller box labeled Meso-level; the Meso-level represents barriers and supports within organizations and institutions. Finally, the smallest box embedded within the Meso-level is labeled Micro-level; the Micro-level represents those barriers and supports found within an individual. These three levels are interdependent; that is, the individual operates within existing organizational and societal constructs. Likewise, the barriers and supports found at the macro-level influence those found in the meso-level, and ultimately impact the individual at the micro-level. To illustrate the interdependence and fluidity of these three levels, and specifically their influence on each of the other others, the boxes are drawn with dashed (rather than solid) lines. On the far right is a box labeled Successful Female Presidents.

A three-pronged arrow connects each of these three categories. First, there is a two-way arrow between self-efficacy and transformational leadership, acknowledging the reciprocal relationship between these characteristics. A solid line connects these characteristics to successful female presidents by running through all three levels of barriers and support structures. The direct line from self-efficacy and transformational leadership to successful female presidents passes through a set of macro-level, meso-level, and micro-level barriers and support structures. In other words, successful female presidents are those whose high self-efficacy and transformational leadership characteristics enable them to effectively persist through a multitude of barriers and engage in appropriate support structures

### **Summary of Research Methodology**

Table 1 provides a summary of the research design by highlighting alignment of research methodology, data measures, and data analysis for each research question.

**Table 1*****Summary of Research Methodology***

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Research Methodology</b>	<b>Data Measures</b>	<b>Data Analysis</b>
RQ1: What qualifications do women presidents in SACSCOC-accredited higher education institutions possess?	Quantitative	Demographic Survey	Descriptive statistics
RQ2: What are the perceptions of self-efficacy identified by women university presidents?	Qualitative	Interview Protocol	Thematic coding
RQ2a: What experiences and sources influenced women presidents' perceived self-efficacy?	Qualitative	Interview Protocol	Thematic coding
RQ3: What are the characteristics of leadership and leadership self-efficacy most frequently exhibited by women presidents?	Quantitative	Leadership Self-Efficacy Scale	Descriptive statistics
	Qualitative	Interview Protocol	Thematic coding
RQ4: What gender-based barriers do women presidents face most frequently at the macro, meso, and micro-levels?	Quantitative	Gender-Based Barriers Survey	Descriptive statistics
	Qualitative	Interview Protocol	Thematic coding
RQ4a: What strategies and support structures are used to overcome gender-based barriers?	Quantitative	Gender-Based Barriers Survey	Descriptive statistics
	Qualitative	Interview Protocol	Thematic coding

The quantitative methodology allows for descriptive analysis of participants responses to the *Survey of Women Presidents' Perceived Leadership Self-Efficacy and Gender-Based Barriers*, a three-part survey including a Demographic Survey, Leadership Self-Efficacy Scale, and Gender-Based Barriers Survey. The Demographic Survey and Gender-Based Barriers and Support Survey were designed by the researcher; the researcher used the categorization of barriers into macro-, meso-, and micro-levels identified by Diehl and Dzubinski (2016). The Leadership Self-Efficacy Scale was used with permission from its authors (Bobbio & Manganelli, 2009). Survey participants were limited to females who serve in the leadership positions of President, Chancellor, or Chief Executive Officer (or interim) of higher education institutions at SACSCOC-accredited institutions. SACSCOC (Southern Association of Colleges



and Schools Commission on Colleges) member institutions award associate, baccalaureate, master's or doctoral degrees in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Latin America; these institutions submit to accreditation and review by peer institutions (SACSCOC, n.d.). Survey responses remained anonymous.

Of the 792 institutions accredited by SACSCOC, 184 were led by women presidents according to an online search conducted by the researcher between July 5, 2020, and July 8, 2020 (SACSCOC, 2020). The percentage of women presidents at SACSCOC-accredited institutions is 23%, which is lower than the national average of 30% (American Council of Education, 2017). Participants from this region provided a sample population from which to extrapolate descriptive statistics of a shared experience.

Additionally, participants were given the option to also participate in an interview to share their experiences and perceptions on leadership, self-efficacy, gender-based barriers, and influential supports. The qualitative methodology and phenomenological approach allowed for the analysis of themes which emerged from responses provided by the interview participants. Twelve participants were selected to participate in the Interview Protocol. Though interview responses were recorded to ensure accuracy, the information remained confidential.

The mixed-methodology phenomenological study analyzed responses provided by survey and interview participants to illuminate the shared experiences of women presidents in higher education and their leadership, self-efficacy, and gender-based barriers.

### **Quantitative Data Analysis and Findings**

*The Survey of Women Presidents' Perceived Leadership Self-Efficacy and Gender-Based Barriers* is comprised of three sections: Demographic Survey, Leadership Self-Efficacy Scale, and Gender-Based Barriers and Supports Survey. It was sent electronically using Qualtrics (n.d.) to all 184 female presidents of SACSCOC-accredited higher education institutions. The initial email was distributed to 184 participants on November 9, 2020; three reminder notifications were distributed between November 15 and December 13, 2020. Reminder notifications were sent only to those individuals who had not completed the survey. While 73 surveys were started, 63 submitted responses to the first two sections (Demographic Survey and Leadership Self-Efficacy Scale); of these, 48 completed the entire survey (including the final section, Gender-Based Barriers and Supports Survey). The response rate was 34.24%% for those completing at

least two-thirds of the survey and 26.09% for those completing the entire survey. Participants completed the survey in 15 minutes on average. The responses to the final survey question were used to determine participants who would be willing to participate in the qualitative portion of the study.

### ***Quantitative Summary of Findings for Research Question 1***

Research Question 1 examined the demographic characteristics of women presidents in SACSCOC-accredited higher education institutions, and the characteristics of the institutions in which they serve. It was measured through a series of demographic questions asked in the Demographic Survey. The percentage of female presidents at SACSCOC-accredited institutions is 23% which is lower than the national average of 30% according to the ACE President's Survey (American Council on Education, 2017). Women in this study led public institutions more frequently than the national average (65.08% in this study, compared to 58% nationally), and private institutions less frequently than the national average (34.92% in this study, compared to 41% nationally). No women indicated they led for-profit institutions in this study, compared to 2% nationally.

In the survey population, women-led institutions granting associate-degrees was 38.10% which nearly matched the national average of 37%. However, other degree-granting institutions were not comparable. In the survey population, the remaining women-led institutions are 12.70% bachelor-granting, 17.46% master-granting, and 31.75% doctoral-granting; none in the survey population served at institutions of special focus or other. Conversely, the national data show that women-led institutions are 20% bachelor-granting, 23% master-granting, 8% doctoral-granting, 10% special focus, and 3% other (American Council on Education, 2017).

Nearly two-thirds of the survey population (65.08%) served in the current role for 0-5 years; nationally, women presidents have been in their current position an average of 5.8 years. The percentage of the survey population who held the immediate prior position of chief academic officer or provost was 29.03%, which was slightly lower than the national average of 35% of women presidents serving as chief academic officer or provost.

The survey also asked demographic questions about highest earned degree, race, ethnicity, and age. The women in this study (87.30%) held a PhD/EdD as their highest earned degree. Over 82% of the survey population were Caucasian, White, or White American while 14.29% were Black, Afro-Caribbean, or African American. While the percentage for Caucasians,

White, or White American was nearly identical at 83%, there appears to be a greater percentage (over 14%) who identified as Black, Afro-Caribbean, or African American in the southeast compared to the national average of 9%. All but one survey participant indicated she was not of Hispanic or Latino origin (98.41%). Nearly 45% of the population was over the age of 61 (lower than the national average for women at 57%), and an additional 38.10% was between the ages of 51-60 (similar to the national average for women at 37%).

### ***Quantitative Summary of Findings for Research Question 3***

To address Research Question 3: What are the characteristics of leadership and leadership self-efficacy most frequently exhibited by women presidents?, the researcher used descriptive analysis to analyze the results from the Leadership Self-Efficacy Scale. Because of the small population size, advanced statistical analysis was not feasible.

The characteristics of leadership self-efficacy most frequently exhibited by the survey population included the ability to establish relationships and demonstrate confidence. Respondents demonstrated the highest level of agreement that the statement “Usually, I can establish very good relationship with the people I work with” (Quite True). Two additional statements yielded high levels of agreement among respondents: “I am usually able to understand to whom, within a group, it is better to delegate specific tasks” (Quite True), and “I am confident in my ability to get things done” (Quite True). The first statement was part of the dimension of *Building and managing interpersonal relationships with the group*, while the latter two statements were part of the dimensions of *Choosing effective followers and delegating responsibilities* and *Showing self-awareness and self-confidence*, respectively. These findings reinforce previous research which found that women display a relationship-oriented leadership style comprised of participative decision-making, role modeling, and clearly articulated expectations more frequently and effectively than men (Ballenger, 2010; Bass & Avolio, 1994; BlackChen, 2015; Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Eagly, 2007; Hannum et al., 2015).

The leadership self-efficacy characteristics least frequently exhibited by the survey population were the ability to distribute work between group members, and the ability to make people show appreciation. The two statements about which respondents demonstrated the lowest levels of agreement were “I am able to optimally share out the work between the members of a group to get the best results” (Somewhat True) and “I can usually make the people I work with appreciate me” (Somewhat True). These statements were part of the dimensions of *Choosing*

*effective followers and delegating responsibilities* and *Gaining consensus of group members*, respectively.

#### ***Quantitative Summary of Findings for Research Question 4 and Research Question 4a***

The researcher sought to identify those gender-based barriers women presidents faced at the macro-level, meso-level, and micro-level by analyzing the rankings provided by survey participants. Additionally, the researcher sought to identify those strategies and support structures used by women presidents to overcome gender-based barriers.

Survey participants indicated that all 27 of the barriers were experienced by women presidents during their leadership journey. Those barriers most frequently experienced by women presidents at the macro-level were leadership perceptions, gender stereotypes, and gender unconsciousness; those barriers most frequently experienced at the meso-level were exclusion from informal networks, discrimination, male organizational culture, and salary inequality; and, finally, those barriers most frequently experienced at the micro-level were conscious unconsciousness and communication style constraints. The barriers experienced least frequently by women presidents were control of women's voices (macro-level), two-person career structure and lack of support (meso-level), and psychological glass ceiling (micro-level).

The barriers of leadership perceptions, gender stereotyping, exclusion from informal networks, discrimination, and communication style constraints which were identified by women presidents aligned to those barriers frequently cited in the literature (Ballenger, 2010; Diehl, 2014; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Eagly & Carli, 2007; McKenzie & Halstead, 2014; Northouse, 2016). Additionally, Eagly and Carli (2007) identified the following broad categories of barriers: (a) vestiges of prejudice; (b) resistance to women's leadership; (c) issues of leadership style; (d) demands of family life; and (e) underinvestment in social capital. The barriers identified by women presidents in this study align to these categories of barriers encountered in the leadership labyrinth.

Survey participants identified leadership development programming, mentoring, and professional development as strategies and support structures used by women presidents to overcome gender-based barriers. These findings support previous research which found women engaged in leadership development and mentorship during their leadership journey (Ballenger, 2010; BlackChen, 2015; Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Selzer &

Wallace, 2017; Tessens et al., 2011). Survey participants engaged less frequently with sponsorship and work-life balance to overcome gender-based barriers.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis and Findings**

The phenomenological study gathered data from twelve women who currently serve as presidents of institutions of higher education in the southeast. The titles of the twelve interview participants were President (9), President and CEO (1), or Chancellor (2). All held a PhD or EdD. The women identified as Caucasian, White, or White American (10); Black, Afro-Caribbean, or African-American (1); or Multiple Races (1). Five (41.67%) of the presidents were age 61 or over; another five (41.67%) were 51-60; and the remaining two (16.67%) were 41-50. More than half (7 of 12) have served in their current role for at least six years; three have served between one and five years; and two have served for less than one year. The interview participants held diverse roles immediately prior to their current role as president. These prior roles included President/CEO/Chancellor (3); Other (3); Senior Executive in Business and/or Administration (1); Outside Higher Education (1); Chief Academic Officer or Provost (1); Senior Executive in Student Affairs (1); Dean (1); Dean and VP Academic Affairs (1).

Demographics about the institutions were also collected. These presidents currently serve at public (75%) and private (25%) institutions. More than half (7 of 12; 58.33%) lead Associate-granting institutions, while the remaining lead Bachelor-granting (1 of 12; 8.33%); Master's-granting (2 of 12; 16.67%); and Doctorate-granting (2 of 12; 16.67%). Of the eleven states in the SACSCOC region, seven were represented by the interview participants: Georgia (1), Louisiana (2), Tennessee (1), Texas (4), North Carolina (2), South Carolina (1), Virginia (1).

All participants consented to participate in interviews conducted between November 16 and December 7, 2020. The researcher conducted approximately 723 minutes (12 hours and 3 minutes) of interviews. The average interview length was 60 minutes and 15 seconds; the interviews ranged in duration from 41 minutes and 32 seconds to 97 minutes and 24 seconds. All interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom (n.d.).

### ***Summary of Thematic Coding***

Thematic coding was used by the researcher to identify themes or patterns from the participants' responses first for the interview protocol questions, and then for the corresponding research questions. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), thematic analysis allows the researcher to analyze "the data for specific themes, aggregating information into larger clusters

of ideas and providing details that support the themes” (p. 321). Table 2 identifies the themes and sub-themes which emerged for each research question and the themes and sub-themes which emerged for the corresponding interview questions.

**Table 2.**

***Themes and Sub-themes Identified for Research Questions and Interview Questions***

<b>Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of self-efficacy identified by women university presidents?</b> <b>Research Question 2a: What experiences and sources influenced women presidents’ perceived self-efficacy?</b>		
<b>Research Question Themes and Sub-Themes</b>	<b>Interview Questions</b>	<b>Interview Question Themes and Sub-Themes</b>
Demonstrated performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, and physiological states to produce given attainments	IQ7: Did you aspire to the role of college president? Why or why not?	Delayed aspiration Verbal prompt to pursue leadership Self-awareness
	IQ8: The definition of self-efficacy is “the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura). Describe your personal belief in your capabilities as related to the college presidency.	Humility Developed over time Self-awareness and authenticity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abilities</li> <li>• Achievements</li> </ul>
	IQ9: When faced with an obstacle or adversity in your current role, rank which of the following you primarily draw on to overcome the obstacle?	Performance accomplishments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Past experiences</li> <li>• Trust and confidence</li> </ul>
	IQ9a: Based on these selections, can you provide an example of a specific obstacle or moment of adversity from your leadership journey and how you overcame it by ____ (selection 1)?	Vicarious experiences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quicker decision-making capability</li> <li>• Navigating the unique role of a woman president</li> </ul>
	IQ9b: Based on these selections, can you provide an example a specific obstacle or moment of adversity from your leadership journey and how you overcame it by ____ (selection 2)?	Physiological states: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional connection to mission</li> <li>• Empathetic</li> </ul>
	IQ10: Is there any other notable experience which encapsulates your self-efficacy or	Willingness to tackle difficult situations Voracious life-long learners

	how you faced and overcame a specific obstacle or adversity? If yes, please share that experience.	
<b>Research Question 3:</b> What are the characteristics of leadership and leadership self-efficacy most frequently exhibited by women presidents?		
<b>Research Question Themes and Sub-Themes</b>	<b>Interview Questions</b>	<b>Interview Question Themes and Sub-Themes</b>
Relationship-focused: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Empowering others</li> <li>• Trustworthy</li> </ul>	IQ1: Describe your leadership style as president.	Collaborative leadership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teamwork</li> <li>• Empowering and inspiring others</li> <li>• Communication</li> </ul> Situational leadership
	IQ2: Has your leadership style evolved? If so, elaborate.	Moments of change Personal reflection
Goal-oriented	IQ3: Research indicates transformational leadership as one of the most effective leadership styles. Do you identify as a transformational leader? If yes, please elaborate.	Communication Relationships: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empowering people</li> <li>• Appreciating different perspectives</li> </ul> Trust
<b>Research Question 4:</b> What gender-based barriers do women presidents face most frequently at the macro, meso, and micro-levels?		
<b>Research Question 4a:</b> What strategies and support structures are used to overcome gender-based barriers?		
<b>Research Question Themes and Sub-Themes</b>	<b>Interview Questions</b>	<b>Interview Question Themes and Sub-Themes</b>
Gender-based barriers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Male organizational culture</li> </ul>	IQ4: Rank barriers by level, identifying top three in each level. Once the top three barriers have been identified in each group (macro, meso, micro), ask the following questions related to this list of nine barriers.	Macro-level: gender stereotypes, leadership perceptions, scrutiny  Meso-level: male organizational culture, salary inequality, exclusion from informal networks, unequal standards

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender stereotypes</li> <li>• Work-life conflict</li> <li>• Scrutiny</li> <li>• Leadership Perceptions</li> </ul>		Micro-level: work-life conflict, conscious unconsciousness, personalizing, psychological glass ceiling
	IQ5a: Pick the three barriers which were the greatest obstacles in the leadership journey towards the presidency. Explain the greatest obstacle and how it was overcome.	Male organizational culture Gender stereotypes Work-life conflict Salary inequality
	IQ5b: Pick the three barriers which were the greatest obstacles you faced as president. Explain the greatest obstacle and how it was overcome.	Leadership perceptions Work-life conflict Scrutiny Unequal standards Personalizing
	IQ6: Describe a mentoring relationship which you believe has successfully prepared you for the role.	Varied mentoring practices Encouraging mentoring practices Mentoring of others
	IQ Follow-up: What other supports do you rely on or has contributed to your leadership journey?	Professional development Family and friends
<b>Open-ended Concluding Interview Question</b>		
<b>Research Question Themes and Sub-Themes</b>	<b>Interview Questions</b>	<b>Interview Question Themes and Sub-Themes</b>
	IQ12: Is there any additional information you would like to share as a woman president that will inform this study?	Authenticity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• True to self</li> <li>• Vulnerability</li> </ul> Preparing future leaders

### ***Qualitative Summary of Findings for Research Question 2 and Research Question 2a***

One primary theme emerged for Research Question 2 (What are the perceptions of self-efficacy identified by women university presidents?) and Research Question 2a (What experiences and sources influenced women presidents' perceived self-efficacy?). As the research questions asked about self-efficacy of women presidents, the theme of demonstrated performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, and physiological states to produce given attainments emerged. Bandura (1977) found that self-efficacy is increased most significantly



through performance accomplishment and vicarious experiences; verbal persuasion and physiological states increased self-efficacy, but not as soundly as the first two capabilities.

In this population, six of the participants ranked their top two capabilities as a combination of “do/act” and “observe others” (performance accomplishment and vicarious experiences), five of the participants ranked their top two as a combination of “do/act” and “feel/desire” (performance accomplishment and physiological states), and one ranked her top two as a combination of “observe others” and “feel/desire” (vicarious experiences and physiological states). Thus, for women presidents in higher education institutions, higher levels of self-efficacy are developed through (a) the combination of performance accomplishments and vicarious experiences, or (b) the combination of performance accomplishments and psychological states.

The women presidents in this study had a delayed aspiration to pursue the presidency and were humble in acknowledging their high self-efficacy. This aligns with McCormick, Tanguma, and Lopez-Forment (2002) who found that female student leaders (when compared to male student leaders with comparable experiences) reported lower self-efficacy. Likewise, Bandura (1997) found “women who are assured in their efficacy to make career decisions ... are more willing to pursue nontraditional occupations than those who judge themselves inefficacious” (p. 428). While women serve as presidents in 30% of university institutions, the role is still overwhelming occupied by men. Thus, these women presidents must be highly self-efficacious to pursue this role, even if they do not articulate their efficacy in such terms.

### ***Qualitative Summary of Findings for Research Question 3***

Two primary themes emerged for Research Question 3 (What are the characteristics of leadership and leadership self-efficacy most frequently exhibited by women presidents?). As the research questions asked about leadership of women presidents, the themes of *relationship-focused* and *goal-oriented* emerged. For the *relationship-focused* theme, three sub-themes emerged: (a) collaboration, (b) empowering and inspiring others, and (c) trustworthy. These themes acknowledge the characteristics associated with transformational leadership which, according to the research literature, women more frequently exhibit. Eagly (2007) affirmed that women more frequently utilize a transformational leadership style by

establishing oneself as a role model by gaining followers’ trust and confidence. Such leaders delineate organizations’ goals, develop plans to achieve those goals, and

creatively innovate, even in organizations that are already successful. Transformational leaders mentor and empower their subordinates and encourage them to develop their potential and thus to contribute more effectively to their organizations. (p. 2)

Thus, women presidents in higher education institutions demonstrate the characteristics of transformational leadership by focusing on building relationships through collaboration and empowering others to accomplish established goals.

### ***Qualitative Summary of Findings for Research Question 4 and Research Question 4a***

One primary theme emerged for Research Question 4 (What gender-based barriers do women presidents face most frequently at the macro, meso, and micro-levels?) and one primary theme emerged for Research Question 4a (What strategies and support structures are used to overcome gender-based barriers?). The themes of gender-based barriers include male organizational culture, gender stereotypes, work-life conflict, scrutiny, and leadership perceptions identified by women presidents during their interviews are aligned to the existing literature on the kinds of barriers women leaders experience on their leadership journey (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Thus, women presidents are more likely to experience these specific gender-based barriers on their leadership journey or within their presidency.

The themes of support structures include mentoring, professional development, and family and friends. Mentoring and professional development are overwhelming found to be essential to women's leadership (Ballenger, 2010; Brown, 2005; Tessens et al., 2011). Thus, women presidents are likely to engage and find value in these strategies and support structures on their leadership journey or within their presidency.

## **Major Findings and Conclusions**

This study identified six major research findings resulting from the survey and interview responses.

### **Major Finding 1**

Women presidents in higher education institutions are highly self-efficacious yet aspire to even greater levels of efficacy and professionalism.

### **Conclusion**

Women presidents, through their actions and behaviors, demonstrate they are highly self-efficacious. While the majority of interview participants were hesitant to claim this, they expressed their aspiration to better themselves professionally through a continued pursuit of self-

efficacy. The women presidents interviewed developed their self-efficacy through performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, and physiological states. According to Bandura (1977), performance accomplishments and vicarious experiences yield greater levels of self-efficacy. Thus, women presidents have been able to develop and maintain high levels of self-efficacy because of the frequency with which they engage in these sources of self-efficacy.

### **Major Finding 2**

Women presidents in higher education institutions are authentic, relationship-focused, and goal-oriented.

### **Conclusion**

While women leaders generally, and women presidents specifically, exhibit various leadership characteristics, the participants in this study demonstrated they are authentic, relationship-focused, and goal-oriented. This supports existing literature which found the leadership characteristics of communication, trustworthiness, collaboration, and team-building are highly valued and are more frequently exhibited by women (BlackChen, 2015; Chisholm-Burns, et al., 2017; Eagly, 2007). Based on the results of the Leadership Self-Efficacy Scale, there was high level of agreement among women presidents that they could establish relationships with people at work, delegate specific tasks, and get things done; these statements came from the dimensions of *Building and managing interpersonal relationships with the group* and *Showing self-awareness and self-confidence*. Additionally, the women presidents who were interviewed described their need for authentic leadership in terms of collaboration, empowering others, and trust. Thus, the women presidents in this study led through building relationships and achieving goals.

### **Major Finding 3**

Women presidents in higher education institutions experience a multitude of gender-based barriers on their leadership journeys and in their presidencies.

### **Conclusion**

Women presidents experiences various gender-based barriers at societal, institutional, and individual levels. The interview participants ranked the barriers of *leadership perceptions*, *gender stereotypes*, and *gender unconsciousness* as the most impactful macro-level barriers. The barriers of *exclusion from informal networks*, *discrimination*, *male organizational culture*, and *salary inequality* were ranked as the most impactful meso-level barriers. The barriers of

*conscious unconsciousness, communication style constraints, work-life conflict, and personalizing* as most impactful meso-level barriers.

The interview participants were also asked to rank the most impactful barriers, and then to reflect on those barriers specifically through the lens of (a) their leadership journey, and (b) their current presidency. Those barriers most frequently cited as impactful on the leadership journey were *male organizational culture, gender stereotypes work-life conflict, and salary inequality*. Those barriers most frequently cited as impactful in the presidency were *leadership perceptions, work-life conflict, scrutiny, unequal standards, and personalizing*.

While all women presidents experienced various gender-based barriers, the most common are *leadership perceptions, gender stereotypes, male organizational culture, salary inequality, work-life conflict, and personalizing*. Thus, for the women presidents in this study, the shared experience of encountering gender-based barriers contributes to the existing literature which states that women will experience barriers, obstacles, and adversities throughout their leadership journey (Diehl, 2014; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Carli, 2007; McKenzie & Halstead, 2014; Northouse, 2016).

#### **Major Finding 4**

Mentoring and leadership or professional development programming are essential components of the leadership journey for women presidents in higher education institutions.

#### **Conclusion**

As part of their leadership journey, women presidents participated in mentoring or programming related to leadership or professional development. These opportunities to develop skills and abilities through relationships or formal training are supported by existing research (Ballenger, 2010; BlackChen, 2015; Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Selzer et al., 2017; Tessens et al., 2011). The women presidents in this study actively engaged in mentoring relationships with colleagues, supervisors, or other presidents, and these relationships were frequently cited as essential to their advancement and ability to navigate their leadership journey. Likewise, the women in this study are life-long learners and participated in professional or leadership development programming whenever it was available. Ranging from conferences to institutes, these opportunities were highly valuable to the women presidents in this study. Thus, women leaders should have opportunities to engage in mentoring relationships and programming related to leadership and professional development.

**Major Finding 5**

Misalignment exists between the gender-based barriers and support structures identified by women presidents of higher education institutions.

***Conclusion***

As established in the previous major findings, women presidents of higher education institutions encounter a variety of gender-based barriers at macro, meso, and micro-levels, and engage in various programming and mentoring opportunities. However, these few support strategies do not fully align with the most influential barriers which exist for women leaders in higher education at each of the three levels. There exists an opportunity for support strategies to be categorized into the macro, meso, and micro-levels to better understand which strategies address existing barriers and where gaps or misalignment exists. Further, if higher education administrators think existing support structures are adequate and appropriate, then minimal to no changes will be made; on the other hand, when support strategies are aligned to existing barriers at appropriate levels, then barriers may start to be dismantled for more women. While prior research identified support strategies within organizations (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013), additional research is needed to better understand and align those most influential barriers for women leaders in higher education to appropriate support structures at all three levels.

**Major Finding 6**

Women presidents of higher education institutions are committed to supporting the next generation of leaders.

***Conclusion***

Women presidents are committed to supporting the next generation of leaders because they themselves had been supported during their leadership journey. The women in this study spoke with conviction about supporting and mentoring others as both an obligation and privilege. Brown (2005) found “Women in leadership positions should take the responsibility to serve as mentors and to legitimize mentorship because they have the utmost need and ... stand to gain the most” (p. 660). Likewise, the women in this study were deeply compelled to prepare the next generation of leaders to be successful because of support received on their journey. Thus, women presidents of higher education institutions demonstrate strong resolve in supporting the next generation of leaders.

## Discussion and Summary of Findings

The six major findings of this study encapsulate the characteristics of women presidents in navigating their leadership journey with all its obstacles and accomplishments.

The women presidents in this study are highly efficacious, and they lead and communicate with authenticity. They are keenly aware of relationships with their cabinet, board members, faculty, students, and the community; this awareness enables them to effectively transition their leadership styles to meet the situational needs. Through these relationships, these women presidents build trust and inspire the organization to pursue and advance the stated mission. Further, their ability to foster relationships enabled them to develop and maintain mentoring relationships with colleagues throughout their journey. This essential element of their personal leadership journey has transitioned into their willingness to serve as mentors to others. They now find themselves enthusiastically seeking out individuals in whom they see potential and offering support, guidance, or more formal mentoring opportunities.

These women also have developed a high level of self-efficacy through years of experience facing and overcoming adversity. In many cases, these obstacles came in the form of gender-based barriers. In the face of challenges or new situations, women presidents rely on their past experiences and achievements (performance accomplishments), the experiences of others (vicarious experiences), and their emotional connection to the task at hand (physiological states) to achieve the given attainment. While the women were hesitant to claim high levels of self-efficacy, they demonstrated this along with their commitment to continuously improving and refining their leadership characteristics. It is the culmination of continuously overcoming barriers and engaging in support strategies, many of which are not directly aligned, which has led to women presidents exhibiting high levels of self-efficacy throughout their leadership journey and within their presidencies. Thus, the major findings in this study inform the overarching research question: *What factors contribute to the self-efficacy of women presidents in higher education?*

## Implications for Theory, Leadership and Practice, and Future Research

The major findings and conclusions for this study informed the implications for theory, leadership and practice, and future research.

### *Implications Related to Conceptual and Theoretical Concerns*

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) illustrated how women presidents in higher education institutions utilized the constructs of self-efficacy, transformational leadership, and

gender-based barriers and supports. The findings of this study support the study's conceptual framework for conceptualizing major constructs related to women leadership. Findings from this study have resulted in implications for the theories discussed below.

**Self-efficacy.** Bandura (1977) identified four sources from which to build self-efficacy; of these, he found that performance achievements and vicarious experiences produced higher levels of self-efficacy. While women in this study did identify these two levels as part of their approach to overcoming obstacles, they also relied on psychological states which Bandura had found to be the least effective at increasing self-efficacy. Further research must be dedicated to understanding which sources women generally, and women at various leadership levels within higher education specifically, rely on to build self-efficacy.

**Transformational leadership.** Transformational leadership is the style most frequently ascribed to women leaders. However, in this study, none of the women categorized her leadership style in this term, though they all exhibited characteristics of this style. Further research must be dedicated to understanding and defining how women classify their own leadership style.

**Gender-based barriers.** Gender-based barriers exist at every point of women's leadership journeys. While Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) have provided a three-part characterization of barriers into macro- (global), meso- (institutional), and micro-levels (individual), the original study was not solely on higher education. Thus, a review of the existing literature and perhaps additional research on the barriers experienced by women in higher education can refine the categories. From this exercise, institutions may begin to determine appropriate tactics for eliminating these barriers.

**Support strategies.** Most women presidents engaged in the support strategies of mentorship and leadership or professional development. These strategies tend to occur within the institutional framework. Though less frequently cited, other support strategies exist and could benefit from being categorized into support strategies available at the macro-, meso-, or micro-levels.

### ***Implications Related to Leadership and Practice***

Institutions of higher education, including its boards of directors, executive councils, and accrediting agencies, have a responsibility to evaluate and change cultures which perpetuate gender-based barriers and hinder women's leadership. Specifically, of all gender-based barriers

identified by women presidents, the majority are categorized at the meso-level. Thus, institutions of higher education must evaluate the institutional culture and seek to eliminate gender-based barriers at the macro- and meso-levels where applicable. Institutions which seek to eliminate gender-based barriers will foster a culture of respect and inclusion. Likewise, opportunities for mentorship and leadership or professional development programming must be readily available and encouraged. Whether institutions develop these strategies internally or seek out regional or national opportunities, the focus must be on supporting future and current leaders. Finally, women must be in all rooms where decisions are being made, specifically on boards of directors and hiring committees. If these decision-making bodies continue to exclude women when decisions are made about the most senior leadership positions, then the status quo is likely to remain. By recognizing these implications for leadership and practice, institutions of higher education will have an opportunity to build more representative, inclusive, and effective institutions.

Findings from this study are also relevant to the SACSCOC accrediting agency. Because the participants were women presidents of SACSCOC-accredited institutions, the agency should consider the results and findings as it prepares future policies and guidance for its member institutions. Specifically, because the percentage of women presidents in the SACSCOC region is lower than the national average, the agency has an opportunity to review existing policies and practices which may be contributing to this lower participation.

### ***Implications for Future Research***

This study explored the self-efficacy, gender-based barriers, support structures, and leadership styles of women presidents in the southeast. Future research may benefit from expanding the population of this study as follows. First, because women hold the role of president in approximately 30% of higher education institutions, future research can explore these constructs in women presidents nationally, or within other regions or other regional accrediting agencies. Second, while this study asked participants to identify how long they served as president in their current role, it did not ask how many presidencies the participants had held previously. Additional research could explore these constructs among first-time presidents compared to those with more than one tenure as president. Third, women presidents in this study (and nationally) are predominately Caucasian/White/White American. Future research should explore these constructs among women presidents of other races. Fourth, this study



focused on current women presidents in higher education institutions. This study could be expanded to include women in senior leadership roles who aspire to the role of presidency in order to explore these constructs in senior leaders prior to ascending to the role of president, as well as recently retired women presidents. Finally, while this study focused on women presidents, future research which administers the same survey and interview protocol to male presidents of higher education institutions will provide an opportunity to explore commonalities around leadership and self-efficacy.

### Conclusion

This mixed methods study explored the experiences and perceptions of women presidents in the southeast regarding their self-efficacy, leadership, gender-based barriers, and support strategies. Through an examination of these constructs, this study sought to answer the overarching research question: What factors contribute to the self-efficacy of women presidents in higher education? The supporting research questions explored the experiences of women who have ascended to the role of presidents in higher education institutions in relation to (a) demographics of women presidents, (b) perceived self-efficacy, (c) factors influencing self-efficacy development, (d) characteristics of leadership self-efficacy, (e) gender-based leadership barriers, and (f) lived experiences of women university presidents.

The researcher used quantitative and qualitative research methods to survey and interview women presidents of higher education institutions in the SACSCOC-region. Survey data were collected from 63 participants, and interview data were collected from 12 interviews which explored the lived experiences of women presidents. The major findings of this study indicated women presidents are highly self-efficacious, relationship-focused, and goal-oriented while experiencing various gender-based barriers and support strategies. These findings have several implications for theory, leadership and practice, and future research.

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