



# Advancing Women in Leadership

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*Full Length Research Paper*

## **Navigating the Nexus: Exploring the Intersections of Race and Gender in the Experiences of Black Women Higher Education Administrators at Predominantly White Institutions**

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**Although Black women have established themselves as leaders within colleges and universities, few have advanced to the most senior levels of postsecondary administration, leaving them underrepresented in these roles (Williams et al., 2024). Existing research on Black women at this level has largely focused on the presidency, often overlooking the experiences of those serving in other executive positions (Johnson, 2025). In this phenomenological study, I examined how four Black women in executive positions perceived the influence of their racial and gendered identities on their leadership experiences at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Guided by Black Feminist Thought, in-depth interviews explored how participants navigated their institutions. The analysis revealed participants described instances of stereotyping, exclusion, and challenges to their authority which they addressed through identity management, coalition-building, and active resistance. The findings draw attention to the persistent structural barriers Black women encounter within executive administration and their strength to adapt to institutional environments.**

**Keywords:** Black women; higher education; executive-level administration; predominantly white institutions; phenomenology; Black Feminist Thought

Despite Black women's representation in higher education degree completion, their academic achievements have not translated to equal representation in leadership positions within higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.; Williams et al., 2024). This gap reflects the barriers that continue to shape Black women's leadership pathways in higher education (Harris et al., 2024). Much of the earlier research on women leaders in higher education largely emphasized the barriers faced by White women (Barksdale, 2007; Patitu & Hinton, 2003) and literature on Black leaders in higher education has focused mostly on Black men (Johnson, 2025). This tendency disregards Black women's distinctive position and reinforces the idea that what is true for White women or Black men is also accurate for Black women (Arnold, 2023; Davis & Maldonado, 2015). More recent scholarship has recognized the need to center the intersectional challenges faced by Black women in higher education leadership roles (Johnson, 2023; Pinto et al., 2024; West, 2020; Williams & Castro, 2025). This recognition reflects the reality that multiple social categories interact to shape the leadership experiences for women (Harris et al., 2024), often compounding the difficulties Black women face in higher education administration (Johnson, 2023).

Although progress has been made, Black women remain underrepresented in senior-level leadership within higher

education. They comprise only 5.4% of college presidents (Melidona et al., 2023) and only 6.1% of administrators in senior-level positions (College and University Professional Association for Human Resources [CUPA-HR], 2025), reflecting persistent barriers to advancement (Harris et al., 2024). This underrepresentation is particularly evident at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), where Black women face additional challenges at navigating organizational cultures not designed with them in mind (Johnson, 2025; Thelin, 2019). Given the small number of Black women in senior leadership roles at PWIs (Johnson & Delmas, 2022), it becomes important to understand the barriers they experience and the strategies that sustain their leadership (Williams, 2023).

### **Purpose and Research Question**

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of Black women in executive-level higher education administration at PWIs. Furthering the scholarship on Black women in higher education adds diversity in perspective to the field of educational leadership, especially considering the need to add to the literature that focuses on Black administrators and their experiences at PWIs (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). Literature about Black women in executive-level higher education administration positions has focused on their experiences as presidents (Jack,

2023), student affairs professionals (Cornelius & Mitchell, 2023; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015), and diversity practitioners (Johnson, 2023). Recent scholarship expands this focus by examining Black women in other executive-level roles beyond student affairs, diversity positions, and the presidency (Cook, 2022; Pinto et al., 2024), yet there remains an opportunity to add to the literature about Black women at this level (Johnson, 2025). This research study builds on that body of work by centering the voices of Black women leaders at PWIs. This qualitative study employed phenomenological inquiry to examine these lived experiences in depth. The research was guided by the following question: How do Black women perceive and describe the influence of race and gender on their leadership experiences as executive-level administrators in higher education?

### **Literature Review**

The extension of higher education opportunities to women and Blacks post-Civil War significantly shifted the educational landscape for Black women (Glover, 2012). During the 1870s, Black colleges and universities, later referred to as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), expanded nationwide and offered Black students, including women, a chance at higher education (Harris, 2024). Black women were able to secure teaching and leadership roles within these Black educational institutions; however, PWIs largely remained closed to them (West, 2020). This exclusion persisted until integration policies allowed them access to PWIs (Glover, 2012); though it did not necessarily resolve challenges related to leadership advancement, as Black women continued to face barriers rooted in both race and gender (Johnson, 2025). The history of exclusion and limited access provides context for understanding the contemporary leadership experiences of Black women in higher education.

### **Contemporary Leadership Experiences of Black Women in Higher Education**

Researchers have shown that HBCUs successfully develop Black women leaders with significant representation of HBCU alumni in political leadership roles (Yeboah, 2021). Yet despite this proven leadership capacity, Black women are underrepresented in executive-level roles in higher education administration at PWIs (Johnson & Delmas, 2022; Pinto et al., 2024). This paradox suggests the issue is not Black women's ability to lead but points to circumstances inherent in PWI environments that create unique challenges in their leadership positions. The convergence of race and gender creates a source of tension and double jeopardy for Black women that leads to discrimination based on both aspects of their identity (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Hall et al., 2025). Current research suggests leadership challenges Black women experience are systemic and persist even within HBCU environments.

In their study of Black women working at HBCUs, Williams et al. (2024) found that 100% of participants experienced significant barriers to leadership advancement, including microaggressions, gender oppression, inadequate networking

and mentoring support, and competing work-life demands. Additionally, Lewis (2023) found that Black women HBCU presidents experienced hostile relationships with their university boards that created substantial obstacles to their leadership effectiveness. If such barriers exist even in institutions explicitly designed to be stewards of Black culture (Lewis, 2023) and cultivate ambition and confidence in Black women leaders (Yeboah, 2021), this raises important questions about the challenges Black women face at PWIs. This disparity underscores the need for research that examines Black women's leadership experiences in predominantly White institutional environments. Black women in leadership roles at postsecondary institutions face barriers and issues related to mentoring (Breedon, 2021), networking relationships (Chance, 2022), and the challenges of hypervisibility and invisibility in predominantly White spaces (Johnson, 2025).

### **Mentoring and Networking Relationships**

The presence of mentors is essential to the academic pathways of Black women (Lewis, 2023). Research suggests that the same demographics (i.e. race and gender) in mentoring relationships can be advantageous (Blake-Beard et al., 2011; Thorne et al., 2021). For example, the study conducted by Chambers (2023) described how a Black woman leader benefitted from her relationship with a senior Black woman mentor who validated her experiences with racism, cultivated her leadership skills, and sponsored her involvement in professional associations and national networks. The relationships the participants had advanced their professional and personal development, affirming the impact of Black women mentors on the leadership experiences of other Black women (Chambers, 2023).

At the same time, other studies show that mentors who are not Black or female can also be instrumental to Black women's leadership journeys (Cornelius & Mitchell, 2023; T. Williams, 2023). Given the limited number of Black women mentors, it can be difficult for other Black women to find and establish relationships with those who can understand their experiences and guide their leadership development (Gamble & Turner, 2015). As a result, women are often paired with mentors who do not share their cultural background or fully understand their intersectional experiences, most commonly White men (Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021). Still, Pinto et al. (2024) found that several Black women senior leaders attested to the advantages of cross-race and cross-gender mentoring and credited those relationships as pivotal in their educational and professional trajectories.

Beyond mentoring relationships, the scarcity of Black women in leadership positions creates challenges for networking. As Breedon (2021) found, Black women in senior-level student affairs positions reported isolation and exclusion resulting from their underrepresentation in leadership roles which constrained their ability to access and build professional networks. In a mixed-methods study of 110 Black women higher education professionals, Johnson and Delmas (2022) found that limited networking opportunities often stem from Black women's

position as outsiders within their institutions. This status contributed to their exclusion from university networks and resulted in negative consequences, such as stalled career advancement (Johnson & Delmas, 2022). Similarly, the study carried out by Williams et al. (2025) revealed that first-generation Black women administrators experienced difficulties creating and sustaining networks and often relied on external associations and professional conferences to nurture relationships. However, access to these resources was inequitable and institutional support for such engagement was limited (Williams et al., 2025).

While some scholars note barriers Black women may face in networking, Cornelius and Mitchell's (2023) study of student affairs officers shows networking contributed to how their participants achieved and maintained success (Cornelius and Mitchell, 2023). Their networking approach was strategic and intentional by actively participating in professional organizations, connecting across institutions, and building community with other Black professionals (Cornelius & Mitchell, 2023). Networks serve multiple functions and are useful in coping with unfavorable experiences Black women endure at their institutions (Ojo-Ohikuare, 2022). Professional counterspaces, professional development opportunities designed by and for underrepresented groups, have been documented as being effective networking environments for Black women (West, 2020). These venues give Black women space to validate their oppressive experiences in a supportive environment to address the isolation they experience at predominantly White institutions.

### **Navigating Concurrent Hypervisibility and Invisibility**

Due to the lack of diversity in higher education administration, Black women are extremely visible at PWIs. This underrepresentation causes Black women to stand out prominently in predominantly White spaces and complicates how they are seen and perceived by others (Buchanan & Settles, 2019). Their visibility within majority White workspaces manifests in two contrasting ways: hypervisibility and invisibility. Hypervisibility describes the excessive attention Black women attract in White spaces because they are viewed as markedly different from the majority culture and invisibility occurs when their unique contributions are overlooked (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019).

Researchers have confirmed that Black women in higher education experience these phenomena at the same time (Iheduru-Anderson, 2025; Smith et al., 2020). The hypervisibility/invisibility tension often translates into Black women being characterized as tokens (Cornelius & Mitchell, 2023; Holmes, 2003), individuals who serve as representatives of a specific cultural status or category in environments where they are not members of the dominant group (Kanter, 1977). This tokenized status creates additional burdens and pressures that their White counterparts do not face. For example, Black women are called upon to speak universally on behalf of Black women rather than being recognized as individuals (Cornelius &

Mitchell, 2023). In a study of Black women deans, Lewis-Strickland (2021) found that participants described the expectation to serve as spokespersons for all Black women, making it important for them to manage their sense of purpose and how they were perceived. One participant resisted this expectation and made it clear she represented only herself (Lewis-Strickland, 2021). Beyond this burden, the challenges of tokenism extend to experiences of exclusion that undermine Black women's sense of belonging. Hall and Johnson (2025) found that Black women Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) leaders at PWIs were excluded from the institutional culture and decision-making processes which made it difficult to progress inclusion efforts at their institution.

These external pressures of tokenism can also create internal challenges for Black women leaders who simultaneously confront isolation and increased visibility (Chance, 2022). In Chance's (2022) phenomenological study of Black women in senior leadership positions, a university president described tokenism as "a very isolating experience" (p. 63). Her account illustrates how being the only Black woman in leadership can mean being highly visible yet overlooked. Black women must also balance awareness of their tokenized status with the pressure to downplay their identity differences within the workplace. In response, many Black women in higher education senior leadership roles engage in heightened self-monitoring to manage the visibility dynamics (T. Williams, 2023). This self-monitoring emerges as Black women paying careful attention to their physical presence and professional presentation (B. Williams, 2023). The additional time Black women spend thinking about how they present themselves when engaging with others is a strategy to avoid negative stereotypes and put others at ease. For instance, in the study conducted by Herrera and Williams (2025), one administrator explained "I have to be very careful about not just what I say, but how I say it...because I just don't have that same luxury" (p. 16). This self-management extended to her word choice, tone, and volume to avoid being labeled as an angry Black woman at her PWI. These multifaceted challenges that Black women in higher education leadership positions face can be understood through the conceptual framework of Black Feminist Thought.

### **Conceptual Framework: Placing Black Feminism at the Core**

As bell hooks (2014) explains, "feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (p. xii). Feminism, shaped primarily by White, middle-class women, often ignored how race and class shaped women's lives, which in turn silenced the voices and experiences of women at the intersections of multiple oppressions (hooks, 1982; Zakaria, 2021). At the same time, the Civil Rights movement often centered Black men's experiences (Brewer, 2020; Guy-Sheftall, 1995).

Black Feminist Theory emerged as both a response to and a critique of these racial and gender exclusions. Additionally, it reflected Black women's determination to define empowerment on their own terms (Brewer, 2020; Taylor, 1998). Rooted in the

work of Black women scholars and activists, Black Feminist Theory provides a discourse for understanding how race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect to shape systems of power while also centering the everyday lives of Black women and their ways of knowing (Collins, 1990; Combahee River Collective, 2014; Crenshaw, 1989; Davis, 1983; hooks, 1982, 1984; Walker, 1983). In recent years, scholars have extended the Black feminist tradition by examining how Black women continue to generate knowledge, resist oppression, and build community through digital and cultural spaces (Bailey, 2021; Cooper, 2018; McMillan Cottom, 2019; Steele, 2021).

Black Feminist Thought (BFT), as conceptualized by Patricia Hill Collins (2009), contributes to Black Feminist Theory by emphasizing lived experience and incorporating oppositional practices that challenge systems of domination (Acuff, 2018). While Black Feminist Theory examines intersecting systems of power and calls for action against oppression (Taylor, 1998), Black Feminist Thought expands this focus by showing how Black women construct and validate knowledge through their experiences (Acuff, 2018; Collins, 2009). BFT articulates the link between knowledge and action and positions theory as praxis for empowerment through self-definition and resistance (Collins, 2009).

BFT reveals the complexities of race and gender discrimination, affirming that Black women experience a world starkly different from the world others experience (Collins, 2009). The negotiation and reconciliation of Black women's identities inform their standpoint and encompasses shared ideas and experiences that shape their collective knowledge (Collins, 2009). Core themes of Black women's standpoint include work, controlling images, self-definition, sexual politics, love relationships, motherhood, and activism, all interwoven with the historical struggles and resilience of Black women (Collins, 2009). BFT also resists the oppression Black women face in America as well as the systems and views that rationalize these injustices (Collins, 2009). Significantly, BFT incorporates the concept of the matrix of domination, demonstrating how varying forms of oppressions converge and impact individuals differently (Collins, 2009). This matrix illustrates how power operates through multiple dimensions, reinforcing each other and influencing the experiences and opportunities of Black women (Collins, 2009).

Scholars have used BFT to understand Black women experiences in higher education leadership (Breedon, 2021; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Herrera & Williams, 2025; Quaye et al., 2025; West, 2015). West (2015) used BFT to examine how Black women student affairs professionals at PWIs experienced racialized and gendered marginalization that limited advancement opportunities. Breedon (2021) applied BFT as both a theoretical framework and epistemological stance to explore how seven Black women in senior-level student affairs roles at PWIs navigate interlocking systems of oppression. Similarly, Quaye et al. (2025) used BFT to illustrate how Black women student affairs educators at PWIs

contend with the emotional and professional strain of racism and sexism. BFT's focus on Black women's vantage point, and the diversity of their experiences provides an appropriately broad lens to explore their lives as executive leaders within higher education.

## Methods

Qualitative research provides an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the viewpoints and perspectives of people in relation to a problem (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2016). The research question aimed to explore qualitative factors in behavior and experience of Black women educational leaders. I used transcendental phenomenology for this study. This approach is suitable for examining shared experiences of a phenomenon and describing commonalities as experienced by participants (Creswell, 2014). Transcendental phenomenology focuses on participants' experiences rather than researchers' interpretations, allowing for the collection of individual accounts of their experiences and capturing the essence of their experiences from individual meanings (Moustakas, 1994). I examined the phenomenon of executive-level higher education administration at PWIs as experienced by Black women. Transcendental phenomenology was selected over other qualitative approaches because the study sought to understand the essence of shared lived experience (Creswell, 2014).

## Participants

Research participants were chosen to participate in the study through criterion and snowball sampling (Glesne, 2016; Yin, 2016). Participants were selected if they: (a) self-identified as Black women; (b) previously or currently held executive-level positions such as president, vice president, chief academic officer, or dean for at least one year; and (c) perceived their race and gender influence their leadership experiences. Criterion (c) was essential given the study's research question which specifically examines how Black women perceive and describe intersectional influences on their leadership experiences. The criterion was included to ensure participants could identify and articulate their perceptions to allow the researcher to develop a common understanding and essence of the research focus from the participants' lived experiences. Four Black women participated in the study. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect confidentiality: Angela, Bridget, Claudette, and Dorothy.

Angela grew up in the southern region of the United States. She divulged she first wanted to pursue a career as a law professional. Yet during college she was encouraged to consider a path within higher education. Angela has over a decade of postsecondary education experience, which spans teaching, research, and administration. She held varying staff roles while in graduate school before she worked her way up to administrative positions within student affairs at a predominantly White institution. She served as interim dean before officially being named to that executive-level role and led as dean for several years.

Bridget's career began in corporate America where she worked in a demanding, high-pressure environment. She enjoyed what she was doing, but the feeling of wanting to do something else overcame her. Bridget earned her terminal degree and began her career within higher education as an academic faculty member. She eventually advanced to her current role of a senior associate dean, reporting directly to one of the college deans. She has served in this capacity for a few years.

Claudette grew up in the deep South. She admitted she did not consider a career in higher education when she was pursuing her doctoral degree in the social sciences. Claudette entered academia as an assistant professor and quickly moved up the hierarchy of faculty ranks. After witnessing there were other opportunities available in higher education, she considered administrative positions within her institution. Claudette held several professional positions before being named to her current role as vice president.

Despite growing up in the projects, Dorothy's working-class parents expected her to attend college. She acknowledged always being purposeful in her career trajectory; however, the bigger picture for her journey had not always been clear. Dorothy divulged a career in higher education was not her first choice as her background was in elementary education before she made the leap into pursuing a doctoral program. Dorothy has over 20 years of higher education experience, with her initial introduction to the postsecondary setting as a faculty member. Dorothy taught for several years before transitioning to her first administrative role and has held several executive-level positions, all at PWIs, including her present role as vice president.

### **Data Collection**

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach that aims to explore how knowledge is formed through lived experience (Moustakas, 1994; Stewart & Mickunas, 1974). I followed Moustakas' (1994) approach to conducting transcendental phenomenological research. Transcendental phenomenology, rooted in the work of Edmund Husserl, focuses on describing how individuals perceive and make meaning of their experiences, rather than interpreting or explaining them from an external theoretical perspective (Moustakas, 1994; Thomas, 2023). Although phenomenological approaches have varied over time, they share several core ideas: emphasizing individuals lived experiences, recognizing that these experiences are grounded in human consciousness, setting aside prior assumptions through bracketing, and creating rich descriptive accounts rather than causal explanations of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). The methods and procedures for transcendental phenomenology include epoche, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation.

### **Interview Protocol**

The primary data source was in-depth, qualitative interviews, offering rich descriptions from participants (Moustakas, 1994). Black Feminist Thought informed the interview questions and

protocol for the study. Using a semi-structured approach with open-ended questions, the interviews facilitated understanding of commonalities in experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because of the sensitive nature of the research questions and the importance of witnessing nonverbal cues and other contexts firsthand, interviews were conducted in-person, based on the participant's availability, and at a location of their choice (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interviews for this research study ranged approximately 60 minutes to 3 hours and 45 minutes. Artistic expressions, such as literary sources, were also collected during this phase (van Manen, 1990). Prior to requesting any art, its usefulness (Grbich, 2013) and authenticity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) were assessed. Only Dorothy provided a relevant document, a firsthand account of her spiritual relationship with God that included details related to her experience as an executive-level administrator.

### **Epoche and Researcher Reflexivity**

The initial and most important step prior to phenomenological reduction is the epoche process. Epoche involves suppressing any biases or preconceptions about experiences to allow new knowledge to enter consciousness (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher must bracket out their own knowledge and experiences with the phenomenon to understand from the participants' perspectives and describe their shared experiences (Creswell, 2014). A journal was used to document this reflection throughout data collection and analysis and allowed for a fresh perspective and discovery of new knowledge (Creswell, 2014). As a Black woman who has held leadership roles within a PWI, my positionality significantly influenced the lens through which I conducted this research. Engaging in the epoche process, I actively suppressed my preconceptions and biases to approach the data collection with an open mind. The reflective journal included detailed memos and notes to document my thoughts and reactions, allowing a continuous awareness of my positionality and its potential impact on the study.

### **Data Analysis**

Since phenomenology was the research approach, a phenomenological process of analyzing data from the transcribed interviews was appropriate. Moustakas' (1994) approach to phenomenological research offers systematic steps for analyzing data collected. As part of phenomenological reduction, horizontalization of the data occurred in which statements significant to the research topic, each having equal relevance, were identified (Moustakas, 1994). Next, each statement was reread, and those that were not necessary to understand the participants' experiences and could not be labelled were eliminated if they were not connected to the research topic, were overlapping, or repetitive (Moustakas, 1994).

Labelling refers to the process of assigning descriptive codes to statements that capture the participants' essential meaning in relation to the phenomenon (Maxwell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Coding, a type of categorizing strategy, created descriptions of

what the participants experienced (Maxwell, 2013), as outlined in remaining steps of phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994). I accomplished this through two cycle methods of coding, with the first being initial coding. Initial coding is an open-ended method that allows the researcher to label what they infer from the data (Saldaña, 2021). Initial coding was accomplished by reading each transcript and making notes using the language from the participants or other descriptors that reflected their experiences. After rereading the transcripts and reflecting, I consolidated or relabeled some of the codes to ensure clearer and more expressive labels were identified. A second-cycle method of coding, focused coding, was then used to consolidate the meaning of the initial codes to create appropriate categories and themes (Saldaña, 2021). After comparing the data, I categorized the codes with related meanings and overlapping concepts and then collapsed them into common groupings (Maxwell, 2013). From these groupings, similarities and patterns were identified and clustered to create major themes. What remained were the textural meanings that described what each participant experienced.

Imaginative variation was the next step of data analysis and occurred after the development of textural descriptions. Imaginative variation explores how and under what conditions the participants' experiences occurred. The imaginative variation process systematically explores the possibilities and contexts of the phenomenon to identify what is essential (Moustakas, 1994). Through imaginative variation, possible meanings of the participants' experiences were considered, and the context or setting that detailed the how of what the participants experienced in relation to the phenomenon were uncovered, which reference structural descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). During the synthesis phase, textural and structural descriptions for each participant were integrated to create textural-structural descriptions of their experience as executive-level higher education administrators. The essence, or meaning ascribed to their experience, emerged from the textural and structural narratives to answer the research question. Synthesizing the textural and structural narratives provided understanding about what the participants experienced (textural) and how they experienced it (structural) as executive-level administrators at a PWI.

The literary resource Dorothy offered underwent a similar process of data analysis as the semi-structured interviews. Grbich (2013) described a thematic approach of content analysis that is useful in pinpointing textual patterns from written documents. An inductive approach to analysis was followed, which involved coding any concepts or situations noted during data collection with labels using a combination of words or sentences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Grbich, 2013). The codes from the document were combined with the codes about what the participants experienced (textural) with how they experienced it (structural) found when analyzing the interview transcripts to arrive at general descriptions and theme connections (Creswell, 2014). Including multiple data sources, such as the literary resource, enriched the phenomenological

analysis by providing a more comprehensive understanding of the textural (what was experienced) and structural (how it was experienced) descriptions of Black women's leadership experiences at PWIs. The coding process was also used to analyze the researcher generated documents of interviews and field notes, memos, and journal entries.

### Validity

Member checking provided participants the opportunity to review data collected and any interpretations generated to ensure the truth was documented and articulated correctly (Yin, 2016). Participants were sent the verbatim transcripts after their interview was transcribed and then again after the coding phase of data analysis. Capturing rich descriptions of firsthand perspectives from the participants extended the validity of the study's findings (Maxwell, 2013; Yin, 2016). Additionally, utilizing different data collection methods allowed me to triangulate data sources. This strategy helped to determine the validity of the data collected and strengthened the credibility of the data (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013).

### Results

This research offers meaningful details about the lives of Black women as executive-level higher education leaders at a PWI. Each Black woman had different, yet connected experiences, which revealed the essence of their work as an executive-level leader within higher education. Participants included four executive leaders with diverse backgrounds and career pathways to higher education administration. Table 1 provides a summary of each participants' position and background.

**Table 1**  
*Participants' Position and Background*

| Pseudonym | Executive-level position at PWI | Career Background  |
|-----------|---------------------------------|--|
| Angela    | Dean                            | Over a decade of experience in teaching, research, and administration; moved from staff roles into student affairs administration        |
| Bridget   | Senior Associate Dean           | Several years of higher education experience following a corporate career; shifted from faculty roles into academic administration       |
| Claudette | Vice President                  | Extensive higher education experience beginning as an assistant professor; advanced through faculty ranks into administrative leadership |
| Dorothy   | Vice President                  | More than twenty years of experience in higher education; held faculty roles and multiple executive positions at PWIs                    |

Based on the phenomenological reduction and coding process, four major themes were identified. Codes were first clustered into categories and then consolidated into themes when they

recurred across multiple participants and represented essential elements of their shared lived experience. A code or pattern was considered a theme when it appeared in several participants' narratives and reflected an aspect of the phenomenon. From their distinct perspectives, the Black women described the individual resilience and strategic acumen of Black women in executive-level leadership roles, which reflected the pervasive challenges they face due to their race and gender. The themes that emerged reflect the essence of Black women's leadership experiences as executive-level administrators at PWIs.

### **Just Because I Am Who I Am**

Preserving their personal identity was crucial for the leadership experiences of Angela, Claudette, and Dorothy. Each developed a unique leadership style based on self-awareness. They described situations that tested their sense of self, drawing attention to the constant negotiation between their personal and professional identities.

In one of Dorothy's previous executive-level positions, she described different instances in which her sense of self was being overshadowed by having to occupy somewhat of a subservient role to her supervisor, the institution's charismatic president. In the vein of choosing to stay who she was or at least trying to stay who she was, she endured several years of mistreatment. She disclosed, "I took about as much as I could until my husband said, 'You are disappearing. Who you are, you're becoming invisible.' And I cried and I cried. Cause to me that meant failure." Rather than continue to let her identity dissipate, Dorothy elected to take a year sabbatical and use that time to heal and rediscover her worth. Having braved through situations "detrimental to her", it was expected that the first piece of advice Dorothy would offer to Black women aspiring to roles such as those she's attained would be to "Know who you are. Be true to who you are." She admonished, "Don't flip flop and try to fit into what somebody says." She acknowledged she will have opportunities and opposition "just because I am who I am" as a Black woman administrator at a PWI. She explained further,

It means I have to know who I am in order for me to be able to give back. I can never, ever leave this building and walk on campus and not know who I am. And beyond just the ascribed characteristics, I mean knowing who I am as a person. I experienced that at [name of previous institution] when I lost who I was. I never wanna go back to that again.

Similarly, Angela spoke to adapting to various situations as an administrator, but remaining her authentic self was important to her. She stressed the difference between maintaining your sense of self and changing who you are. Prior to becoming dean, she had always wondered when she would be confronted with the decision to change who she was to stay an executive-level administrator or remain steadfast in her truth. In the last year of Angela's deanship, she had to make that choice. She chose not to change and left that institution after tolerating several years of

adversity. Claudette echoed similar sentiments about adapting her personality and likened herself to a "chameleon". She explained,

I can be flexible and fluid and get along with my colleagues. I can laugh and talk, about a lot of things...But what I try to do is be able to fit into different settings, while also maintaining an important part of who I am. So even though I can be friendly and jovial and kid and laugh and talk, when those issues come up that I have to bring an alternative perspective to, then I'm willing to do that.

### **Playing the Game**

Angela, Bridget, Claudette, and Dorothy all viewed engaging in institutional politics as essential for acquiring power and influence. This strategy helped them navigate and negotiate the political landscape, crucial for achieving work outcomes and maintaining their executive-level positions. Bridget shared she learned quickly higher education was not a meritocracy and expounded, "It's about who has the leverage, who has the power, who has the decision-making rights, right?" She went on to explain engaging in politics "is not an indication of your worth or your value or how committed or uncommitted you are. It's an indication that you want to be successful." Angela felt playing the game was necessary for Black women due to their marginalized status as executive-level higher education leaders within a PWI and having to work harder as a result. She proclaimed, "And I think it's being aware of that as a Black female. And that you do. I'm sorry, I don't care what anyone says, you do have to work. You do....The games and the politics and things like that."

All four participants employed various tactics to accomplish individual or institutional goals, often through political connections and networking. Bridget commented on the social circle aspect of office politics. "The clubbiness that underrepresented minorities see that exists among White people is because they socialize. If you want to receive the benefits of the clubbiness, then you too, must partake of the socialization." Angela, Bridget, and Claudette engaged in relationship-building with others at their institutions to support their career trajectories, with each cultivating these connections in different ways. Claudette shared she spent her time "getting to know people in position of influence." She elaborated, "Schmoozing up to these folks because that's part of it. It's not just what you know, it's the relationship and schmoozing up and validating their thoughts and ideas and making it more than sometimes what it actually is." Dorothy used her influence and network of allies to bypass a previous president's attempts to stall her initiatives. She admitted,

Every initiative that I started, he found something wrong with it...I would get people on board, and even if it didn't come out of my mouth, it would come out of the mouth of somebody else, and it would get received. Then he would find out it was my idea.

Being methodical when articulating their ideas was useful for all participants' when managing the political processes within their PWIs. Claudette mentioned she's "calculated" in her approach to making suggestions and described an experience with her supervisor in one of her previous executive-level roles. She narrated,

I had to make sure he felt validated. Even though there were times I felt like, I didn't feel that he had the knowledge. There were certain things he weren't. But I still had to give him the respect and affirmation he deserved. Because if not, it would've been my kiss of death. To show him up, is my kiss of death...He would come asking me "What do you think?" And I would tell him what I would think. Realizing, I was influencing his thinking, but then I would affirm that "See you already knew, you just needed me to validate it." I would just try, [Laughs] it was almost comical. But I just had to realize that to get to the next step, I needed to be savvy. You have to be savvy.

Bridget observed colleagues using emotional tactics to get what they wanted, but chose to be direct and forthcoming, viewing such behaviors as manipulation. She proclaimed, "Probably my path is a more difficult one because I'm not going to do that." But Bridget would also be deliberate in her opinions. When discussing if another leader should be reappointed to his role within their college, Bridget indicated her evaluation of the individual swayed the dean's decision to hire someone else.

### **They Have to Feel Like I Like Her**

All the participants reported positive experiences with relationship building and mentorships, noting the critical role of supportive networks. Claudette expressed the positive impact of connections on inclusiveness within her institution. She asserted,

Because the thing about being successful as a leader at a PWI, that interpersonal is huge. You can't be so serious. You have to be able to engage people. They have to feel like I like her. Sometimes even when they don't even know a person's knowledge, skills, and abilities, if they like you, it's like they believe you even before you've done anything.

Claudette believed she was afforded an advantage because of her influential relationships and being a Black woman.

They, often times, the majority in administration, they want to have, somebody used this phrase, a favorite son or a favorite daughter. I think I have been privileged in that I have, I am now perceived, and I say now, because you can fall out of favor. But I think right now, I am now perceived as a favorite daughter. And so because of it, I'm able to get certain opportunities.

Dorothy described the personal relationship she has built with her current president and how he has fostered an institutional culture that made her experience a sense of belonging. Dorothy shared,

He's a real person. But he's transparent and open. He doesn't mind crying in front of me. Or saying to me, "Dorothy, can you pray with me right now? I'm worried about—." We've actually prayed together. I know that's not supposed to happen in higher ed, but it—He has a strong faith and so do I....But we talk about, this is kinda telling you about the relationship. We talk about all kinds of things...I have never in my [number] years had someone that I reported to that cared about me like that.

Each participant shared experiences with mentors who provided valuable support, advice, and information, significantly impacting their leadership experiences. Dorothy commented on how transformational mentoring was to her.

I think I probably wouldn't be where I am had I not had people who first saw something in me and took the risk to say something to me...And so for me, the possibilities for mentoring go beyond the cognitive to the area of affect. And affect is what changes hearts.

Dorothy also acknowledged another treasured supervisor who instilled in her the value of reflection and recognizing her strengths and weaknesses. She confessed the insights gained from this mentor were invaluable and life changing. Angela, Bridget, and Dorothy each noted that White men expressed a vested interest in supporting or advancing their careers. Angela recalled this experience when she was named the permanent dean for her institution.

I get called to his [president's] office, me and the dean, and so he looks at me and he says, "I'm going to make you dean." I looked at my boss, and I said, "Where are you going?" He's like, "Oh I'm going to [name of another division]." I'm thinking, "You're too happy about this. Something ain't right." Then I said, "Oh you're going to make me interim again until you hire who you want." He said, "No. I'm going to build your career." He said, "We're going to build it here at [name of institution]."

Claudette shared a heart-to-heart interaction she had with a Black male mentor of hers who offered honest and meaningful advice about one of the executive-level positions she was pursuing.

He said, "Sister, it's not that you can't do the job. He doesn't want you for the job. You're not getting the job." I can remember sitting in his office, literally crying, and I said, "But why? I have the knowledge, the skills, abilities." I said, "In fact I could do the job better than he can." He said, "It's not about what you can do. He doesn't want you."

### **Walk in More Than One World**

Three participants, Angela, Claudette, and Dorothy, acknowledged being the "first" or "only one" at their institution, drawing attention to the disproportionate representation of Black

women in executive-level roles and the stagnant progress in higher education administration. Their experiences reflected intersectional challenges in predominantly White spaces, with most conflicts attributed to their identity as Black women. Angela recalled a colleague's derogatory remark of, "What you going to be the caddy today?" while playing golf. He apologized after her supervisor addressed the inappropriate comment. Bridget mentioned a comment a White woman colleague friend of hers made after she was appointed to her executive-level role, saying "I've always thought, I've always wanted an administrative role. But it must be nice being an African American woman and getting all of these opportunities because of that." Dorothy remembered entertaining at events hosted by her former president and guests would often say to her supervisor "you have a really good African American woman...and they really thought they were being kind."

All participants, except Bridget, were highly conscious of their tone, mannerisms, or appearance to avoid the "angry Black woman" stereotype, often prioritizing others' comfort. Bridget viewed any behavior changes as adopting a work persona explaining it as "behaving appropriately for the place you're working." Angela described being in an executive-level higher education administrative position "meant always being on my Ps and Qs, everything." She stated,

It always meant making sure my shit was together. Everything's fine....Always making sure you're articulate, it's just your whole presence, that when people look at—[name of one of the institution's presidents] told me this and I started thinking about when I walk into a room, I know people see three things. Age, race, and gender. Before I became dean, I'd never thought about it like that and I'm very much conscious of that.

Dorothy practiced acculturation rather than assimilation because it allowed her to "walk in more than one world." However, she found it taxing to constantly monitor her words and actions. She indicated,

I spend a lot of time in my head figuring out how do I say this so that it is understood and received...Lots of time, I leave meetings, and I'm exhausted. Because I've spent a lot of time in my head doing that. If I don't do that, and I just say things, it alienates people. And that isn't good for me. People don't necessarily have to say something to me. I just know it. I look at body language. Facial expressions....I think I see that in the way people respond. They became staccato in how they respond to you because they're fumbling for their words or they drawback. I've seen people cross their legs away from me. I'll say "why did you do that?" And they're like, "What?" "Why did you cross your legs in that direction?" "Oh, I didn't notice." Those kinds of things I pay attention to. Sometimes I'm off base. But because I do it almost without thinking, I kinda see little cues and signs that make me say you need to word

that differently, you need to say that with a different tone.

Angela also reiterated the constant awareness required in her executive-level role and the possible impact. She declared, "You have to—I think, so as a Black female you're always just aware of your tone with people....I think we pick up this attention to stuff like that because we know how people—the angry Black woman." Dorothy also referenced the angry Black woman stereotype when sharing about the perceptions of the colleagues on her team. She explained,

There are men on the home team. It's really funny. They don't quite know what to do with me either. Because when I'm passionate, sometimes it's misunderstood as anger. That happens with Black women when we get passionate. We become the angry Black woman. I very seldom am angry.

Claudette stressed the importance of being keenly aware of her emotions and feelings as a leader and mentioned numerous times she often had to recalibrate when she found herself getting angry in certain situations. She offered, "Because if you don't reframe your reality, you get bitter and angry. And then you become the angry Black woman."

Both Angela and Dorothy experienced moments of inclusion, yet they also felt forgotten and invisible at times. Angela was excluded from important meetings and denied crucial information, initially attributing it to gender before realizing it was about her race. It was not until people that she worked with for a long time began to treat her differently that she began to question the dynamics of her role and her position within the institution. She recalled,

It became about my race, about you got this young Black girl up here telling you, "Y'all are going to do this," and I'm calling you out that y'all having these back room meetings. We would be in president's council underneath this last president and this was the only time I had this issue. I'm like, "Because people havin' back room meetings"...He [president] wouldn't call 'em out at all...I said, "That's fine if you don't want me in these meetings, but don't come, don't act like I'm supposed to know when you're all having these meetings."

Dorothy recalled being dismissed by her president who told her "don't be a whiner," when she questioned why he did not introduce her at an event. The oversight became so evident that others started questioning the president's negligence in acknowledging her. She stated, "This is who I report to. I'm not going to say anything negative. I would say, 'I don't know, I guess he overlooked it in his script.' But it was a pattern."

Each of the four participants detailed conflicts in their roles as executive-level higher education leaders, citing their authority was undermined and they experienced acts of disrespect. Angela described an uncomfortable situation with a colleague and the

institution's president when they met about a project that did not pan out as anticipated. During this meeting, she felt her peer was scolding her. She recalled,

The president doesn't say anything... This man is basically berating me and he's not—and I'm looking at the president and I'm shaking a little bit and I said, "God help me through it." I said, "Don't you ever talk to me like that again." ... He just got huff and puff, and he didn't say sorry or anything. He said, "I have nothing else to say." He leaves, so the president doesn't say anything. I said, "You're going to let him talk to me like that?" He said, "Well he's very upset, about what happened."

Bridget recounted a colleague who also yelled at her over a decision. She advised him to sit down and firmly stated, "You're not going to be in here yelling at me and being disrespectful." Bridget did not attribute the negative treatment she endured in instances such as this to her race and gender, saying, "For me, the lens that I choose to view these people through is, they're just difficult people."

The themes presented in the results reflect the participants' lived experiences as expressed in their own words and perspectives. In the discussion that follows, these themes are examined through the lens of Black Feminist Thought, which provides a conceptual framework for situating the participants' experiences.

## Discussion

### Self-definition and Identity Affirmation

For Angela, Claudette, and Dorothy, their leadership experiences were deeply rooted in self-awareness, enabling them to navigate and challenge the systemic inequities in higher education. This self-defined perspective, a core principle of BFT, empowers Black women to resist and dismantle oppressive structures (Collins, 2009). Among the participants, Dorothy and Claudette offered the clearest examples of this, as their emphasis on knowing who they are shows the importance of a self-defined identity in resisting marginalization and asserting their leadership role. These findings are consistent with the work of Showunmi and Tomlin (2022) which indicated how Black women in leadership must maintain a strong sense of self to counteract systemic oppression. However, this perspective differs from findings in Townsend (2021), where Black women administrators did not feel comfortable presenting their authentic selves, highlighting the challenge of navigating their identities to inform their standpoint (Collins, 2009). As Harris (2024) documented among Black women faculty who carefully manage their classroom presence, these administrators often engaged in strategic performance designed to ease tensions and mitigate negative assumptions tied to their identity. Claudette's strategy of recalibrating herself to avoid projecting racist stereotypes of Black womanhood reflects a broader pattern among the three participants who faced similar pressures to navigate and mitigate intersecting oppressions within the matrix of domination. This approach demonstrates the ongoing negotiation between

personal identity and professional expectations in an environment where racial and gender biases are prevalent. This experience parallels the kinds of identity negotiations Townsend (2021) found among Black women who felt pressure to adjust aspects of their authentic self.

Despite the challenges of operating within a PWI, Angela, Claudette, and Dorothy remained committed to their authentic selves, consistent with BFT's assertion that self-knowledge and self-valuation are essential to counteract negative societal images (Collins, 2009). This discovery aligns with Cook's (2022) work addressing Black women higher education leaders' perception of identity, leadership style, and authenticity in senior roles. Further, Angela, Claudette, and Dorothy's experiences suggest that being surrounded by a culture not their own did not deter them from remaining steadfast in their truths of what being a Black woman executive-level higher education leader meant. They adapted to their minoritized status without assimilating into the majority culture, showcasing versatility and resilience (Chance, 2022). The same self-awareness these participants relied on to maintain their authenticity also informed how they approached institutional politics.

### Strategic Navigation of Institutional Politics

Regardless of their positional authority and perceived power, all the participants still had to employ political tactics to accomplish goals at their institution. Angela's extra effort in workplace politics is consistent with Davis and Maldonado's (2015) assertion that Black women in higher education recognize the persistent inequality and focus on developing strategies to enhance their leadership abilities in bureaucratic institutions. Creating powerful connections was a key tactic reported across participants in advancing personal agendas and inciting institutional change. Dorothy's experience reflected a practice all four participants described, as she relied on allies to champion her ideas and rally buy-in from institutional stakeholders (Lewis, 2023; Lewis-Strickland, 2021). This tactic is akin to forming coalitions, a political strategy that relies on leaders building groupings of individuals with divergent interests to push forward an agenda (Bolman & Deal, 2021). Further, according to BFT, engaging in institutional politics to influence change within social institutions is a form of activism for Black women, with coalitions being integral to their ability to transform and impact policies and procedures from the top-down (Collins, 2009). Through their use of political strategies, Black women can exploit an oppressive circumstance, such as being excluded and undermined, to affect the powerful networks within PWIs in some capacity (Lewis-Flenaugh & Myrick, 2022). All four participants' ability to use relationships and informal networks to support their leadership practice stands in contrast with the work by Mor Barak (2022) and Pinto et al. (2024), who suggest that Black women are isolated from informal networks and often struggle to access the powerful informal relationships that could benefit them professionally. Persuasion and involvement in decision-making conversations were effective across all four participants' attempts to influence change and maintain positive

rapport with colleagues (Lewis, 2023). These strategies reflect BFT's concept of the matrix of domination, where Black women must navigate multiple, intersecting systems of power (Collins, 2009).

### **Community Building and Networking for Solidarity**

Building social capital through professional relationships can provide access to essential information, support resources, and career advancement opportunities (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Each participants' willingness to build connections despite their marginal status highlights the importance of community and networking in their leadership experiences. While Dorothy's relationship with her current president fostered a sense of belonging and feeling valued, Bridget also noted the value of being seen by influential colleagues, and Claudette emphasized the interpersonal aspects of leadership within her institution. Recognizing the importance of relationships in their leadership experiences supports the conclusion that relationship networks are crucial to Black women's careers (Jernigan et al., 2020; Pinto et al., 2024). While Black women may find it challenging to acquire mentors that look like them (Reed, 2023; Smith & Crawford, 2007), they are able to successfully acquire mentors who are instrumental to their professional development and career trajectories (Cook, 2022). All participants described mentorship as influential, though the sources and forms of support varied. From the president dedicated to advancing Angela's career to Dorothy's supervisor who encouraged introspection, these mentors identified the potential within the Black women and offered help, advice, and support to encourage their personal and professional growth (Bertrand Jones & Dufor, 2012; Breeden, 2021). This focus on building supportive networks aligns with BFT, which emphasizes the importance of community and collective empowerment (Collins, 2009). Their experiences were shaped by interactions within their academic communities, and fostered strong, supportive relationships as a form of resistance against the systemic marginalization they faced (Collins, 2009).

### **Resistance and Resilience in the Face of Adversity**

All the participants navigated racial microaggressions, bias, or the effects of hypervisibility and invisibility. The lived experiences as described by the four participants revealed some were rooted in racial microaggressions, deliberate or unintended verbal, behavioral, and environmental circumstances that convey aggressive, offensive, or harmful racial smears and insults to an individual or group (Sue et al., 2007). The microaggressive comments each participant experienced ignored the accomplishments and acumen of them as Black women and contributed to them being devalued and disrespected with their intelligence, expertise, and abilities contested and questioned (Herder, 2021; Holder et al., 2015; Tinglin, 2025).

The bias others had against the study participants is indicative of Black women continuing to face adversity because of their race and gender regardless of the executive-levels of leadership they achieve within higher education (Lewis-Flenaugh & Myrick,

2022). Efforts to dismantle stereotypes and prevent being mislabelled were also motivation for three of the four participants, Angela, Claudette, and Dorothy, to adjust their behavior and tone (Herrera & Williams, 2025). To combat the angry Black woman stereotype, a controlling image that reinforces the oppression of Black womanhood (Collins, 2009), they carefully managed their responses to prevent them from being misconstrued as negative. The restraint the Black women exhibited when engaging with colleagues required them to tread cautiously when interacting with others at their institution and often pulled them away from expressing their authentic selves. This dynamic reflects the years of conditioning Black women endure about how they must navigate predominantly White environments (Harris, 2024). However, BFT asserts Black women can reject images that negatively portray them and resist accepting those images as their reality (Collins, 2009), as demonstrated when Bridget refuted being stereotyped as the angry Black woman because it was not her personality.

Due to the lack of diversity in higher education administration, Angela, Claudette, and Dorothy were extremely visible at their respective PWIs. Hypervisibility results in Black women feeling pressured to act in ways that align with the dominant culture (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). This pressure and mechanism of control (Collins, 2009) often lead to Black women changing their tone and behavior to avoid alienation or to be portrayed negatively (Arnold, 2023; Dickens et al., 2019). Ironically, the increased attention from hypervisibility can also lead to these women being easily ignored and discounted because of their minority status in their workplace, as shared by most participants. While hypervisibility exposes Black women to heightened scrutiny and unrealistic expectations, invisibility diminishes recognition of their contributions, both stemming from experiences of domination and subordination (Collins, 2009). To navigate these circumstances, three of the four Black women in this study responded by accommodating others, identity shifting (Dickens & Chavez, 2018; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003) or policing their behavior (Townsend, 2021; B. Williams, 2023). Angela and Dorothy's willingness to sacrifice their emotional and mental health to conform to others' expectations points to the continued exploitation of Black women's work (Collins, 2009). This finding aligns with other studies where Black women overextended themselves to contest the conditions of their outsider within status (B. Williams, 2023; Herrera & Williams, 2025; Townsend, 2021). Their reactions of being silent or addressing their transgressors, as expressed in the study findings across all four participants, are also forms of activism Black women use to reject and resist oppressive situations. This resistance is essential to their survival (Collins, 2009).

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

The findings from this study have contributed to giving a voice to the Black women who make meaningful contributions within higher education leadership. Further research on Black women as higher education leaders should continue to explore other

social identities they hold such as age and socioeconomic background and how they impact their leadership experiences. Additionally, the experiences of Black women in leadership roles at PWIs creates a cascade effect that extends beyond individual career trajectories to impact the broader Black student experience. For example, the disproportionate number of Black women leaders reduces the presence of advocates who understand the unique physical and psychological impacts Black students endure in predominantly White environments (Harris, 2024). Future studies could explore how the challenges Black women higher education administrators encounter are connected to institutional practices that inadvertently impede Black student success and outcomes.

Given the current dismantling of DEI initiatives in higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2025), institutions must be strategic in how they address issues that Black women face. Safe spaces for Black women leaders to process their experiences can be part of a broader employee wellness initiative that emphasizes stress management and work-life balance. Additionally, with the expected turnover of senior-level leaders in higher education (Klein & Salk, 2013; Melidona et al., 2023), institutions have an opportunity to integrate succession planning (Hoque & Zheng, 2024) with leadership development. Consistent with Wolfe and Freeman's (2013) call for a more comprehensive approach to address the leadership disparity, institutions can strengthen promote from within practices by embedding mentoring and intentional professional growth opportunities, such as shadowing, for Black women in middle-level positions who aspire to ascend to senior leadership roles.

### Conclusion

This research was centered on the voices of Black women in higher education, exploring how they perceive and describe the influence of race and gender on their leadership experiences as executive-level administrators at predominantly White institutions. Leading in these spaces created both challenges and opportunities, requiring them to strategically manage their identities and transform obstacles into leadership advantages. Their narratives revealed how intersecting systems of race and gender shape their realities and demanded constant negotiation of identity, institutional politics, and power dynamics. Black Feminist Thought provided a critical lens for understanding these experiences and showing how Black women lived experiences and standpoint inform their leadership as they navigate intersecting systems of power within predominantly White spaces. These findings hold important implications for institutional leaders and governing bodies as they continue to grapple with representation and equity in leadership. Understanding and addressing the unique challenges Black women face is not merely about inclusion, it is about fundamentally transforming institutional systems and culture to value and support the leadership these women provide.

Note: The participants' names and any other identifying information have been changed to protect their identity.

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