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## The Career Advancement Narratives of Black Women Presidents of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

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The Career Advancement Narratives of Black Women Presidents of  
Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
Educational Administration

by

Tonia W. Horton

B.A. Louisiana State University, 1998  
M.P.A. Louisiana State University, 2004

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Ernest Dorsey and Dorothy Williams. Due to life's circumstances, neither received a high school diploma. This doctorate is for you.

## **Acknowledgements**

The completion of this dissertation would not have been possible without the support of my loving and dedicated husband, Darryck D. Horton, Sr. Your constant support and refusal to allow me to settle for mediocrity helped get me through the tough times. I would also like to acknowledge our children, Tevin, Darryan, and Darryck, Jr. I hope I have made you all proud! As the saying goes "I thought about giving up, then I remembered who was watching."

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## Abstract

The purpose of this narrative study was to chronicle the career advancement journeys of the Black women who have been successful in ascending to the presidency in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Currently, only a small percentage of Black women serve as presidents of HBCUs. More specifically, there is literature suggesting that race and gender discrimination towards Black women is not confined by institution type, and that some of the same issues plaguing Black women in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), exist within HBCUs as well (Bonner, 2001; Gasman, 2007; Kennedy, 2012). Although many studies exist relative to the career advancement experiences of Black women in PWIs, there is a paucity of studies focusing on the experiences of Black women HBCU presidents. In an effort to convey the career advancement stories of Black women who have ascended to the HBCU presidency, narrative methods were used in this study. The author sought to answer the following research question: *What are the storied career advancement experiences of Black women who have risen to the HBCU presidency?* The findings revealed that Black women role models, mentoring and support systems, and a determination to succeed are beneficial to career success. Additionally, the findings indicate that Black women face sexism within HBCUs, PWIs, and within the community. In particular, the findings suggest that there is a Black male patriarchy existing in the HBCU, where few Black women serve in the role of president. Further findings show that there is also a difference in the treatment of Black women HBCU students, versus Black women HBCU leaders. Whereas the former is nurtured, while the latter's competency and qualifications are called into question.

Keywords: HBCU, HBCU presidents, Black women, sexism, patriarchy, Black Feminist

Thought, empowerment

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction**

Statistics show that Black women are obtaining college degrees at growing rates. For example, a comparison of the 2000 and 2015 bachelor's, masters, and doctoral degree attainment rates for Black women show increases of 69%, 126%, and 101% respectively (NCES, 2016). Despite Black women's improvement in educational gains, they still remain underrepresented in executive level positions in both academia and corporate America. For example, in 2016, the labor force participation of Black women was 59.4% (Toossi & Joyner, 2018), yet in 2014 Black women comprised only 5.3% of executive positions in the corporate environment (Beckwith, Carter, & Peters, 2016) and in 2011 comprised 5.8% of executive and administrative level leadership positions in academia (Wilder, Jones, & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013). Furthermore, women of color represent 5% of U.S. college presidents (ACE, 2017) and are oftentimes hired for leadership roles in two-year colleges and what some consider to be less elite four-year colleges (Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009).

To add, Black women are also underrepresented in faculty positions. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, Black women comprise only 3% of the higher education faculty in the United States, while comprising 14% of the total bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees conferred in 2015-16 (NCES, 2017). During the 2015-16 academic year, Black women earned 4% of doctoral degrees conferred in the U.S. (NCES, 2017). This presents a challenge to Black women who seek to advance through the ranks to executive level positions in higher education, as faculty positions are seen as the gateway to such positions (Commodore, Freeman, Gasmen, & Carter, 2016; Holmes, 2004; Jackson & Daniels, 2007).

Subsequently, Black women administrators in the academy face several barriers in their pursuit of career advancement. These barriers include race and gender discrimination, a lack of mentoring opportunities, and the concrete ceiling (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Wright, Taylor, Burrell, & Stewart, 2006). First, race and gender discrimination negatively impacts the career advancement of Black women leaders, where they are often stereotyped as incompetent for being Black and female (Pittman, 2010; Rosette & Livingston, 2012). Second, although a lack of mentoring is problematic for women leaders in general, the lack of guidance and support from a mentor has been known to pose particular problems for Black women leaders where demographic characteristics impact the mentoring relationship (Brown, 2005; Wilson, Valentine, & Pereira, 2002). Third, the concrete ceiling also serves as a barrier that stifles the career ascension of women of color, which limits their leadership opportunities (Catalyst, 2016). To illustrate, while the glass ceiling is often used to describe the career advancement limitations placed on women in the workplace, the concrete ceiling is a term often used to shed light on the struggles that women of color face within their careers (Catalyst, 2016). This concrete ceiling, as the metaphor suggests, is far more difficult to break than glass.

Given this information, Black women encounter struggles that outweigh that of White women, as well as men of all races. As such, Black women face a “double jeopardy” in terms of race and gender discrimination; first being female, and secondly, being of color (Davis, 2016; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Harnois, 2010). Consequently, Waring (2003) and Patton (2009) posited that given the impact of race and gender on Black women, women of color should be studied separately from other demographics. Moreover, the advancement of Black female leaders in higher education is necessary to address the race and gender disparities existing in academia (Bates, 2007). However, Davis and Maldonado (2015) argue that there is minimal research

available on the impact of race and gender on leadership development within the academy, and that some academic institutions fail to provide the support needed for qualified Black women to undertake leadership positions. Even though women in general have increased their representation in administrative positions, for Black women, there is still much underrepresentation in senior level positions (Davis, 2016). Likewise, Alexander-Lee (2014) posited that due to the low number of Black women holding senior level positions in academia, additional research regarding the factors that lead to their career advancement is vital. For instance, in 2016, Black women represented only 6.4% of management positions (e.g. Deans, Vice Presidents, Provosts) in all types of higher education institutions (NCES, 2017). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, management positions include those individuals who “plan, direct, or coordinate student instruction, administration, and services, as well as other research and educational activities, at postsecondary institutions, including universities, colleges, and junior and community colleges” (NCES, 2019, *Education Administration, Postsecondary, 11-9033*).

### **Problem Statement**

The literature suggests that the number of Black women leaders in predominantly White institutions (PWIs) is minute and many often struggle to advance to leadership positions (Cobham & Patton, 2015; Dowdy & Hamilton, 2011; Holmes, Land, & Hinton-Hudson, 2007; Patitu & Hinton, 2003). But on the contrary, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), which were founded with the purpose of educating Black people, lead PWIs in employing Black women in faculty and executive positions (Benjamin, 1997; Provasnik & Shafer, 2004). Additionally, Black women comprise 48% of the total HBCU student population, while Black males comprise 28%, and other races and genders comprise 24% (NCES, 2018).

Although HBCUs employ more Black women in leadership positions than PWIs, and educate more Black female students, there are still forms of discrimination against Black women within HBCUs. For example, some Black women leaders in HBCUs grapple with the same issues as Black women in PWIs, such as gender oppression, a lack of advancement opportunities, pay equity, and a lack of decision making regarding curricular matters (Bonner, 2001; Kennedy, 2012). By the same token, Gasman (2007) asserts that HBCUs have not been receptive to women obtaining executive leadership positions. However, it is important to note that HBCUs have different influences. For instance, some have religious affiliations, some are private, while others are public. In addition, HBCUs prior history of White male board involvement could have negatively impacted Black women's early rise to the presidency (Gasman, 2007). In addition, hooks (2015) argued that "men of all races in America bond on the basis of their common belief that a patriarchal order is the only viable foundation for society" (p. 99). Consequently, Black men are more likely than Black women to assume leadership roles in the workplace (hooks, 2015).

Additionally, even though Black women earn more graduate and undergraduate degrees than Black men (NCES, 2018), Black men still outnumber Black women in the HBCU presidency. To illustrate, a review of HBCU websites show that only 26% of HBCU presidents are Black women, while 73% are Black men. Furthermore, a comparison of the degrees awarded to Black women show that in 2017, these women earned 53%, 50%, and 40% of all bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees conferred at HBCUs respectively. On the contrary, Black men earned 28%, 20%, and 21% respectively of all bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees conferred at HBCUs during the same year (NCES, 2017).

Taken together, the absence of Black women HBCU presidents is problematic, given that HBCUs were created with the purpose of providing a college education to Black people who had been historically barred from attending PWIs. However, the scarcity of Black women HBCU presidents show that discrimination towards Black women is evident within these institutions as well, and that challenges facing Black women are not constrained to PWIs. Furthermore, much is known about the experiences of Black women leaders at PWIs, while little is known about the experiences of this population of leaders employed in HBCUs. More specifically, Black women in HBCUs, like their peers employed in PWIs, have experiences to share (Freeman & Gasman, 2014; Gasman, 2007).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this narrative study was to chronicle the career advancement journeys of the Black women who have been successful in ascending to the presidency in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). This study was guided by Black Feminist Thought and was informed by the following research question: *What are the storied career advancement experiences of Black women who have risen to the HBCU presidency?* Since Black Feminist Thought involves storytelling and empowerment of Black women, this framework, along with narrative approaches, provided an avenue for Black women to tell their stories of how they have overcome roadblocks in their career paths.

Subsequently, few studies exist that highlight the HBCU president (Commodore et al., 2016; Esters & Strayhorn, 2013). By the same token, the lack of studies relative to how Black women become college presidents provides little information regarding these women's career development and challenges on the road to the presidency (Jackson & Harris, 2005). This study sought to highlight Black women's career trajectories through the academic ranks, and ultimately

the college presidency. Subsequently, knowing these women's experiences may assist other Black women who desire to rise through the career ladder.

This area of research is significant for several reasons. For instance, employing Black women in leadership roles can aid institutions in increasing their diversity and inclusion practices (Davis, 2016). Furthermore, Patton (2009) found that the presence of having Black female mentors is desired by some Black female graduate students, who prefer the mentorship of someone who can identify with obstacles they face in academia. Additionally, having Black women academics serving as role models for Black female graduate students provides a sense of reassurance that these students can also achieve professional growth and success (Patton, 2009). In similar fashion, Herdlein, Cali, and Dina (2008) posited that Black women senior leaders at HBCUs are successful in shaping Black women, and making positive contributions to HBCUs.

### **Definition of Terms**

#### **Black**

This term will be used to describe persons of African descent.

#### **Concrete Ceiling**

A metaphorical career barrier placed on women of color in the workplace (Catalyst, 2016). This barrier is referred to as concrete, because it is said to be far more difficult to break than glass (e.g. glass ceiling).

#### **Double-Jeopardy**

A term used to describe the “double course” placed on Black women for being both Black and female (Rosette & Livingston, 2012).

#### **HBCU**

The term HBCU refers to a Historically Black College and University.

**Othermothering**

This term describes how Black women care for children that are not their own (Collins, 2000).

**PWI**

The term PWI refers to a Predominantly White Institution in academia.

**Racial Microaggression**

This term refers to subtle racist undertones directed towards persons of color (Chambers, 2011). “Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007, p. 271).

**Tokenism**

The term tokenism refers to the ways in which institutions employ members of underrepresented groups for the sole purpose of giving the impression that the institution is diverse (Niemann, 2016).



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Introduction**

This chapter highlights the research of various scholars who have studied Black women leaders in higher education, in both PWIs and HBCUs. However, available studies show that research which focuses exclusively on the Black female HBCU president is scarce. To that end, this study seeks to chronicle the career advancement experiences of these understudied women who lead HBCUs. Furthermore, given that research suggests that Black women face many challenges in their careers (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Wright et al., 2006) Black Feminist Thought (BFT) was selected as the theoretical framework which guides this study, as BFT relates to Black women's empowerment over oppressive structures.

### **Literature Review**

Several studies in academia and the corporate sector have been conducted relative to the career advancement experiences of Black women leaders (Beckwith, Carter, Peters, 2016; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Hall, Everett, Hamilton-Mason, 2012; Holmes, 2004). These studies highlight the challenges facing Black women leaders in academia, as well as strategies that have been employed by Black women to overcome barriers. This literature review will be divided into the following sections: a historical overview of Black women in academia, leadership development strategies for Black women, and challenges to career advancement for Black women.

### **Overview of Black People in Higher Education**

The struggle for educational equality has been a troubling process for Black students. It was not until 1826 that the first Black student would earn a college degree in the U.S. (Haynes, 2006). In 1837, the Institute for Colored Youth was formed, which was the first collegiate

institution for Black students in the U.S. (USDOE, 1991). Some years later, in 1890, the second Morrill Act increased college opportunities for Black students. This Act challenged public institutions to provide HBCUs with the same land-grant institution opportunities as the PWIs (Haynes, 2006; USDOE, 1991). Since the days of segregation and the ending of the Civil War, a number of additional policies have been implemented to increase educational attainment opportunities for Black students in higher education. For example, the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965 led to an increase in college opportunities for Black persons (USDOE, 1991). These Acts prohibited racial discrimination and federal funding was withheld from those institutions not adhering to federal guidelines (Holmes, 2004).

Notwithstanding several acts, policies, and Black serving institutions, the road to higher education has not been an easy one for Black people, especially Black women, who have struggled within the walls of academia (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Harnois, 2010; Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009). Likewise, dating back to slavery and extending through the mid-1800s, Black women were prohibited from receiving an education and subjected to domesticated employment roles. In the past, women of all races had limited educational and employment opportunities. However, Black women grappled with issues of race, gender, and class (Holmes, Land, & Hinton-Hudson, 2007). These intersecting factors have for years posed problems for Black women. Even with anti-discrimination laws, Black women continue to struggle against hegemonic practices that interfere with their professional growth (Cobham & Patton, 2015; Dowdy & Hamilton, 2011; Holmes, Land, & Hinton-Hudson, 2007).

### **Black Women in Higher Education**

In light of obstacles, there are Black women who have been integral in paving the academic road for other Black women. For instance, Mary Jane Patterson, an 1862 graduate of

the PWI Oberlin College, was the first Black women to earn a Bachelor's degree in the U.S. (Patton, 2009). In addition, the academic landscape for Black women changed when Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, a Black female educator, became the first Black female HBCU president by founding a school for Black girls in Florida (Hague & Okpala, 2017). Furthermore, Dr. Anna Julia Cooper would become the second Black female president of an HBCU in 1930, when she became president of the now closed Frelinghuysen University (Bates, 2007).

Many decades later in 1987, Dr. Johnetta B. Cole was named the first Black female president of Spelman College (Lefever, 2005), an HBCU founded with the purpose of educating Black women. As it relates to PWIs, Dr. Shirley Ann Jackson would become the first Black woman president of a nationally acclaimed research institution—Rensselaer Polytech Institute (Bates, 2007), a position she has held since 1999. Also breaking barriers in PWIs is Dr. Ruth Simmons, who would make history in 2001 by becoming the first Black women president of an Ivy League institution—Brown University. These pioneering Black women have broken concrete ceilings which has helped pave the way for their successors. However, there is still much underrepresentation in academia among this group.

In addition to some degree of career mobility, Black women have also made strides in degree attainment. To illustrate, the percentage of Black women earning bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees since 1976 has increased by 272%, 365%, and 611% respectively (NCES, 2017). In addition, Black women lead other women of color (Hispanic and American Indian) and Black men in bachelors, masters, and doctoral degree attainment (NCES, 2017). However, Black women lag behind both White women, and White men in bachelors, masters, and doctoral degree attainment, while trailing Asian women in doctoral degrees (NCES, 2017).

While much academic progress has been made, Black women still remain largely absent from executive positions in academia (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Statistics show that the percentage of Black women holding leadership positions in higher education has shown minimal increases over the last two decades. For example, in the Fall 1993 Black women represented 4.5% of executive, administrative, and managerial positions in higher education (NCES, 1996). By the Fall 2015, this percentage rose to 6.2% (NCES, 2016).

Furthermore, Black women are largely centered in low-level teaching roles with low salaries and often without tenure (Gregory, 2001). A review of data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) show that Black women currently represent 3% of all full-time faculty in the U.S., with 2% at the rank of professor, 3% at the rank of associate professor, 4% at the rank of assistant professor, and 5% at the rank of instructor (NCES, 2017). These dismal numbers show a disparity in the percentage of Black women faculty in academia. In addition, many colleges and universities are seeing increases in the diversity of their student enrollment, while on the contrary the diversity of faculty and staff remain stagnant (Espinosa, Turk, Taylor, & Chessman, 2019; Kayes, 2006). However, the presence of persons of color gives students of color, the confidence that they too can achieve academic and professional success (Patitu & Hinton, 2003).

Moreover, the majority of Black women faculty are employed in HBCUs and community colleges (Gregory, 2001). Additionally, challenges facing Black women within both PWIs (Jean-Marie, Williams, & Sherman, 2009) and HBCUs are often overlooked (Bonner, 2001; Kennedy, 2012). Consequently, the literature suggests that the ills of the past (e.g, racism, sexism) continue to plague Black women today, where many hold positions with little to no decision-making authority (Wright, Taylor, Burrell, & Stewart, 2006).

## **Black Women in HBCUs**

Due to racial segregation, Black people were prohibited from attending predominantly White institutions, giving rise to the HBCUs (Davis & Maldonado, 2015), which were created with the sole intent of educating Black people in the U.S. (Gasman & Abiola, 2016; USDOE, 1991). Several different groups are responsible for the development of HBCUs. For example, the HBCU was started by former slaves and churches (Bracey, 2017; Haynes, 2006), the Freedman's Bureau, White abolitionists, and White philanthropists (Anderson, 1997; Gasman, Abiola, & Freeman, 2014; Gasman & Abiola, 2016). The patriarchy that exists within the HBCU is representative of the early influences of White men, who governed these institutions in their early years (Perkins, 2015; Gasman, 2007). Currently, Black men are largely representative of HBCU boards of trustees. While on the other hand, Black women are less represented (Grimes-McGreer, 2013).

Since its inception, the HBCU has been integral in providing higher education opportunities for Black people in the U.S. (Bracey, 2017). Consequently, HBCUs would become the frontrunner for providing higher education to Black students. In fact, HBCUs have produced the majority of Black people who have earned degrees in medical studies (Rodriguez, Lopez, Campbell, & Dutton, 2017). Moreover, HBCUs surpass other institutions in the number of Black students earning bachelor's degrees in math, engineering, science, and technology fields (Gasman, Smith, Ye, & Nguyen, 2017). As such, HBCUs play integral roles in helping Black women graduate with STEM degrees (Lockett, Gasman, & Nguyen, 2018; Perna, Lundy-Wagner, Drezner, Gasman, Yoon, Bose, & Gary, 2009). Thus, HBCUs are viewed by some as the catalyst for Black people to forge post racial discrimination within an institution developed specifically for the academic prosperity of this demographic (Harper, 2007). The HBCU is

especially pivotal in providing an avenue for Black female students to share solidarity among one another and increase self-confidence (Njoku & Patton, 2017). Given that research has shown Black female graduate students welcome the mentoring and guidance of another Black women (Patton, 2009; Williams, Brewley, Reed, White, Davis-Haley, 2005), Black women administrators and faculty within these institutions play key roles in the success of Black female students.

Yet, even within the HBCUs, Black women faced sexism and were largely employed in gender-based roles in positions such as home economics and student affairs areas (Benjamin, 1997). According to Bonner (2001), HBCUs have given little attention to gender disparities, despite the fact that these institutions are integral in educating Black women (Williams & Johnson, 2019). Furthermore, men serve as presidents of the more renowned HBCUs, while women are more likely to hold presidencies in smaller HBCUs with fewer students and fewer employees (Bonner, 2001). A search of HBCU websites reveal that only twenty-six Black women presently serve as presidents of the 101 HBCUs in the United States.

### **Leadership Development Strategies for Black Women**

Leadership skills are key components in the career advancement of Black women in academia (Bates, 2007; Freeman & Gasman, 2014; West, 2017; Hughes, 2004). According to Hughes (2004), Black women have displayed leadership skills such as problem-solving capabilities and the ability to motivate others. Nonetheless, they still remain underrepresented in leadership positions. A number of studies have been conducted highlighting the leadership development of Black women in academia (Cobham & Patton, 2015; Davis, 2016; Freeman & Gasman, 2014; Hague & Okpala, 2017). These studies point to leadership characteristics, family support, and spirituality as important factors in Black women's career advancement.

## **Characteristics of Leader Development**

Several studies found self-efficacy to be a necessary factor in the career development of Black women (Beckwith, Carter, & Peters, 2016; Cobham & Patton, 2015; Davis, 2016; Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015). For instance, Freeman and Gasman (2014) observed Black leaders in administrative positions and concluded that negotiation skills and problem-solving skills are essential for Black leaders. This characteristic is crucial, especially for Black women whom are often challenged with having to prove themselves to colleagues. West (2017) and Cobham and Patton (2015) also argued that Black women must be self-sufficient and determined to acquire professional development, even when faced with adversity. These assertions show that Black women must be resilient in the workplace, in spite of difficulties. While self-efficacy is an important characteristic of Black women's professional growth, the ability to take risks is also integral to their success. For instance, Freeman and Gasmen (2014) and Gamble and Turner (2015) posited that Black leaders must be willing to take risks, as this strategy is essential in order to climb the career ladder.

Beckwith, Carter, and Peters (2016) and Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto (2015) studied Black women in the corporate environment, with the former finding that self-efficacy is integral for Black women to overcome challenges in the workplace, while the latter posited self-care is vital to overcome challenges. There are Black women who have had the concept of self-efficacy instilled within them at a young age by family members who shaped them to show pride in themselves (Davis, 2016). The use of self-efficacy as a leadership development strategy is one that Black women control by exhibiting confidence and a desire to succeed. Moreover, these studies show that Black women hold some degree of responsibility for their own leadership development.

There is also literature suggesting that training programs also aid in Black women's leadership development (Hague & Okpala, 2017; West 2017). To illustrate, Hague and Okpala (2017) suggested that leadership development programs are the bridge to leadership positions, as the women in their study credited leadership training as a major factor in their leadership development. By the same token, West (2017) found that career development programs, designed by and for Black women, helps them overcome challenges in the workplace. These studies highlight the varying skills that can be employed by Black women to aid in their leadership development.

In addition to leadership skills and leadership training, several studies indicate that some Black women leaders credit spirituality and family support to aid in their career advancement (Byrd & Shavers, 2013; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Davis, 2016; Gaetane, 2006; Green & Lewis, 2013; Holder, Jackson, Ponerotto, 2015). For instance, Green and Lewis (2013) and Clayborne and Hamrick (2007) found that Black women administrators of PWIs utilize their faith in God and spirituality as a motivational strategy to help overcome challenges in academia, which helps them navigate their environments. Furthermore, family support has also been linked to the leadership development of Black women in both higher education and corporate environments. To add, Byrd and Shavers (2013), Davis (2016), Davis and Maldonado (2015), and Gaetane (2006) found that Black women leaders credit their families as guiding forces in their leadership ambitions, citing that these relationships helped to instill self-confidence, which aids in their career advancement.

### **Mentoring**

Mentoring is also vital to the career advancement of Black women in academia (Brown, 2005; Gamble & Turner, 2015; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Wallace, Moore, & Curtis, 2004; Tillman,



2010). Both earlier and more recent studies highlight the role of mentoring in Black women's career advancement. Mentoring relationships vary and can be in the form of informal networks that provide Black women faculty with the support needed to navigate the academic environment. These informal networks may include peers and support groups that share information with one another relative to career support. While on the other hand, mentoring relationships can also be formal, whereas the mentor is a superior with more experience who takes the mentee under their tutelage. Mentoring is crucial in the tenure and promotion process for Black women faculty (Patitu & Hinton, 2003). Additionally, in a study to determine the mentoring of women presidents in academia, Brown (2005) found that most of the women in the study were mentored, and attributed the mentoring relationship to their ascension to senior level positions.

Although there is literature suggesting that mentoring is crucial to the career development of Black women in academia, there is some literature suggesting that mentoring was not a factor in Black women's career development. For example, the Black women observed by Crawford and Smith (2005) and Gamble and Turner (2015) did not contribute their success to mentoring. However, all of the women in Crawford and Smith's study felt as though having a mentor would have had a positive impact on their career development, while Gamble and Turner (2015) found that half of the Black women in their study lamented the decision of not having sought the guidance of mentors at the start of their careers.

As it relates to Black women college students, mentoring is also beneficial (Louis, Russell, Jackson, Blanchard, & Louis, 2014; Patton, 2009; Williams & Johnson, 2019). This is evident in several studies that have been conducted relative to mentoring and Black female students and their mentoring preferences. Patton (2009) and Williams, Brewley, Reed, White,

and Davis-Haley (2005) found that Black female students relish the mentorship of other Black women. On the other hand, Louis et al. (2014) and Williams and Johnson (2019) studied the mentoring preferences of Black undergraduates and findings suggest that these women held a more personal relationship with Black faculty, both male and female. The study of Louis et al. (2014) corroborates the findings of an earlier study of Black faculty at PWIs where the majority of Black women faculty in the study had interpersonal relationships with students, where they provided both academic and non-academic guidance (Griffin & Reddick, 2011). Ultimately, Black women faculty credited the support they provided to students of color as a factor in their career achievements (Sulé, 2009). Additionally, these findings suggest that mentoring relationships are not only sought out by Black women administrators and faculty, but by Black women college students as well. However, some Black female student favor other Black women to serve as mentors, but the lack of Black women in leadership positions presents obstacles for these students.

### **Challenges to Career Advancement for Black Women**

The literature suggests that Black women face a myriad of obstacles within academia that hinders their leadership, and ultimately their career advancement (Nichols & Tanskley, 2004; Sesko & Biernet, 2010; Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Davis, 2016). These challenges manifest throughout their daily lives in the higher education environment, and serve as roadblocks for Black women on their path to the HBCU presidency. According to research, such challenges are evident in both the PWI and HBCU environments.

#### **Race and Gender Discrimination**

Several studies have been conducted relative to race and gender discrimination challenges facing Black women in higher education (Chambers, 2011; Cobb-Roberts, 2011;

Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Green & Lewis, 2013; Nichols & Tanskley, 2004; Turner, Gonzales, & Wong, 2011; Wallace, Moore, and Curtis, 2014). These studies show the detrimental impact of such discrimination in Black women's career advancement. In a study to determine the experiences of women of color within PWIs, Turner, Gonzalez and Wong (2011) found that faculty women of color employed in PWIs are faced with challenges such as racial microaggressions, race and gender discrimination, and a lack of respect from students who undermine the authority of women of color. Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) define racial microaggressions as "subtle, verbal or nonverbal insults directed towards people of color" (p. 60). Consequently, Chambers (2011) argued that racial microaggressions, as opposed to weaknesses in navigating the tenure preparation, are responsible for Black women faculty leaving academia. Such racial microaggressions may include instances of black women being told that they are smart for a Black woman. The literature relative to the obstacles of Black women faculty is significant, as faculty positions serve as the pipeline to the college presidency (Commodore, Freeman, Gasman, & Carter, 2016).

Moreover, Black women are faced with race and gender discrimination towards Black women within the academy where they are often ignored and treated as invisible by students within PWIs (Sesko & Biernat, 2010). For instance, Black women faculty (Cobb-Roberts, 2011; Pittman, 2010) and administrators (Green & Lewis, 2013) face discrimination from White male students in PWIs, where their knowledge and expertise is questioned. For instance, research suggests that White male students can become so fixated on a Black female faculty's race and gender that they ignore whether these women are effective in the classroom (Cobb-Roberts, 2011). Moreover, in studies of women of color in PWIs, other means of disrespect towards Black women by White male students include entering their (closed door) offices without knocking

(Pittman, 2010), while some White male and female students address Black women administrators by their first name (Green & Lewis, 2013). Consequently, in a study to determine teaching performance of female college professors, Black women were rated the lowest of both White and non-White female faculty (Smith & Johnson-Bailey, 2011).

In addition to having to prove themselves to students at PWIs, Black women in the academy often have to prove to their colleagues that they are capable of performing their duties and responsibilities (Chang, Welton, Martinez, & Cortez, 2013; Green & Lewis, 2013). These findings mirror that of Kelly, Gayles, and Williams (2017) who found that Black women faculty must often justify their capabilities. The concept of tokenism further disparages the credibility of Black women, as they are at times viewed as token hires that are unqualified for the positions they hold (Lewis, 2016). Furthermore, in a study outside of academia, Hall, Everett, and Hamilton-Mason (2012) found that the women in their study faced “intragroup” racism from other Black women and Black men in the workplace, with the former claiming that a participant’s promotion was received solely based on her race, while the latter deemed Black women as too aggressive. These studies show that an environment where discrimination comes from nearly every facet of the workplace is a major obstacle for Black women.

As such, there are scholars who argued that being Black and female poses a double jeopardy for Black women, where they are deemed less effective leaders and face discrimination in the workplace more often than Black men, White men, and White women (Davis & Maldonado, 2015, Nichols & Tanskley, 2004; Rosette and Livingston, 2012). Moreover, Lewis (2016) found that even though Black men are also marginalized, they are still more likely to have more access to supportive networks than Black women. As a result, Black women believed that their race and gender had adverse effects on their careers, which led to feelings of isolation,

marginalization and invisibility (Davis, 2016). Coupled with isolation, marginalization, and invisibility, Black women in academia are also stymied by a lack of resources in the workplace. This is evident in a study by Clayborne and Hamrick (2007), where results show that Black women in PWIs had minimal access to resources that would aid in their career advancement. In contrast to the aforementioned studies, Holmes (2004) conducted a study relative to both Black male and female college presidents to determine how each has experienced issues associated with race and gender in their careers. Contrary to the aforementioned studies, Holmes found that the participants in her study did not view race as an obstacle in their careers. These contrasting findings warrant additional research relative to the impact of race and gender on career ascension.

### **Challenges in HBCUs**

According to the literature, there are Black women leaders in HBCUs facing some of the same discriminations as Black women in PWIs. These challenges include gender oppression, a lack of advancement opportunities, and a lack of decision-making authority (Bonner, 2001; Kennedy, 2012). For instance, Jean-Marie (2006) and Jean-Marie, Williams, and Sherman (2009) conducted studies of Black women HBCU administrators relative to race and gender, and leadership development. They found that Black women face discrimination from White men, White women, and Black men in both HBCUs and PWIs. Moreover, McDowell and Carter-Francique (2017) found that the Black women in their study were not well received in both PWIs and HBCUs. These findings suggest that race and gender discrimination towards Black women are not confined by institution type (Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009).

In addition, Jean-Marie, Williams, and Sherman (2009) found that gender discrimination exists within HBCUs where men earned greater salaries and had access to greater resources than

Black women. This is particularly disparaging, since on average, HBCU salaries are normally lower than that of PWIs (Renzulli, Grant, & Kathuria, 2006). Moreover, there is literature suggesting that taking on a motherly role for students in HBCUs adds increased responsibility for Black women. This concept is referred to as othermothering. According to Collins (2000), othermothering involves the ways in which Black women provide academic and non-academic mentoring and guidance to Black students. Mawhinney (2011) argued that the institutional expectations for faculty in HBCUs was overwhelming at times due to othermothering relationships with students. But on the contrary, other studies paint a more promising perspective of the concept of othermothering. For instance, Guiffrida (2005) and Hirt, Amelink, McFeeders, and Strayhorn (2008) found that there are Black women who welcome the idea of othermothering relationships, and dedicate themselves to helping students achieve their personal and professional goals. Furthermore, othermothering at HBCUs forges bonds between students and administrators, in addition to aiding in student attrition (Hirt et al., 2008).

### **Lack of Mentoring**

A lack of mentoring is also a challenge facing Black women in academia (Brown, 2005; Carapinha, Ortiz-Walters, McCracken, Hill, & Reede 2016; Crawford and Smith, 2005; Simon, Perry, & Roff, 2006; Holmes, Land, & Hinton-Hudson, 2007; Cobham & Patton, 2015; Stanley, 2006). Mentoring is vital in providing support to Black female students (Patton, 2009), faculty (Davis, Chaney, Edwards, Thompson-Rogers, & Gines, 2012), and presidents (Commodore et al., 2016). The traditional approach to mentoring, as defined by Ensher, Thomas, and Murphy (2001), is “one of a network of individuals with equal or greater experience than the protégé, who can be a positive role model and provide emotional and career support” (p. 421). Aside from

traditional mentoring, there is also peer-mentoring, where colleagues assume a non-traditional role as mentor (Henderson, Hunter, & Hildreth, 2010).

Some Black faculty are in favor of the traditional mentoring approach, where the mentor is someone of power and authority that assists the mentee, while others favor peer mentoring support, where the relationship between the individuals involved is mutually beneficial (Commodore et al., 2016). Henderson et al., (2010) suggests that peer mentoring is an important component of career advancement for Black women, as it serves as a means of helping these women cope with race and gender discrimination. Furthermore, peer mentoring opens the door to a more supportive environment where Black women can build relationships with other persons of color who are facing discrimination (Henderson et al., 2010). However, both traditional and peer-mentoring relationships are at times difficult for Black women in academia, since they are oftentimes stereotyped as incompetent and unworthy of their positions. As a result, these stereotypes at times interfere with Black women's ability to establish mentoring relationships with persons of a different race (Daniel, 2009).

For example, Brown (2005) asserted that limited mentoring opportunities exist for women of color, and demographic characteristics can impact the mentor-mentee relationship. By the same token, the findings of Carapinha, Oritz-Walters, McCracken, Hill, and Reede (2016), Gamble and Turner (2015), and Wilson, Valentine, and Pereira (2002) indicate that some Black women faculty favored mentors of the same race and gender. However, this is problematic for Black women, due to the limited number of Black faculty available to serve as mentors in academia (NCES, 2016). In addition, even within HBCUs, where the demographic of Black women faculty is greater, barriers for mentoring Black women faculty still exist (Bonner, 2001). Ultimately, the lack of sufficient mentoring for some Black women has been known to

negatively impact their career mobility (Zambrana, Ray, Espino, Castro, Cohen, & Eliason, 2015). Consequently, the paucity of mentoring opportunities has led some Black women to seek mentoring networks outside of their departments, due to limited opportunities for support within their units (Chang, Welton, Martinez, & Cortez; 2013; Wallace, Moore, & Curtis, 2014).

In contrast to the aforementioned studies, other studies found that Black women have had positive experiences with mentors of a different race and gender, and thus have no preference either way (Gardner, Barret, & Pearson, 2014; Cobham & Patton, 2015). To add, Stanley and Lincoln (2005) argued that cross-race mentorships can help to increase an institutions' diversity and inclusiveness. These varying mentoring perspectives warrant further exploration into cross-race and cross-gender mentoring preferences of Black women leaders in academia.

### **Literature Review Summary**

The aforementioned studies show that there is an abundance of literature focusing on career advancement limitations on Black women faculty and executives in PWIs, while minimal studies exist relative to this demographic within HBCUs. Furthermore, studies relative to the HBCU president have been largely omitted from academic research (Commodore et al., 2016). Moreover there is a dearth of studies on Black women presidents of HBCUs. Consequently, Gasman (2007) and Freeman & Gasman, (2014) argue that Black women employed in HBCUs also have experiences to share. This study sought to fill gaps in existing literature by sharing the narratives of those Black women who have been successful in breaking the concrete ceiling to ascended to the HBCU presidency.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The framework that guides this study is Black Feminist Thought. Developed by Patricia Hill Collins (2000) as a critical social theory, Black Feminist Thought seeks to empower Black



women faced with oppression and injustices, and to challenge dominant ideologies “designed to keep African-American women in an assigned, subordinate place” (Collins, 2000, p. 5).

Moreover, Black feminism puts into perspective how race, gender, and class impact Black women (Guy-Sheftall & Ikerionwu, 1983). In addition to Collins, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Kimberle Crenshaw, and bell hooks, have also applied Black Feminist Theory to their studies and have made contributions to the field (Crenshaw, 1991; Guy-Sheftall, 1986; hooks, 2015). These, and other Black women in the field conceptualize the ways in which being Black and female places limitations on Black women (Dixson & Dingus, 2008).

Black Feminist Thought was conceptualized out of Black women’s exclusion from both the Feminist Movement and the Civil Rights Movement (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2015). As such, Collins argued that adding the term “Black” to feminism, helps to dispel any notion that the Feminist Movement is committed to the advancement of Black women. Moreover, the White women of the heavily segregated Women’s Movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were not receptive of Black women joining their ranks (hooks, 2015). In more recent years, Black women’s involvement within the Women’s Movement was short lived, as they believed their presence in the movement was not to engender Black women’s rights, but instead to serve as tokens within a movement designed to increase the rights of White women (davenport, 2015).

In addition, the experiences of Black women have been historically disregarded by White male patriarchy as well (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2015). However, Black Feminist Thought helps to understand White male and female dominance over Black women, including dominance by Black men. For instance, within the Civil Rights Movement, Black women were subjugated by Black men to perform subservient domesticated roles, such as child rearing and homemaking, with no voice in political matters (hooks, 2015). Moreover, a Black feminist group referred to as

the Combahee River Collective argued that there is a reluctance on the part of Black men to accept Black feminism and end their oppressive dominance over Black women (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015). Black Feminist Thought counters this dominance, and acts a platform to bring the experiences of Black women to the forefront (Collins, 2000).

Prior to the development of Black Feminist Thought, Sojourner Truth spoke out against the oppressive treatment of Black women through a speech credited to her titled “Aint I A Woman?” The speech, which was given at the Women’s Rights Convention in 1851, painted a picture of the invisibility of Black women, while White women were deemed superior and worthy of attention. Subsequently, hooks (2015) argued that the sexist victimization of Black women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century far exceeded that of any other race of women in the United States. As such, race and gender work in tandem to create unique experiences for Black women (Collins, 2000). Given these unique experiences, Black Feminist Thought serves as a means of understanding struggles facing this marginalized group.

Furthermore, due to the impact of race and gender on Black women, some scholars suggest they should be studied separately from other demographics (Patton, 2009). Moreover, Collins (2000) argued that Black women grapple with race, sex, and class oppressions, which has been likened to a “triple jeopardy” that causes challenges that outweigh that of Black men and White women. For example, Clarke (2015) argued that Black women receive “minimal access to the crumbs thrown at Black men and white women” (p. 134).

There are other critical social theories that could have been used to frame this study, such as Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Intersectionality. For instance, both theories focus on the impact of race and gender on marginalized groups. However, the author chose BFT as it focuses exclusively on understanding how Black women emancipate and empower themselves from

oppressive practices. Lastly, Feminist Theory was not indicative of this study, as it focuses primarily on the struggles of White women.

### **Components of Black Feminist Thought**

Black Feminist Thought consists of four components, which give voice to Black women. These components seek to dispel negative stereotypes by empowering Black women to tell their own stories. According to Collins, (1990) the components are as follows:

- Afro-American women's self-definition and self-valuation;
- The interlocking nature of oppression;
- Intellectual thought and political activism;
- The importance of Afro-American women's culture;

These themes allow for a greater understanding of how race and gender impact the career advancement of Black women to the HBCU presidency. The theme of self-definition and self-valuation encompasses how Black women view themselves. Self-definition refers to how Black women denounce stereotypes leveled against them (Collins, 1986), while self-valuation refers to the notion of how Black women value their images (Collins, 1986). For years, Black women have been stereotyped as promiscuous, mummies, and welfare seekers (Collins, 2000). The mammy stereotype dates back to slavery, where Black women were subjected to caring for their owner's children and household. Today, these stereotypes have manifested into the professional environment, where the "angry Black woman" stereotype is prevalent.

To add, those in positions of power often advance these stereotypical perceptions of Black women. Collins (2000) argued, "these controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (p. 86). Moreover, for centuries White people and in some instances,

Black people, have stigmatized Black women as having no sexual boundaries (hooks, 2015). For instance, in the past, Black women were stereotyped as jezebels. I recognize that today, terms such as “THOT” and “hood rat” are used to label Black women as sexually promiscuous. In light of such stereotypes, Black Feminist Thought suggests that Black women have instilled within them the drive to forge past stereotypical characterizations, and to construct their own identities in opposition to race, gender, and class oppressions (Collins, 2000).

In the mid-1800s, Black feminist Maria Stewart challenged Black women to break the cycle of gender oppression and gender roles by encouraging Black women to earn a college education and undertake leadership positions (Collins, 2000). Furthermore, hooks (2015) argued that Black women who empower one another and refuse to be oppressed helps pave the way for other Black women to break barriers. This theme is relevant to this study as it sheds light on those Black women who have countered stereotypes and have been successful in ascending to the HBCU presidency. Subsequently, learning from these women’s experiences may serve as a guiding point for other Black women facing similar obstacles.

The theme of the interlocking nature of oppression examines the relationship between race, gender, and oppression (Collins, 1986). For decades, Black women have held low-level positions in academia, and have been viewed as what Collins refers to as the “outsider within.” This outsider status marginalizes Black women and disempowers them to positions of little authority. Consequently, Guy-Sheftall (1986) posited that the oppression of Black women, based on race and gender, leads to struggles that are different from that of White females and Black males. According to hooks (2015), gender oppression is no less oppressive than race oppression for Black women. While both Black men and women fought for equality during and after slavery, Black men view Black women as submissive, and assume a dominant role over them

(hooks, 2015). Subsequently, gender oppression within the HBCU presidency was analyzed from a Black Feminist Thought perspective, as the vast majority of HBCU presidents are Black men.

The theme of intellectual thought and political activism refers to how Black women use both their intellect and activism as a means of rejecting oppressive practices (Collins, 1990). Collins argued that Black women's intellectualism is a form of activism. To emphasize, having self-determination and a positive perspective aids Black women in empowering themselves over negativity in the workplace. In addition, Black women exercise forms of political activism to counter discriminatory structures existing within institutions. This form of activism involves coalition building with others seeking to eliminate institutional barriers. The current study seeks to examine the notion of coalition building among Black women within the HBCU.

The theme of the importance of Afro-American women's culture emphasizes the need for Black women to reaffirm their culture (Collins, 1990). This cultural reaffirmation can be found within the bond that Black women and their daughters' share, one where the mother passes on tools of empowerment to her daughter. Another salient component of the reaffirmation of a Black female's culture is their relationship with other Black women. This relationship is one where Black women encourage one another to persevere in spite of challenges. Additionally, Collins (2000) suggested that through their life experiences, Black women are dedicated to preserving Black sisterhood and the well-being of other Black persons in society. This theme relates to this study as it solidifies the need for Black women to counter oppressive practices and uplift and empower one another.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century era, Black feminist Maria Stewart received backlash from Black men because of her platform to empower Black women beyond subservient roles. Furthermore, Stewart brought attention to the Black communities' denouncement of White peoples'

discrimination against Black people, while on the other hand, the Black community failed to acknowledge the discrimination towards Black women within the Black community (Collins, 2000). Likewise, Collins (2000) argued that while White organizations perpetuate stereotypical images of Black women, similar stereotypical images within Black organizations must not be overlooked, as HBCUs contribute to the stereotypical subservient images of Black women. Subsequently, this study sought to understand this notion of discrimination of Black women within the HBCU community, by describing the underrepresentation of Black women HBCU presidents.

Academia has become integral to the development of Black Feminism literature. Currently several studies exist relative to race and gender discrimination of Black women within predominantly White institutions (Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Holmes, Land, & Hinton-Hudson, 2007; Dowdy & Hamilton, 2011; Cobham & Patton, 2015), while there is a paucity of studies relative to race and gender discrimination against Black women within HBCUs. Additionally, Black Feminist Thought aligned with this study's purpose of describing how Black women have been successful in breaking the concrete ceiling to ascend to the HBCU presidency, despite race and gender oppressions. As such, in utilizing Black Feminist Thought, I explored gender oppressions within Black women's career ascension in the HBCU. Furthermore, I described how Black women have empowered themselves to break the concrete ceiling within the HBCU.

Although Black Feminist Thought has its strengths, there are critics who have categorized the theory as non-scholarly (Smith, 1978; Collins, 1990). For instance, the works of Black women have at times been ignored by mainstream scholars (McDowell, 1980) and has been labeled as only being applicable to a small population. In spite of the criticisms, Black Feminist Thought continues to be a widely used theoretical framework for understanding Black

women's experiences on oppression and empowerment. A number of recent studies have taken a Black Feminist Thought approach to analyze the experiences of Black women higher education leaders. For instance, Counts (2012) employed Black Feminist Thought in a study to examine the experiences of Black women executive leaders in two-year colleges. Similarly, Terry (2013) employed Black Feminist Thought to examine the impact of race and gender on Black women senior leaders in community and technical colleges. More recently, West (2017) utilized Black Feminist Thought in a study to address the need for professional development programs for Black women in academia.

## CHAPTER 3

The purpose of this narrative study was to chronicle the career advancement journeys of the Black women who have been successful in ascending to the presidency in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). This study was guided by the following research question: (1) *What are the storied career advancement experiences of Black women who have risen to the HBCU presidency?* This chapter is divided into the following sections: rationale for the use of qualitative and narrative methods, participant selection, data collection, data analysis, and lastly, ethical considerations.

### Research Design

In order to gain an understanding of Black women's experiences, this study was conducted using qualitative research methods. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research lends itself to interpretation and places the researcher in the participant's natural setting. Merriam & Tisdell (2016) define qualitative research as the ways in which researchers seek to understand how participants interpret and apply meaning to their experiences and how they "construct their worlds" (p. 15). Moreover, qualitative research is inductive, which means that there is no hypothesis testing, rather theories are derived through data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, the use of open-ended interview questions, which is reflective of qualitative research, allowed me the opportunity to collect additional information and ask follow up questions when necessary. The use of qualitative methods in this study was due to my intent to gain a greater understanding of the participants' career advancement narratives through their life stories.

In addition, qualitative methods are most appropriate to conduct this study, as qualitative research entails meaning and understanding, and the researcher as the main source of data



collection and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). More specifically, in order for me to hear the stories of my participants, I collected data in the form of open-ended interview techniques, as opposed to quantitative methods of data collection. Furthermore, I am a Black female collecting the stories of other Black women. I practiced restorying of their narratives in an effort to share their voices through research; which is consistent with Black Feminist Thought. Furthermore, “learning and absorbing from other Black women is part of the process of oral narrative research as carried out by black women” (Vaz, 1997, p. 3).

### **Narrative Research**

As defined by, Clandinin (2013), narrative inquiry “is an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experiences as a source of important knowledge and understanding” (p. 17). In addition, narrative research affords the researcher the opportunity to collect stories of how others make meaning of their experiences (Polkinghorne, 1988). Savin-Baden and Niekerk (2007) posited that narrative methods have several advantages, which include: collecting stories from individuals, producing thick descriptions, and meaning derived from participants’ stories.

In an effort to gain insight into how Black women have empowered themselves to advance throughout their careers, the narrative approach was used to collect their stories. As it relates to empowerment of women of color in academia, Evans-Winters and Esposito (2018) argued that:

Our narratives can never be separated from our bodies, histories, or politics. Storytelling in this way does not become separated from our embodiment, our histories, and our politics. With each narrative we write, we reclaim power. The telling of stories that were previously silenced becomes an act of survival in an academic space that conflicts with

our ways of knowing—a space that tries to separate intellect and embodiment. We tell stories that were previously silenced. (p. 866).

As such, narrative methods were chosen over other methods because of its storytelling component. Subsequently, the “stories it records, offers research a way to highlight those understandings often not revealed by traditional modes of inquiry” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 14). In narrative inquiry, the researcher listens to the participants’ stories and retells the stories in order to understand the participants’ lived experiences (Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007). These stories are conveyed using methods that includes autobiographies, oral histories, and interviews (Earthy & Cronin, 2008).

Furthermore, narrative methods involve storytelling (Reissman, 2008), placing events in chronological order (Creswell, 2013) and living and re-living (Clandinin, 2013). Thus, a narrative approach was best suited in order to capture the career advancement stories of the participants, beginning with their early life history, their college years (undergraduate and graduate) and extending through their careers and ultimately their roles as presidents of HBCUs.

Because restorying is vital to narrative research, I utilized this method to convey the participants’ stories. This process involves analyzing and then organizing stories in the order in which they occurred (Creswell, 2013). Moreover, since participant may not present their stories chronologically, the researcher must restory the data so that stories flow from beginning to end. This co-construction of knowledge granted me a greater perspective into making meaning of and interpreting participant experiences.

Further rationale for the use of narrative methods is that, oftentimes, persons other than Black women write about them. However, Black Feminist Thought, combined with narrative research, serves as an avenue that allows Black women to offer counter narratives to the stories

written about them by mainstream society. Additionally, Collins (2000) argued that storytelling is synonymous with Black Feminist Thought.

Moreover, the participants' life stories painted a historical picture of how these women have empowered themselves to overcome struggles at different stages in their lifetimes, and how these experiences may have benefited them in their current positions. As such, counter narratives are used by researchers as a means of providing a voice to marginalized and oppressed groups, and as a way to challenge stereotypical narratives held against oppressed groups by the hegemonic class (Ladson-Billings, & Tate, 1995). Furthermore, Solorzano and Yosso (2002) argued that counter-storytelling is necessary in order for persons of color to challenge dominant ideologies. Subsequently, counter narratives will complement the storytelling nature of BFT. Thus, through these methods, the stories of Black women HBCU presidents were told in their own words. In addition, the stories were written by me, a Black female, who shares identity with my participants. Collins (1989) stated that:

In terms of Black women's relationships with one another then, African-American women may indeed find it easier than others to recognize connectedness as a primary way of knowing, simply because they are encouraged to do so by Black women's tradition of sisterhood (p. 763).

In addition, I sought to understand how Black women HBCU presidents make meaning of their empowering positions, as Collins (1990) posited, "Black women's experiences and ideas lies at the core of Black feminist thought" (p. 16). Subsequently, the use of Black Feminist Thought combined with narrative methods allows Black women the opportunity to tell their stories of breaking the concrete ceiling. Thus, this study seeks to provide Black women with a voice of which to tell their stories of empowerment.

## **Participant Selection**

I employed purposeful sampling in order to select participants for the study. Purposeful sampling involves the selection of a group of specific individuals of which to gather the most information relative to the study (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Since I sought a certain demographic, purposeful sampling was the best suited sampling technique. This study included three Black women, all of whom are current presidents of HBCUs. While there are different types of narratives, with varying numbers of participants, the use of three participants is consistent with the notion that “narrative research is best for capturing the detailed stories of life experiences of a single individual or the lives of a small number of individuals” (Creswell, 2013, p. 74). Furthermore, given this study’s limited sample size, the selection of three participants was appropriate.

The presidency position was chosen as it is the highest position within the HBCU. Since so few Black women hold this position, this may provide for a deeper understanding of Black women’s career advancement stories throughout their ascension through academia. Moreover, their stories allowed me the opportunity to share the ways in which Black women have empowered themselves through different levels of their careers to ultimately advance to the HBCU presidency.

I accessed the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) online database and compiled a complete listing of HBCUs in the U.S. After the list was compiled, I searched HBCU websites to determine whether the president was a Black woman. Once the determination was made, I referred back to the NCES list of HBCUs and added a check mark next to the institutions with Black female presidents. In total, there are 101 HBCUs, of which twenty-six are led by Black women.

## **Recruitment**

Upon approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I contacted the Black female presidents through email to determine interest in, and availability to participate in the study. The recruitment email (Appendix A) and consent form (Appendix B) were emailed to potential participants contained a brief introduction of the researcher, the study's purpose, criteria for participation, and a statement reflective to my adherence to confidentiality, and an explanation of how the data will be collected through a series of interviews. In the event that their email addresses were not listed on the schools' website, I reached out to their assistants and provided them with the recruitment email and consent form.

If no response was received after two weeks of the initial email, I sent a second email to the presidents. After not having received a response four weeks after the initial email, I sent a third and final invitation to participate in the study. After these email attempts, there were three presidents who agreed to participate in this study. Once the three signed consent forms were received, I began scheduling interviews with the participants. Due to the small sample size, the inclusionary criteria consisted only of current Black woman HBCU presidents.

## **Data Collection**

Qualitative data collection includes open-ended interviews, observations, and document analysis (Creswell, 2013). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), interviews are a major component of the data collection process. Even more so as it relates to data collection in narrative research. Gubrium and Holstein (2001) posited that interviews where race is a factor, are conducted in qualitative research by way of oral histories. As such, the interview questions were the primary data collection method for used in this study. The interview process consisted of two audio-recorded individual interviews with each of the participants. I conducted four of the

interviews via Zoom, and two via telephone. In addition, the interview questions were developed in ways that elicited detailed responses from participants, which is consistent with narrative methods (Reissman, 2008).

Prior to data collection, I reviewed the bios of the participants in order to have some background knowledge of participants prior to the interview. Additionally, a review of bios beforehand assisted in developing interview questions based on the presidents' career trajectories. As I reviewed the information, I made note of data within the bios that may be relevant to the study.

The interview protocol is outlined in Appendices C and D. Each interview was conducted utilizing a semi-structured interview protocol (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, given the purpose of the research, open ended questions were necessary to capture the participants' career advancement experiences. This type of questioning gave participants an opportunity to tell their full stories. As such, structured interview questions were not used as they would have limited participant narratives, which would in turn limit the researcher's ability to convey their stories. Moreover, the use of open-ended questions allowed me to ask probing questions when necessary.

Each interview began with a brief introduction of the researcher and the purpose of the study. Additionally, in order for me to gain an understanding of the influences other Black women may have had on the participants' upbringing, the first interview (Appendix C) focused on the participants' early life history, their youth, and college years. The questions focused on their family background, such as their relationships with their mothers and other female family members. In addition, their relationships with non-relatives who are also Black women were explored (e.g. teachers, friends). The rationale was that focusing on early relationships may

provide the researcher with an understanding of how these women's early life relationships have shaped them into the leaders they are today.

The second and final interview (Appendix D) focused on the president's career trajectories through academia. This helped broaden my understanding of how they have empowered themselves to advance to the HBCU presidency. The participants were asked to share their career advancement trajectories through the years. In addition, questions reflected on any obstacles on their paths and how they addressed them. Additionally, questions regarding their thoughts on the HBCUs role in fostering career development opportunities for Black women were presented.

The interview questions were developed to reflect the four components of Black Feminist Thought: self-definition and self-valuation, the interlocking nature of oppression, intellectual thought and political activism, and the importance of Afro-American women's culture. Each interview was transcribed verbatim within a week following each interview. The transcriptions were stored in a locked cabinet that is only accessible to the researcher. In addition, audio recordings were stored on a digital recorder and on my password protected computer.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis is the process of compiling various types of data (transcripts, journal notes, etc.) for the purpose of grouping the data into categories or themes through coding (Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell (2013), coding is a major component to analyzing qualitative data. In qualitative research, data collection and data analysis are concurrent and inductive processes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This method assisted me in identifying relevant details within the data. In addition, I journaled the data collection and analysis experience by keeping notes of my thoughts during the process. The four components of Black Feminist Thought guided the analysis

of this study: self-definition and self-valuation, the interlocking nature of oppression, intellectual thought and political activism, and the importance of Afro-American women's culture (Collins, 1986; 1990).

Thematic analysis was used as a means of analyzing the data. "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p 6). Thematic analysis compliments narrative research in that it can be used to analyze stories that are derived from interviews (Reissman, 2008). Given that the sole data collection method in this study was interviews, thematic analysis aligns with this study. Moreover, this method aided me in determining the final themes emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ezzy, 2013; Reissman, 2008).

I used Braun and Clarke's six phases of thematic analysis to analyze the data in this study: Phase One, familiarizing yourself with the data; Phase Two, generating initial codes; Phase Three, searching for themes; Phase Four, reviewing themes; Phase Five, defining and naming themes; and Phase Six, producing the report. In Phase One, I initially read over each interview transcript once, in order to gain insight into the participants and to become acquainted with the data. In Phase Two, I began the coding process by reading over each transcript a second time, highlighting and making notes of patterns within the data. I then read each interview transcript two additional times, continuing to highlight additional words and phrases that may have been overlooked during the previous readings. Afterwards, I used an Excel spreadsheet as a map to organize each code by participant.

In Phase Three, I looked for similarities and differences across all three participants in the Excel spreadsheet. This process yielded 17 overall codes. Each of the 17 codes were analyzed closely, which allowed me to make meaning of the participants' experiences. I placed each of the



17 codes into categories, which allowed overarching themes to emerge. "A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research questions, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 10). During the data analysis process, I referred back to the four components of Black Feminist Thought. This helped me to identify themes that were reflective of the participants' empowerment, as well themes that contributed to their oppression. In identifying codes, key words and phrases aligning with Black Feminist Thought were discovered.

In Phase Four, I thoroughly analyzed the overarching themes. In Phase Five, I completed a written analysis of the meaning of each theme, and how each theme relates to Black Feminist Thought. According to Braun and Clark (2006) "a good thematic analysis needs to make sure that the interpretations of the data are consistent with the theoretical framework" (p. 26).

In Phase Six, I practiced peer debriefing by meeting with my major professor to discuss the themes to ensure they aligned with both the purpose of the study and Black Feminist Thought. In this final data analysis phase, the narratives of how these women ultimately emerged as HBCU presidents were derived. The full report of these themes will be discussed in Chapter 4.

### **Ethical Considerations**

I sought IRB approval prior to beginning the data collection phase of the study. In addition, ethical guidelines in research were followed in an effort to minimize risks to participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, it was crucial for me to inform my participants in advance the purpose of the study, as well as possible risks associated with the study. As such, I obtained informed consent from each participant prior to beginning data collection. In addition, I carefully explained to each participant the purpose of the study.

The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Additionally, I also ensured that participant information was protected and kept confidential. As such, pseudonyms replaced their names, as well as the names of their current and previous places of employment, and any individual name they mentioned in the interviews. Moreover, neither state or regions are mentioned in this study. Furthermore, in an effort to further protect the identity of my participants, I did not impose any exclusionary criteria such as the requirement of previous positions (e.g. faculty role) held prior to assuming their current roles. Ultimately, due to the small percentage of Black women serving as presidents of HBCUs, protecting their identity was essential. As a result, I took great care in the anonymity of participants.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is a key component in validating a study's findings (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Guba and Lincoln (1981) posited that there are several strategies that enhance the validity of a study. Such strategies include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

#### **Credibility**

Credibility is an essential component of a study (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). To that end, member checking was utilized to ensure my interpretation of the participants' experiences is accurate (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This method aided in the trustworthiness of the study, as I allowed my participants an opportunity to review for accuracy the themes and sub-themes of the study.

#### **Transferability**

A second technique that enhanced the trustworthiness of this study was transferability. Guba and Lincoln (1981) posited that transferability involves thick descriptions. Thick descriptions provide rich details about the sample, and my interpretation of the sample. For

instance, knowledge of how Black women in HBCUs have been successful in reaching the presidency, may be transferable to other types of post-secondary institutions where Black women aspire to ascend to this position.

### **Dependability**

The concept of dependability is an essential component of the research process. In an effort to increase dependability of this study, I used peer-debriefing. As such, my major professor reviewed the study's themes and findings. This evaluative process aided in determining whether relevant information has been overlooked (Creswell, 2013; Creswell, 2014).

### **Confirmability**

The final technique to ensure the trustworthiness of this study was confirmability, which “shifts the burden of proof from the investigator to the information itself” (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 126). I share several commonalities with the women in this study (e.g. race, gender, experiences in academia). Even though my participants and I share similarities, I relayed their narratives in their own words. Throughout the data collection and analysis, I practiced reflexive journaling to make notes of my thoughts with the process.

### **Researcher Positionality**

My rationale for selecting this topic was threefold: my years of experience employed in HBCUS, the relationships I've formed with Black women in leadership positions at these institutions, and my desire to rise to the HBCU presidency. In conducting this study, it was my hope that the shared race and gender of myself and my participants led to discussions where they would freely open up to me about their experiences.

Furthermore, Pillow (2003) argued that:

The problematics related to researcher subjectivity were initially focused upon instances

where the researcher who is differently privileged in relation to the research subject attempts to come to terms with his/her privilege and represent the other in a less ethnocentric, subjected way. (p. 182).

Throughout my conversations with these dynamic women, I often felt a connection to them based on our experiences both within and outside of academia. In addition, I have faced obstacles of my own within higher education. As such, I certainly identified with many of the challenges of my participants, as a college student and as a higher education professional.

Given my study of the marginalization of Black females in academia, the transformative approach helps shape my worldview. The transformative worldview was conceptualized in the 1980s as a means of addressing areas where the other worldviews were lacking, such as: theories for marginalized populations, “issue of power and social justice, discrimination, and oppression” (Creswell, 2014, p. 9). Furthermore, the transformative worldview is linked to a call to action, which can invoke change within individuals and institutions alike. I hope that my inquiry into the participants lived experiences helps tell their stories of empowerment, so that they can serve as guiding forces for other Black women struggling to advance within HBCUs. It is also my hope that this study will effect change in HBCUs, where they become more responsive to the needs of Black women seeking to advance to the presidency.

## CHAPTER 4

There is a stark underrepresentation of Black women serving as presidents of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). As such, this study sought to explore, from a Black Feminist Thought (BFT) perspective, the career advancement narratives of the Black women who have been successful in ascending to the HBCU presidency. This study consisted of three Black women, all of whom are current presidents of HBCUs. The sole research question was, "what are the storied career advancement experiences of Black women who have risen to the HBCU presidency?" In an effort to share the full picture of how these women have been successful in their journeys, stories as early as their youth were captured.

Subsequently, throughout the interviews, the presidents told stories from their childhood, collegiate, and career experiences. The findings suggest these experiences have helped shape them into the leaders they are today. Given that narrative inquiry involves storytelling, this research method served as the methodology for this study. The findings in this chapter emerged through the use of semi-structured interviews and through applying the components of Black Feminist Thought to the women's stories: self-definition and self-valuation, intellectual thought and political activism, the interlocking nature of oppression, and the importance of Afro-American women's culture (Collins, 1986; Collins, 1990). Each component of Black Feminist Thought was evident in the women's stories.

Chapter 4 is comprised of two sections. The first section consists of participant descriptions. There were three Black women who participated in this study, all are current HBCU presidents. In order to keep their identities anonymous, their names were replaced with pseudonyms. In addition, the names of their current and former places of employment were not disclosed. In the second section, the findings that arose from the data analysis are presented. The

following are the overarching themes that were evident in the participants' stories: (1) Black Women Role Models, (2) Overcoming Oppression, (3) The Importance of Mentoring and Support Systems, and (4) Determination to Succeed. The subthemes within the greater themes are childhood idols, college idols, and career idols (Black Women Role Models); sexism, sexual harassment, and racism (Overcoming Oppression); college and career mentoring, access to networks, and support systems (Mentoring and Support Systems); and climbing the career ladder, overcoming stereotypes, and making yourself known (Determination to Succeed).

### **Participants**

Invitations soliciting participation in this study were emailed to the 26 Black female presidents of HBCUs. Ultimately, there were 3 who agreed to participate in this study. The primary method of data collection involved two interviews with each participant. The interviews with two of the participants were conducted using Zoom Videoconferencing. While the interviews with one participant were completed over telephone. Each of the interviews occurred in the Spring 2020. The participants identify as Black or African American women, each currently serving as presidents of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) in the United States. The women are all over 40 years of age and each hold doctoral degrees. The following section will include an introductory narrative of each participant, followed by the findings of this study.

**President Robin James.** President James is married with children. She was raised in what she described as a loving household. Although her family lacked financial prosperity, her parents worked hard to provide for their children. Even though she grew up in a Black neighborhood, President James initially had challenges be-friending other Black girls with whom she came in contact with. However, these strained relationships improved in her teenage years.

President James attended predominantly White grade schools. Also challenging were her experiences with the White girls in school. She referred to this experience as an identity crisis, where a Black girl was trying to fit in with her White peers. Furthermore, while she believed her White female peers were her friends, looking back through an adult lens, she now realizes that was not the case.

Aside from her experiences with peers, President James acknowledges that she has had both positive and negative interactions with her K-12 teachers. She prides herself in having been a good student, under the tutelage of great teachers in her earlier years, further adding that some took a vast interest in her education. On the contrary, she spoke of the negative aspects of her grade school experience. She explained how later, in her schooling, she was ignored by teachers in the classroom. She explained her frustrations of raising her hand in class to answer questions, only to continuously be ignored by her teachers. In light of this isolation, she continued to believe in her academic abilities. In contrast, a major breakthrough occurred when she enrolled in college. She excitedly shared her story of attending an HBCU as an undergraduate. She spoke with great enthusiasm sharing how great it felt seeing administrators, faculty, and students who looked like her. Consequently, she shared that having attended an HBCU was a life changing experience. She recalls:

And I would never not be grateful for that experience. I mean a lot of people come there because they wanted affirmation. And for me, I didn't even know that I wanted it, but I needed it, really, really bad.

After having received her undergraduate degree, President James initially embarked on a career outside of academia. Her desire to enter into higher education was fueled by having taught college courses as an adjunct. She would soon realize that her calling was in higher education.

Prior to ascending to her current role as president of an HBCU, she held faculty positions and mid-level administrative positions prior to ascending to executive positions in both PWIs and HBCUs. These positions came with different responsibilities and requiring different skills sets, which helped strengthen President James' qualifications for the presidency.

**President Barbara Jordan.** President Jordan is married with children. She was raised in what she described as a strict, Christian household with hard-working parents. It was not until her adult years that she came to the realization that her family was "poor." But growing up, she did not feel economically disadvantaged. For instance, there was always food on the table and her parents were generous in sharing food with the neighbors from time to time. She further shared that getting an education was paramount in her family, and that, although neither of her parents finished high school, they often stressed to their children the value of an education. As a matter of fact, even when homework was not assigned at school, President Jordan's parents made sure their children completed some type of educational activity by assigning homework of their own. She shared that her parents were:

All about education because it was something they didn't obtain, so they always pushed us to have an education, and you know, for them, it was just, you have to finish high school, that was the requirement. You could not drop out of high school.

President Jordan hails from a large family. She spoke vividly recalling stories from her childhood where her siblings and cousins had close relationships and would often spend time playing together. Her childhood interactions with White children mainly took place in grade school. She shared a story of a time when schools in her area had recently undergone desegregation. She excitedly shared how different it was to see White girls up close, sitting in desks right beside her, as compared to only seeing them around town. Excited by this new



experience, she laughed as she recalled telling her mother that the White girl who sat next to her in class "has red dots everywhere, and my mom explained to me that its freckles." She remembered that most of her teachers growing up were African American, and that most took a liking to her and the feelings were mutual. President Jordan graduated high school earlier than most of her peers and immediately enrolled in college at an HBCU.

She described her first year in college as awkward, as she struggled to meet the demands of college life. In addition, President Jordan struggled with self-identity as she explained that many of the girls on her campus were light-skinned, with long hair. On the contrary, she referred to herself as being brown-skinned, with short and "coily" hair. However, she overcame those feelings of self-doubt and ultimately adjusted to college life. After having earned her bachelor's degree, she entered into another field, prior to entering into academia. It was her love for the college population that brought her into the higher education environment. Her post-secondary career consists of leadership positions in both PWIs and HBCUs.

**President Hillary Truth.** President Truth is married with children. She was raised with an extended family, in what she described as a strict and loving close-knit household with Christian values. Her interactions with other Black girls were described as varied, but positive overall. She posited that she typically interacted well with children regardless of race. In her younger years, she admits to trying to fit in with the crowd. However, she later came to realize that she would not force relationships, stating it was her strong family relationships that were of most value to her.

President Truth candidly recalled her K-12 years. She described how some teachers rallied for her success, while contrarily having some challenges with others. For instance, she

described herself as having a strong personality, which at times led to strained relationships with some of her teachers. She shared:

I did run in to foul with some teachers, because again, I had a strong personality. And it wasn't just reserved for my peers. If I didn't agree with the teacher, I told them. But I had good relations with most of my teachers.

She further explained that she has never had an issue challenging her teachers but did so in a respectful manner. The excitement was overflowing in her voice as she described her undergraduate years at an HBCU. President Truth spoke lovingly of the nurturing environment and support she received as a student. She credits her undergraduate institution as a major factor in her success. She began her career outside of academia and realized the position she was in was unfulfilling. It was then that she decided to pursue a career in higher education. Since this time, she has held numerous teaching and administrative positions in HBCUs.

### **Findings**

The purpose of this study was to chronicle the career advancement journeys of the Black women who have been successful in ascending to the HBCU presidency. More specifically, this study sought to identify how their childhood, collegiate, and career experiences helped to prepare them for their current roles. This study served as an avenue for these women to openly share their stories of challenge and triumph. Their stories produced four overarching themes: (1) Black Women Role Models, (2) Overcoming Oppression, (3) The Importance of Mentoring and Support Systems, and (4) Determination to Succeed. These themes have helped to shed light on the career advancement journeys of Black women HBCU presidents. Subsequently, these women all had strong Black female role models within their lifetimes with whom they credit for instilling within them the value of hard work and perseverance. In addition, these women have

all faced some type of oppressions in different phases of their lives ranging from sexism, racial discrimination, and sexual harassment. These women have also spoke of the need for mentoring, the need to pay it forward and serve as mentors, and the need for Black women to have access to networks and support systems. Moreover, these women have all shown the drive and determination to succeed in spite of the challenges they faced along the way to the HBCU presidency. The following sections will be organized by themes and will outline the participants' stories, as told in their own voice. In an effort to share in greater detail how their experiences, relate to Black Feminist Thought, their stories were organized by theme. Ultimately, the findings show that the road to the HBCU presidency is not an easy one for Black women.

### **Black Women Role Models**

Having Black women role models was a commonality shared among the participants in this study. All three of the women have had Black women role models in different stages of their lives. These role models have been positive figures whom the women hold in high regard. They have looked to their idols for personal guidance. Each of the women spoke adoringly about the women who were integral in molding them for success. This finding resonates with Black Feminist Thought's "importance of Afro-American women's culture," which solidifies the relationships that Black women have with one another. Collins (2000) posits that the bonds among Black women are necessary in sustaining Black sisterhood. The subthemes that will be discussed in the following sections are as follows: childhood idols, college idols, and career idols.

**Childhood idols.** The women in this study spoke highly about the Black women in their childhood and each spoke with passion and enthusiasm when describing their childhood idols. Each idol was someone who was near and dear to these women. These findings align with

Collins (1986) concept of the importance of Afro-American women's culture. According to Collins (1986) "the attention to Black women's culture has stimulated interest in a second type of interpersonal relationship: that shared by Black women and their biological children, the children in their extended families, and with the Black community's children" (p. S22). This assertion highlights Black women's relationship dynamics, particularly for the women in this study. For example, President Jordan's relationship with her mother, President Truth's relationship with her grandmother, and President James' relationship with her aunt. President Barbara Jordan identified her mother as her childhood idol. Throughout her story, she recalled how her mother overcame several challenges in her childhood and adult life and spoke of how her mother left school in the 4th grade to help provide for her family's household. She shared:

For a woman to have a 4th grade education, and to get married at 16 and start having babies...and to work every day, take care of all of us, help us do whatever we needed to do, but she only had a 4th grade formal education, I think she accomplished something so great because she instilled in us hard work and teaching yourself...owning it yourself

Despite her lack of educational experience, President Jordan's mother taught her children the value of hard work and responsibility. Her tenacity was passed on to President Jordan, who overcame challenges in college and within her career. Moreover, President Jordan explained that even though her mother had limited education, she was a strong "African American" woman who eventually learned to read and would challenge her children to read as well. To this day, she finds herself thinking "Momma said to do this, or Momma was right, she told us to do this." President Jordan further described her mother as a phenomenal woman, who not only made an impact on the lives of her children, but also within the community. She proudly exclaimed that she has had many influential women in her lifetime, but her mother was the most influential.

Having a Black female role model was also evident in President Truth's story. She spoke proudly of her grandmother and the impact that she had on her childhood. She explained that because of familial responsibilities, her grandmother was unable to finish school. Similar to President Barbara Jordan's mother, who also did not graduate high school, President Truth's grandmother stressed the importance of an education for her children and grandchildren, further explaining that her grandmother knew an education would be significant in determining their paths in life. She shared:

What I found to be inspirational about her is that even though she wasn't educated, she understood the importance and significance of making sure that her children had the opportunity to be educated, and what that would mean for the trajectory of their lives and their kids' lives to come.

In a time where Black people faced segregation and limited educational opportunities, Black women such as President Barbara Jordan's mother and President Hillary Truth's grandmother pushed their children towards the educational prosperity that they themselves were not afforded.

President Truth fondly spoke of how her grandmother was hard working and took great care of her family. She credits her grandmother with instilling within her values, character, and strength. She recalled that her grandmother took civic responsibilities seriously, as she proudly signed up to vote during an era where it was dangerous for Black people to do so. She further explained her grandmother's bravery, and willingness to inspire her family to excel, in spite of the circumstances.

In addition to Presidents Barbara Jordan and Hillary Truth, President Robin James also found inspiration in a Black female role model in her childhood. She spoke highly of her aunt, who was a college educated professional. She described her aunt as a phenomenal person of

whom she has always had a connection to. She stated, "I always felt very connected to her, she was just amazing, I mean, just an amazing, amazing, women who really achieved." To add, she would later follow in the path of her aunt. For example, she attended the same HBCU that her aunt attended as an undergraduate. She also earned the same degree as her aunt and entered the same career path. President Robin James posited that her aunt diligently pushed her to succeed, which ultimately led her to strive to "be just like her when I grew up." These findings show that all of these women had significant Black women role models while growing up. All of whom positively influenced the women they are today.

**College idols.** The concept of Black women role models extended into the college lives of two of the participants. A constant between Presidents Barbara Jordan and Robin James was their admiration for the Black women who were instrumental in their collegiate success. President Barbara Jordan spoke often about what she referred to as strong Black women in her college years. One was an administrator, and the other was a faculty member at her undergraduate institution. Her voice was filled with adoration while she recounted stories of her college idols. She spoke passionately about how the administrator would assist her when she encountered obstacles on campus and was always there when she needed a helping hand. She stated, "I was always around strong Black women...now later in my career, White women came in to play, but in college, it was strong Black women." More specifically, she was very fond of the influence and "power" this individual had on campus. This dynamic of seeing other Black women in positions of power can provide Black female students reassurance that they too can ascend to leadership positions (Patton, 2009). This assertion further attests to the importance of Black women leaders on HBCU campuses. According to President Jordan "she's always meant the world to me."

Also influential in President Jordan's college life was a Black female faculty member whom she idolized. She defined this individual as someone who is articulate and confident. Moreover, this Black woman encouraged her to persevere and believed in her success. These forms of adoration further speak to the importance of Black women in leadership roles, where they can serve as agents of empowerment for other Black women. Similarly, President Robin James found an idol at her undergraduate institution. She held an admiration for the wife of the president. She shared:

I just thought she was everything in the world. And so whether she knew it or not, she was my mentor. And so I think it's just important that we have women to look up to as young women, when we're trying to figure out how to be, and how to fit.

Both she and the president's wife shared similar interests, as both were in the same sorority and both would eventually have similar career paths. These findings highlight the impact that Black women have on each other's success, which aligns with the importance of Afro-American women's culture, a theme of Black Feminist Thought. Collins (1986) posited that sisterhood is a component of Black women's culture. Further emphasizing that through their experiences, Black women share interpersonal relationships with one another.

**Career idols.** President Barbara Jordan was the sole participant who spoke of a Black female idol in her career. She warmly recalled how this idol was more than just a superior, but a friend as well. She credits her with being a constant source of encouragement, but also someone who did not shy away from giving constructive criticism. However, President Jordan saw these opportunities as learning experiences, and therefore understood her idol's toughness to be necessary, as she only wanted the best for her. Chuckling as she recalled the story, President Jordan shared that this individual was "A great supervisor, real hard on me, you know. One of

the ones that expect the best out of you, you know, the ones you love, but you wanna pull their hair out one string at a time".

As such, it is important to acknowledge that career advancement for Black women in higher education is challenging, which shows that having the proverbial thick skin is necessary to succeed. According to literature, Black women face obstacles that outweigh that of Black men and White women (Clarke, 2015; hooks, 2015). Furthermore, being that Black women are oftentimes stigmatized as incompetent, it is necessary to combat these stigmas by exhibiting strength in not allowing others perceptions to interfere with their self-confidence.

Moreover, President Jordan revealed that this role model served as her inspiration to return to school and earn a doctoral degree. For example, she recalled how satisfying it was watching her career idol balance a career and graduate school simultaneously. This would be a culminating factor in President Jordan's pursuit of a doctoral studies. She proudly proclaimed:

When I got to her graduation, I started crying...I was like, I can do this, I can do this, So [Name] is the reason why I went back and got my Ph.D...it was just so fulfilling and empowering all at the same time to do that work.

The bond shared between President Jordan and her career role model was integral in her decision to return to school to earn a doctoral degree. Having seen first-hand another Black woman's accomplishments served as a guiding light in her decision to earn a doctorate.

### **Overcoming Oppressions**

Oppressive practices have been leveled against Black women in academia for years (Cobham & Patton, 2015; Dowdy & Hamilton, 2011; Holmes, Land & Hinton-Hudson, 2007). Consequently, this theme was evident in the stories of all three participants. The findings in this study suggest that oppressions have at times negatively impacted the K-16 education, as well as



the career development of Black women in academia. The women in this study have faced oppression either in grade school, college, and within their careers. These oppressions include sexism, racial discrimination, and sexual harassment. Each will be unpacked and discussed in the following sections.

**Sexism.** A review of the data shows that sexism has manifested in two of the women's stories. As they have either faced sexism in their college years or within their careers. President Hillary Truth and President Robin James both experienced sexism within the HBCU. President Truth stated that it was surprising for her return to an HBCU as a faculty member, only to face sexism from Black men, sharing that there is a patriarchy at HBCUs, which presents obstacles for women (Bonner, 2001).

Similarly, President Robin James shared her experiences. She recalled being introduced at a university function by a Black male colleague, who said to the other party "well, you can take one look at her and see why we hired her." She encountered similar sexist remarks at a PWI. She explained that her supervisor was a White male, who made sexist comments based on her appearance. She stated how this individual said to her "you've got everything going for you... you're good looking, you're smart, you're dark, but not Black". She shared the following reaction to this comment:

What the hell is that! Does that mean like, I'm Black, but not ghetto? Does that mean like, I'm Black but not like, too dark skinned? Like, what are we talking about here, right? He would just make those kinds of comments, so clearly, he's a sexist right? And obviously, he's got racial hang ups.

Incidences such as these undermine the competency and legitimacy of Black women. Moreover, these types of remarks sexualize Black women and disregards their qualifications. A major

component of Black Feminist Thought is self-definition and self-valuation, which explains how these women dispel stereotypes leveled against them (Collins, 1986). This component coincides with President Robin James' reaction. For example, she explained that after the comment about being hired based on appearance, she felt the need to prove herself and show that she was qualified for the position.

President Hillary Truth and President Robin James both shared sentiments of how different it was to be an HBCU student versus an HBCU employee. Both spoke of their institutions as supportive and nurturing environments during their college years. On the contrary, as employees, their experiences consisted of sexism, stereotypes, and in some instances, unfavorable treatment. For instance, President Truth shared:

Having graduated from an HBCU and never really feeling like while I was here, that my gender was an issue. Because the people doing well were women. And I always had support of men, women, in being successful. Coming back into the environment as a professional, it was a different experience and even at the faculty level, the stereotype being women are emotional, all that type of stuff, and it played itself out. The people who were the worst were Black men.

President Robin James was very candid in her stories of preferential treatment towards males within the HBCU. She explained how her male predecessor had a housekeeper and meal service provided by the university. Conversely, she was not provided such privileges. Moreover, she also shared her thoughts of how male presidents are given second chances, when women are not. She added that women presidents are at times terminated publicly and subjected to scrutiny, while males are given the opportunity to resign quietly. President Robin James further recognized the disparity between male and female presidents at HBCUs, citing that many of the women today

are the first to lead their institutions. To add, she stated how women are often given the role of interim president, before they are named president. She declared:

The vast majority of women who ascend to the presidencies of HBCUs, if you'll check the data, you will see, the vast majority of them were interims before they became the president. We've got to prove it, we've got to prove it. Almost all of us have been an interim at least one time before we got the presidency. We have to prove ourselves before we get the permanent job.

The stories of President Hillary Truth and President Robin James resonate with the notion that Black women's qualifications are often questioned and that they face the burden of having to prove challenges they are qualified for their positions (Kelly, Gayles, & Williams, 2017). Being that HBCUs were created for the purpose of educating both Black men and women, this finding is of particular significance as Black women HBCU leaders continue to face stereotypes and unfavorable treatment within these institutions. However, President Barbara Jordan painted a different portrait of sexism within the HBCU. Although she acknowledged that gender discrimination exists, she has experienced such discrimination from individuals outside of the HBCU. She shared:

I don't think the gender discrimination comes from them. But I do think outside of the circle, there's certainly gender discrimination. I don't think the guys who are my colleagues are looking at me and saying [Participant Name] you're not doing a great job, cause that is not the case. They are fabulous. But I do feel there is gender discrimination from outside.

This finding contrasts with the existing literature, regarding the gender discrimination women face within their employment roles in the HBCU. For instance, there is literature suggesting that

HBCUs have not been in favor of women obtaining executive leadership positions (Bonner, 2001; Gasman, 2007). In addition, this finding differs from the experiences of Presidents James and Truth, both of whom talked of the gender discrimination they encountered as HBCU employees.

**Sexual harassment.** An additional challenge faced by two of the women was sexual harassment. As an undergraduate, President Barbara Jordan detailed a time when one of her professors made inappropriate sexual remarks regarding her boyfriend's genitalia. She shared:

And he was teaching me how to work the lab equipment, how to help the students measure, and he told me to practice measuring things, and I should measure my boyfriend's penis...I was so shocked that he said that!

She expounded upon how uncomfortable this incident made her feel. In speaking with a friend about the matter, she learned that his professor had a history of sexually harassing students. She would later experience sexual harassment within her career. However, she did not go into detail regarding this challenge within her career.

Likewise, President Robin James shared her stories of sexual harassment. While being employed at a PWI, she recalled how her supervisor, a White male, made disparaging remarks towards her. President James recounted how she felt this individual punished her for becoming pregnant, by demoting her. She also recalled how "he stopped speaking to me for like six months." She further described how he would tell her that she was attractive, and once told her "I used to dream about living with you until you got knocked up." These findings show that Black women are at times disrespected and sexualized within the confines of academia. This revelation coincides with Black Feminist Thought's concept of controlling images, whereas dominant

groups seek to confine Black women to subordinate roles (Collins, 1986; hooks, 2015; Grimes-McGreer, 2013).

**Racial discrimination.** Of the three participants, there was only one who spoke of having experienced racial discrimination, and this was not in the workplace, but in the classroom. President Truth encountered racism while attending a PWI for graduate school. Throughout her graduate experience, she attributed the discrimination to be racial, as opposed to being gender based. Accordingly, she explained that although there were non-Black females in her graduate program, they were not treated as harshly as she was.

President Truth spoke firmly as she recalled how her peers often questioned her intelligence, which made it difficult to join their study groups. As a result, she felt as though her peers did not feel she was qualified enough to be in the program. As it relates to her graduate years in a PWI she shared:

Because my peers, I think in many ways, didn't think I deserved to be there. Oftentimes when we, when I tried to study with them, or be with them, they... I would say, didn't question, their questions weren't around how did you get that answer, or how did you get that solution, or can you explain to me what the process was. If I got it right, they were essentially questioning my intellect.

Furthermore, her professors also harbored resentment towards her. She explained: "even though my answers and solutions looked like my peers, the professors would always figure out a way to score my papers 10-15 points less." Applying the lens of Black Feminist Thought's "interlocking nature of oppression," to President Truth's experiences, helps put into perspective the nuances of racial discrimination and its impact on Black women. For instance, due to the isolation and

discriminatory treatment she received at the PWI, President Truth recounted during her doctoral studies, there were time when she questioned her self-worth. She stated:

It was very challenging and that was a stark contrast to what my undergraduate experience had been and even my K-12, whereas I'd always been looked at as someone extremely bright and talented....they were intentionally and sometimes unintentionally, really breaking down my self-worth and self-value.

According to President Truth, having come from an HBCU into a PWI forced her to learn to navigate this new environment. She realized that doing so would allow her to continue to be successful in her academics. As such, she formulated a plan that ultimately resulted in her completing her doctoral program. Notwithstanding the racial discrimination President Truth and many other Black women face when navigating the higher education landscape, she continued to advance through her program in the face of adversity. Moreover, many face isolation and are treated as what Collins (1986) refers to as the outsider within the academy. This outsider status relates to how Black women are marginalized and their experiences largely ignored in academia.

### **The Importance of Mentoring and Support Systems**

The women in this study were cognizant of the importance of having mentors and support systems. The aforementioned role models all played pivotal roles in the women's lives, beginning in their early years for all, and extending through the career of one participant. These role models helped set the tone for whom the women aspired to be, and who they'd become. Moving forward, their mentors provided a more formal level of support. In some instances, their mentors were males, both Black and White. Each acknowledged that mentoring and support systems are beneficial for collegiate and professional success. These relationships helped the women overcome isolation and has provided them a sense of belonging. They spoke often about the need

for mentoring and support systems for Black women, and how they believed these exchanges were vital to their development. Mentoring has been attributed to the ascension of Black women to senior level positions (Brown, 2005; Crawford & Smith, 2005; Gamble & Turner, 2015; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Wallace et al., 2004, Tillman, 2010). Additionally, mentoring is vital to the success of Black women college students (Patton, 2009). In the following sections, the subthemes of college and career mentoring, access to networks, and support systems will be discussed.

**College and career mentoring.** All of the women in this study stressed the importance of mentoring. Two had mentoring relationships in college, where the mentor was an administrator or faculty member. Another had mentoring relationships within her career. Presidents Barbara Jordan and Hillary Truth were both under the direction of mentors while undergraduates. President Jordan struggled her first year in college and would eventually come to realize the value of having a mentor to help her navigate this new environment. She proclaimed that students miss out on meaningful experiences without mentors. She shared:

I think you can't survive without a mentor. You need someone, I don't care who it is, you need someone saying to you "you can do this," helping you get through the process, helping you understand the ways of college, all the paperwork, the whole process of relating to an instructor who's not a very good instructor, and how you work through that. You need someone to help you stay balanced, you know.

In college, President Jordan had Black female mentors. She further asserted that, in college, she has always been around strong Black women. However, she also acknowledged that to her, it was less about race and more about the gender of the mentor, as she was not fond of having a male mentor. In speaking of her mentor, she proudly declared:

She was just a strong woman who felt the need and responsibility to help students and make sure they had success and me coming from a family of [number], I was the first to get a degree in my family, I had no support system. She became my support system and I think that experience for me has really made me understand the need to mentor others and to just help everybody I can.

The relationship that President Jordan had with her college mentor was emphasized in this study. To illustrate, she confided the reason she agreed to participate in this study was due to her responsibility to pay forward the guidance she received. She further stated, "the mentoring relationships that I had with her solidified what I'm doing today and why I should be doing it." President Robin James had a comparable revelation, but under different circumstances. She revealed that the mentors in her professional career did not provide her with meaningful guidance. It was this lack of support that encouraged her to support others. She shared a time when she came to a mentor to ask for guidance relative to an employment contract she received. President James explained that the mentor told her the contract was "fine." Taken aback by the lack of interest in her need for support, she shared:

It was a terrible contract, a terrible contract. Why my mentor did not take the time to say, lets walk through this, you need to ask for this, you need to ask for that? That was really devastating for me, when I learned later and, so it has really fueled me to want to be there for other people in a very meaningful way.

The experiences of Presidents Barbara Jordan and Robin James attest to the relevance of mentoring for Black women, and how these mentoring relationships can engender a continuous cycle of mentoring for other Black women.



While President Jordan was mentored by Black women, President Truth had Black male college mentors. The race and gender of the mentor was not an important factor for her. As a matter of fact, her high school mentor was a White male, and her college and professional mentors were Black men. She further put into perspective that she welcomes mentoring relationships with men, because she feels they "don't try to impose." She also shared that she has not had meaningful relationships with women, particularly other Black women. As it relates to her male mentors, she stated:

They give me what I need, when I need it. I just have not been able to find as many, I have some, a handful...not even a handful...can count on one hand. But it hasn't been as positive of an experience with other women, particularly African American women.

In comparing the experiences of President Jordan and President Truth, on one hand, relationships with Black women are preferred, but on the other hand, relationships with Black women are strained. In keeping with the components of Black Feminist Thought, there is a vital need for collaboration building among Black women. According to Collins (1986), "Afro-American women create and pass on self-definitions and self-valuations essential to coping with the simultaneity of oppression they experience" p. S21). Thus, in an environment where Black women oftentimes struggle with challenges, supportive relationships with one another are crucial.

Unlike Presidents Jordan and Truth, President Robin James did not have a mentoring relationship in her college years. Although she longed for that experience, she recalls having been apprehensive about reaching out to prospective mentors. She recounted: "I just didn't have enough fortitude or wherewithal to say 'would you be my mentor,' like formally." Nonetheless, there were women on her campus whom she looked up to. As it relates to finding a mentor, she

stressed the importance of "open your mouth and ask." She further stated: "I encourage my students and young women that I work with, open your mouth and ask...I think you would be surprised how many people are willing to help you." President James' assertion of not being afraid to ask shows that Black females in academia students should take the initiative to seek out mentors, even when the opportunity does not present itself.

**Access to networks.** Access to networks is a beneficial component to career development. The privilege of having this access was a challenge for the women in this study. President Barbara Jordan shared that given the demands of academic leadership, and staying "in the loop, staying in the know is a big challenge." Her method of strategizing included connecting with "the right committees." President Hillary Truth and President Robin James also took initiative to strategically plan to enter networks, and to create networks for Black women, respectively. President Truth shared:

Understanding the do's and dont's, how to set up networks and systems that supported the direction I wanted to go and for my experience was viable. Making sure that I balanced the internal relationships to developing the external networks that would keep me competitive.

President Truth understood the need to not only consider, but to act on ways that would increase her access to those networks that would benefit her career development. When there was seemingly a lack of access to networks, these determined women were creative in their endeavors to be a part of networks. Moreover, President Robin James explained that men have more access to networks than women, which oftentimes leaves women to fend for themselves. As a result of limited support opportunities for Black women, some seek networks outside of their departments (Chang, Welton, Martinez, & Cortez; 2013; Wallace, Moore, & Curtis, 2014).

She spoke to the importance of networking, and that her current network involves publishing, sharing information, and remaining in contact with her collaborators. However, she stated:

I am always shocked at the networks that men have. The ability to get references. I mean somebody putting in a call for you and nominating you. We just don't have the networks where people are constantly promoting us and nominating us.

This finding further shows the need for Black women to form their own networks, whether within or outside of the HBCU. Consequently, unsatisfied with the lack of networking opportunities for Black women, President Robin James spoke of the need to develop networking groups for Black women HBCU leaders. Her actions align with the intellectual thought and political activism component of BFT (Collins, 1990). This form of activism entails establishing relationships with others who also seek to eliminate institutional barriers. These findings show that even within HBCUs, Black women encounter challenges navigating networks. However, having devised plans to create their own entry into networks, with the hopes of career mobility, shows that these women took initiative to increase their chances of climbing the career ladder. These women abandoned complacency and put forth great effort in gaining access to networks either within or outside of their institutions.

**Support systems.** The women in this study either had support systems in their early lives, within their college experiences, or within their careers. President Robin James attended predominantly White grade schools and spoke of the positive support she received from teachers in her early school years. She shared how a teacher once said to her "you're so smart." She explained that having this support helped place her on the path to academic success. Further stating that "those things, I think, really shaped a strong academic trajectory for me, just a

teacher pouring in to you a little bit, meant a great deal to me. As a current HBCU president, her support system consists of bonding with some of the other HBCU presidents.

President Truth also had support systems in her childhood and career. During her grade school years, she received support from teachers. She stated that her teachers were supportive, encouraging, and challenged her to put forth her best effort. Thus, President Truth credits her childhood support system as integral component of her success. Likewise, the support and encouragement continued into her college years. As an undergraduate, she spoke of the support she received from her HBCU. As a result of these interactions and support systems, her qualifications for post-graduate study increased due to the level of preparation she received. Speaking with fondness regarding her undergraduate HBCU experience, she recalled: "I was nurtured as a person. I was developed. I was, you know, made to feel like I was the smartest thing in the world, that I could do anything, go anywhere and be successful." Similar support systems existed in her professional career. She shared:

So I have been very fortunate and blessed, blessed to have had a very successful, I believe professional journey. I have been able to be supported by people both, both visible, mentors, and physical advocates, as well as some who were invisible.

In similar fashion, President Barbara Jordan also experienced support systems as an undergraduate. She credits her college boyfriend, who would later become her husband, and her sorority sisters with being there for her, and helping her overcome the feelings of isolation. She recounted, "had I not joined a sorority, been active in clubs, had that other support system right there on campus, I would not have finished school." President Jordan stressed the importance of these relationships in aiding in her collegiate success.

In light of these stories, it is evident that such support systems are pivotal to the success and well-being of Black women in the academy (Davis, Chaney, Edwards, Thompson-Rogers, & Gines, 2011). President Robin James shared a support system with other HBCU executives. Additionally, President Truth leveraged her relationship with faculty and peers to successfully navigate the undergraduate experience. Her formula for success was to "hang around the right people" and "have the right relationships with your faculty members." Equally important, President Barbara Jordan received the support she needed from her significant other and sorority sisters.

### **Determination to Succeed**

The women in this study are all tenacious and have shown determination to succeed in the face of adversity. Whether in grade school, college, or within their careers, their stories of empowerment chronicle their strong will to prosper in environments that were not always welcoming to them. In reference to the racism she endured within the PWI she attended, President Truth shared a very powerful statement: "I tell students all the time, the 4 years that I received of being stroked up and built up (HBCU) is what helped me survive the 4 years that I endured being torn down (PWI)." The resiliency they have shown throughout their lives was illustrated in each of their stories. The dedication and commitment to earning terminal degrees further places into perspective their drive for career prosperity. The sub-themes relative to their narratives are as follows: climbing the career ladder, overcoming stereotypes, and making a name for yourself.

**Climbing the career ladder.** The career advancement of the women in this study was a key element in their determination to succeed. Each has held various leadership positions prior to ascending to the HBCU presidency. All three participants spoke of the challenges Black women

face while rising through the ranks of higher education. Some of those challenges included racism, sexism, and a lack of mentoring (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Wright, Taylor, Burrell, & Stewart, 2006). In light of challenges, these women have empowered themselves to reach the highest level in the HBCU. President Barbara Jordan shared the following experience with career ascension:

I learned one thing, you cannot stay in one job too long. But you can't hop around either. So you've got to do 3-5. You do 3-5 years in one thing and then you get out and go to the next thing, because if you do it like every year, you're changing, people are going to say "she doesn't know what she wants to do" but if you, and if you stay seven years or longer, they're gonna say "that's all she knows how to do is that work."

President Jordan had defined goals in place to ensure the advancement of her career. Her desire to refuse complacency on her career path shows that she had the drive and wherewithal to devise a plan that would allow her the opportunity to advance through the higher education landscape. She reiterated the notion of not limiting one's possibilities, and to learn new leadership skill sets with each position.

President Truth stressed the importance of professional development and its relevance to career ascension. She described herself as a "continuous learner" with a desire to remain empowered and motivated to ensure professional development through workshop attendance and having relationships with individuals that help advance her leadership skills. Subsequently, she was very diligent in advancing throughout the ranks in the HBCU. Her higher education career began as an Assistant Professor, after which she rose through the different ranks of the professorship, through full Professor. After a successful career as a faculty member, her hard-

work and dedication was recognized by the university President, who opened the door to a career in executive leadership. She shared:

I was able to move through the academic ranks...and ended up crossing the path of the president at the time, and I guess he saw something, or some additional potential in me that I wasn't necessarily looking at, at the time. And presented to me the opportunity to move into upper administration. And that's what set the course for me in terms of moving through the upper administration.

President Truth would then advance through executive level leadership positions, and ultimately, president. She shared that knowing the culture of your environment is necessary for career advancement. Along her path to the presidency, she recounted having faced different sets of challenges as faculty and as administrator. As a faculty member, she faced the challenge of finding colleagues willing to partner with her on research collaborations. While as an administrator, the challenge was interacting with former colleagues who treated her with contempt after she advancing to an executive leadership position. Notwithstanding these challenges, President Truth continued to persevere throughout academia.

Similar to Presidents Barbara Jordan and Hillary Truth, President Robin James was also persistent in climbing the higher education career ladder. Having started out as an adjunct instructor, she rose through the mid-level administrative ranks through executive level administration. She shared that with each position, she gained a new skill set that eventually placed her on the path to the presidency. According to President Barbara Jordan, "you can't stop, you can't quit." The women in this study showed resiliency in navigating the different levels of their careers, all while balancing their home lives, careers, and return to school to earn doctorates. A commonality within the stories was the importance of taking the initiative to learn

new skills that would be beneficial to their career ascension, as each position led to a new learning experience.

**Overcoming stereotypes.** Negative perceptions of Black women in academia was a constant among the women in this study. The stereotypes they encountered within college and their careers was evident in their stories. For all three women, simply being HBCU presidents brought on stereotypes where their leadership capabilities were scrutinized. To illustrate, President Barbara Jordan shared that women are often stereotyped in the role of president. She stated how just being a female in a male dominated role is a stereotype. Further explaining that when people realize she is in fact a president, they make comments showing their surprise, such as "Oh, you're a president?" In response to these negative viewpoints, she firmly shared "I try to remain feminine, but I try to make sure men know I'm at this table, and that I have a voice." While President Barbara Jordan encountered career stereotypes, President Truth faced both college and career stereotypical challenges. She recalled a time in graduate school where she felt that her peers in the PWI automatically assumed Black students lacked intelligence. She explained that being Black in a predominantly White program, there was "always questions of your intellect, no one wants to study with you." While this was a challenging collegiate experience, President Truth was cognizant that overcoming these issues was integral to her success. As a result, she successfully completed her graduate program.

For President Truth, stereotypes were also evident in her career. For instance, within the HBCU, there was the stigma that women are emotional, a stereotype leveled against President Robin James as well. Both Presidents Hillary Truth and Robin James hypothesized that women lead differently than men. However, they posited that generalizations and preconceived biases



about the differences in leadership styles further perpetuates stereotypes. President Robin James shared:

I mean, I would be just as irritated by an employee who cried in my office, as a man. I mean, this assumption that we are fans of being over emotional in the workplace is not an accurate assumption about most of us.

President Truth was frank in her recollection of the stereotypical treatment of women in the HBCU, specifically emphasizing that this treatment mainly comes from other Black people. She likened the patriarchal structure of the HBCU to that of the Black church, whereas Black men lead, while Black women follow. Relative to HBCUs, she shared:

A lot of us resemble the Black church. You still have a lot of longstanding impacts of that and how women are perceived, or how they move through the organization. I think we're supportive of the success of the students, but you see more subtle things. Particular when it comes to the professional side in how and when women advance, or don't advance are some of the challenges that they have to overcome that may be different than what the male counterparts are having to endure.

President Robin James has similar experiences in both PWIs and HBCUs, she stated "in many churches, women can't stand in the pulpit, women are not supposed to be in leadership positions, and so I had to navigate those things very carefully."

However, in light of stereotypes surrounding women's capacity for leadership, these women used their intellect and strong personalities as a means of overcoming systematic patriarchal structures. For instance, President Robin James proclaimed that it gives her much satisfaction to counter assumptions surrounding her capabilities. She proudly shared: "...it gives me such great joy to be able to demonstrate to them, not only am I highly competent, I'm well

prepared, and reasonably doggone intelligent!" Throughout the interviews, she made known that she is motivated by those who doubt her.

**Make yourself known.** The findings show that these women did not ascend to their current roles by happenstance. Each have shared stories of how their hard work was recognized by those in authoritative positions, and in some instances, by individuals in executive positions outside of their institutions. In a role dominated by males, these women have prevailed in leading their institutions. The leadership skills and determination they possess has opened doors that have only been afforded to few women. These women are go-getters who have been diligent in making a name for themselves. Whether or not opportunities were presented, these women took initiative to create their own connections. All of the women in this study referenced the importance of making yourself known.

The concept of making a name for herself led President Truth to leave her initial career field to enter academia. She described how she came home from her non-academic job and realized that career was not what she wanted to be known for. During her tenure as faculty, President Truth shared:

I've made sure to get my name out there in [Funding Agency Names], serve on those panels, go to my technical related conferences, so that when my proposal came up to be evaluated, people had a comfort and a sense of who I was, and therefore they'd, "Oh well, we're willing to give you the benefit of the doubt."

Consequently, President Truth's proactive mechanism of getting her name out there led to obtaining funding and scholarship that outweighed that of her peers. Rather than idly waiting for an opportunity, she devised a plan that would increase her likelihood of tenure and promotion. In addition to orchestrating a plan for career success, she also strategized on making certain she

stood out with her college professors. She shared that there was one professor with a reputation for being hard on students. Knowing this, she talked of visiting the professor's office and establishing a rapport. President Truth asserted that if it takes extra tutoring sessions and extra conversations with professors to be successful, then establishing relationships with these individuals was necessary.

Similarly, Presidents Barbara Jordan and Robin James attested to the importance of making yourself known. President Jordan shared that it is essential for Black women to let it be known that they are qualified and capable of executive level leadership. Moreover, she shared that although career advancement is challenging, you have to "get your foot in the door" and make sure your credentials speak for themselves. Likewise, President James was very forthcoming in stating "open your mouth...I mean, people have to know who you are." These women are all aware of the challenges Black women face on their path to career mobility. Each understands the importance of their reputations. More specifically, they understand that for Black women leaders, there is marginal opportunity to advance to the HBCU presidencies. Nevertheless, these women's dedication to making a name for themselves has helped place them in to the top position in the HBCU.

### **Summary**

This chapter outlined the career advancement narratives of the Black women who were successful in advancing to the HBCU presidency. There were four overarching themes found: (1) Black Women Role Models, (2) Overcoming Oppression, (3) The Importance of Mentoring and Support Systems, and (4) Determination to Succeed. These themes were manifested throughout their stories of challenge and triumph in the face of adversity. Their stories began with their childhood experiences, college experiences, and extended through their career and current

position. Having a sense of their early lives helped to put into perspective how their upbringing relates to the strong leaders they are today. Each has experienced empowering moments at different phases in their lives. While their road to the HBCU presidency was not without roadblocks, these women have overcome several obstacles in their quest to the HBCU presidency. In the following section, Chapter 5 will include implications for both HBCUs and Black women HBCU leaders. In addition, implications for future research will be discussed.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Discussion**

There is a vast underrepresentation of Black women presidents in HBCUs. Despite Black women's educational achievements, they still lag behind their Black male counterparts in the HBCU's chief position. This study presents the career advancement narratives of three Black women who have rose to the HBCU presidency. Due to the storytelling nature of this study, a narrative approach was used. In addition, Black Feminist Thought (BFT) was the theoretical framework applied to the stories conveyed by the women. This chapter will begin with a discussion of how the findings connect to the literature review and the theoretical framework, followed by a discussion of implications for policy and practice, as well as recommendations for future research. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of limitations and delimitations.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The findings of this study filled a gap in the literature relative to the narratives of Black women HBCU presidents. The literature on this topic is dearth, some of which is decades old. Subsequently, recent studies are few. Similarly, there are researchers who attest to the lack of available research regarding this demographic of leaders (Commodore et al., 2016; Esters & Strayhorn, 2013; Jackson & Harris, 2005). Much of the research available regarding Black women leaders in higher education focuses on their experiences in predominantly White institutions. The narratives of the women who contributed to this study were grouped into the following overarching themes: (1) Black Women Role Models, (2) Overcoming Oppression, (3) The Importance of Mentoring and Support Systems, and (4) Determination to Succeed. These four themes were further collapsed into sub-themes. The sub-themes for "Black Women Role Models" were: (1) Childhood Idols, (2) College Idols, and (3) Career Idols. The sub-themes for

"Overcoming Oppression" were: (1) Sexism (2) Sexual Harassment, and (3) Racism. The sub-themes for "The Importance of Mentoring and Support Systems" were: (1) College and Career Mentoring, (2) Access to Networks, and (3) Support Systems. The sub-themes for "Determination to Succeed" were: (1) Climbing the Career Ladder, (2) Overcoming Stereotypes, and (3) Making Yourself Known. Taken together, the women in this study shared many commonalities, each consistent with Black Feminist Thought.

### **Addressing the Research Question**

The sole research question in this study was, *what are the storied career advancement experiences of Black women who have risen to the HBCU presidency?* The stories of the three resilient women in this study exemplify empowerment. Even in the face of adversity, these women were triumphant in reaching the HBCU presidency. According to the literature, Black women face a number of challenges throughout their career paths (Cobham & Patton, 2015; Davis, 2016; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Dowdy & Hamilton, 2011; Holmes, Land & Hinton-Hudson, 2007; Nichols & Tanskley, 2004; Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Sesko & Biernet, 2010). Reflective of the research, the women in this study each faced challenges while navigating their rise to the HBCU presidency. Throughout different positions and within different institution types, these obstacles have included sexism, and in some instances, racism and sexual harassment (Brown, 2019; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Pittman, 2010; Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Wright, Taylor, Burrell, & Stewart, 2006). The strong early childhood bonds they shared with Black women in their families helped to set the foundation for the phenomenal woman that they have become (Collins, 2000). Each narrative was representative of their drive to climb the higher education career ladder. These women have broken barriers and have forged past what Collins (2000) refers to as controlling images of Black women.

In addition, each of the women spoke of the importance of having a mentor while navigating the higher education environment. This finding coincides with several researchers who have explored the need for mentoring Black women in academia (Chang, Welton, Martinez, & Cortez; 2013; Wallace, Moore, & Curtis, 2014). President Barbara Jordan was mentored by Black women, and venerated this demographic as a mentor (Griffin, 2012; Patton, 2009). However, President Robin James did not have adequate mentoring relationships, but desired them. Notwithstanding her lack of mentoring, she managed to climb the career ladder. This particular finding contrasts with existing literature which found mentoring to be a key component of Black women's career ascension (Brown, 2005; Gamble & Turner, 2015; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Wallace, et al., 2004; Tillman, 2010). President Hillary Truth preferred the mentorship of males, which resonates with Gardner, Barret, and Pearson, (2014) and Cobham and Patton (2015), who found that some Black women in academia have had positive mentoring relationships with individuals of different races and genders, and thus have no mentoring preference.

As it relates to race and gender, researchers have found that being both Black and female poses what some refer to as a double jeopardy, where they are viewed as less effective leaders and face discrimination more often than Black men, White men, and White women (Davis & Maldonado, 2015, Nichols & Tanskley, 2004; Rosette and Livingston, 2012). This study resembles those findings, as the women faced stereotypes for being in the role of the president. Additionally, some of the women spoke of the challenging aspects of finding supportive networks, while at times emphasizing the strength of networks that men have. Likewise, Lewis (2016) found that even though Black men are also marginalized, they are still more likely to have more access to supportive networks than Black women.

Furthermore, there have been times when these women's leadership skills were doubted. Chang et al. (2013) and Green and Lewis (2013) found that Black women in academia often find themselves having to prove to their colleagues that they are qualified for the position in which they hold. To illustrate, President Robin James faced comments of being hired based on her looks. She further asserted that her Black male counterparts do not face this type of scrutiny in their role as HBCU president, and are treated more respectfully. Kelly, Gayles, and Williams (2017) found that in comparison to Black men, Black women feel more negatively affected with having to prove their value. This unnecessary burden further supports the concept of the double jeopardy of being Black and female, and the multiple forms of oppression these women encounter (Clarke, 2015; Collins, 2000). In addition to the aforementioned findings, the three key findings of this study will be unpacked below: Sexism in the HBCU, HBCU Student vs HBCU Employee, and Black Male Patriarchy in the HBCU

### **Sexism**

While racism against two of the women was evident within the PWI that one attended, and in a PWI that one was employed in, a key finding in this study was the sexism the women endured within their careers. The sexism occurred in PWI's and HBCUs for President Robin James, from individuals outside of the HBCU for President Barbara Jordan, and in the HBCU for President Hillary Truth. To illustrate, President Robin James shared stories of working in a PWI and being demoted due to her pregnancy. On the other hand, President Barbara Jordan shared how individuals outside of the HBCU are surprised to learn that a woman is a president of a university. Given that she did not experience sexism within the HBCU, this finding contrasts with Bonner (2001) and Gasman (2007), who found that HBCUs are not always welcoming to Black women leaders. However, President Hillary Truth shared stories of the sexism she



endured from Black men in the HBCU. Given the reasons for the establishment HBCUs, this finding was particularly disparaging. hooks (2015) argued that:

Black leaders, male and female, have been unwilling to acknowledge black male sexist oppression of black women because they do not want to acknowledge that racism is not the only oppressive force in our lives. Nor do they wish to complicate efforts to resist racism by acknowledging that black men can be victimized by racism but at the same time act as sexist oppressors to black women. Consequently, there is little acknowledgement of sexist oppression in black male/female relationships as a serious problem (p. 88).

Even though the HBCU was founded in response to racist systems that prevented Black people from attending PWIs (Bonner, 2001; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Gasman & Abiola, 2016; USDOE, 1991), there is literature suggesting that there are Black women leaders in HBCUs that encounter discriminatory practices (Bonner, 2001; Jean-Marie, 2006; Jean-Marie, Williams, & Sherman, 2009; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017). These practices include gender oppression, a lack of advancement opportunities, a lack of decision-making authority, and pay inequities (Bonner, 2001; Kennedy, 2012). For some of the women in this study, these practices manifested. In light of these findings, discrimination against Black women is not confined by institution type (Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009). By the same token, men in HBCUs earn higher salaries and have access to more resources than Black women (Jean-Marie, Williams, & Sherman, 2009).

According to Bonner (2001), "the uniqueness of HBCU's history of struggle against racism seems to frame the issues creating difficulty for efforts to explicate gender-related problems" (p. 180). In other words, while HBCUs have fought against racial oppressions, there

appears to be a disregard for the sexism ingrained in the culture of the institution. Similarly, hooks (2015) argued that it is imperative for the Black community to recognize that "sexism could be just as oppressive as racism" (p. 1). Furthermore, Collins (2000) posited that there are some HBCUs that contribute to the marginalization of Black women. Consequently, the sexism facing Black women HBCU leaders, especially within institutions that were created as a safe haven for Black people, requires immediate attention.

### **HBCU Student versus HBCU Employee**

A second key finding is the HBCU student experience versus the HBCU employee experience for Black women. The narratives of Presidents Hillary Truth and Robin James show that their experiences as HBCU students were nurturing and uplifting. This finding mirrors that of Arroyo & Gasman (2014), who found that the HBCU climate offers support systems integral for Black students' success. But on the contrary, their careers within the institution have not always provided such a warm environment (Gasman, 2007). Presidents Truth and James spoke fondly of their undergraduate HBCU experience and the support and care they received during this time. Nonetheless, their experiences as HBCU professionals was surprisingly the opposite. Both spoke of the sexism they endured in their HBCU careers, which was a stark difference in comparison to their years as students. Although HBCUs are known to provide comforting environments for both Black male and female students alike, the disconnect in how Black women leaders are treated is contradictory to the mission of HBCUs. This difference in treatment of Black women students, as compared to Black women leaders, can be attributed to HBCUs viewing Black women leaders as a threat to the Black male patriarchy evident within these institutions.

### **Black Male Patriarchy in HBCU**

A third key finding was the Black male patriarchy that exists within the HBCU. There was a consensus among the women in their acknowledgement of the large number of Black male HBCU presidents, in comparison to the number of Black women serving in the role. Presidents Hillary Truth and Robin James compared this representation to that of the Black church, where the men lead and the women follow. Dating back to the 19th century, Perkins (2015) argued that because of patriarchal views held by Black men, they oftentimes feel threatened by the accolades of Black women. While some may pass this patriarchy off as an accepted tradition, there are others who argue that sexism in any, regardless of the circumstances, is unacceptable. According to hooks (2015), during the 19th century, Black male control in leadership positions was representative of a patriarchy. hooks further contended that as Black men obtain status within their lives, they expect Black women to be submissive. To demonstrate, commentary in the HBCU Digest by deGregory (2016) reads as follows:

It is not enough to acknowledge that presidential offices of ivory and ebony towers alike have traditionally been thought of as the purview of men. It is certainly not nearly enough to disguise patriarchy and sexism as traditional (and therefore “appropriate”) gender roles, when limiting the ability of women to access the presidential offices of HBCUs, much less be successful in them (p. 3).

Moreover, there were stories told of how the men in these roles are treated more favorably, while the women face scrutiny. An example of this biased treatment was shared by President Robin James:

Many of us are the first in our institution. If we blow it, will be the last at our institution. I think the pressure is on us to perform at a very, very high level, and I think that any misstep is an immediate cause for termination, or some form of public humiliation that I

find different from, you know, when men commit some awfully egregious act sometimes on campus, we're human, and people fall short, they are dismissed quietly, and paid out.

Women are publicly dragged and embarrassed, unfairly in many instances.

A commentary in the HBCU Digest echoes her sentiment. The author argued that Black women HBCU presidents are held to a higher standard than their Black male counterparts, stating that: "Women in HBCU presidencies have not received the same opportunity to get it wrong and to learn how to get it right. They are told to get out" (deGregory, 2016, p. 5).

Further instances of sexism towards Black women HBCU presidents was evident in the contract of Dr. Gwendolyn Boyd, former president of Alabama State University. Dr. Boyd was the first female president of the HBCU. In her contract, posted by the Alabama Media Group, there was a clause stating: "for so long as Dr. Boyd is President and a single person, she shall not be allowed to cohabitate in the President's residence with any person with whom she has a romantic relation" (*Employment Contract Between Alabama State University, A Public University, And Dr. Gwendolyn E. Boyd, Its President, Section 5.4, p. 5*). This clause caused some controversy, which left some wondering whether such a stipulation would have existed if the president was a male. These actions further attest to the, unequal treatment of Black women HBCU presidents. Similarly, Bonner (2001) argued that it is paramount for HBCUs to address sexism within their institutions.

### **Connections to Theoretical Framework**

The narratives of these courageous women are interwoven into Collins (2000) Black Feminist Thought. Collins argued that BFT examines how Black women empower themselves and reject oppressive practices and controlling images of their womanhood. The following components of BFT will be unpacked in this section: self-definition and self-valuation, the

interlocking nature of oppression, intellectual thought and political activism, and the importance of Afro-American women's culture.

### **Self-Definition and Self-Valuation**

According to Collins (1986), "self-definition involves challenging the political knowledge-validation process that has resulted in externally-defined, stereotypical images of Afro-American womanhood" while "self-valuation stresses the content of Black women's self-definitions-namely, replacing externally-derived images with authentic Black female images" (p. S16-17). Throughout this study, the women's narratives were indicative of self-definition and self-valuation. Each has been subjected to stereotypical assumptions either on their path to the HBCU presidency, or while holding the position. To add, some stereotypes were gender-based, while others were race-based. The gender-based stereotypes are linked to the notion that some hold regarding Black women's leadership capabilities (Green & Lewis, 2013; Kelly, et al., 2017; Lewis, 2016). For instance, Black women are oftentimes labeled as ineffective leaders. Such stereotypes are a burden for women, particularly Black women, who are underrepresented in the HBCU presidency. While all three experienced gender-based stereotypes within their careers, President Hillary Truth was subjected to race-based stereotypes (Grier-Reed, 2010). These instances occurred during her graduate school years at a PWI.

Despite these stereotypical images, the women's sense of self-valuation helped them to navigate these troubling environments. Collins (1986) argued that "when Black females choose to value those aspects of Afro-American womanhood that are stereotyped, ridiculed, and maligned in academic scholarship and popular media, they are actually questioning some of the basic ideas used to control dominated groups in general" (p. S17). In essence, the three women in this study were determined to rise above controlling images as they ascended to the HBCU

presidency. They did not allow the perceptions and actions of others to hinder their progress. In essence, having an empowering attitude is necessary to Black women's career prosperity. These women were cognizant of the need to exercise self-definition and self-valuation. They were aware of their worth, and refused to allow others' impressions of them to place doubt on their capabilities. Despite roadblocks on the path to the HBCU presidency these women exercised perseverance throughout their career paths.

For example, President Barbara Jordan reflected on how being a female in a male dominated role in and of itself is a stereotype. However, she was very forthright in stating that "I try to make sure men know I'm at this table, and that I have a voice." Similarly, President Hillary Truth also practiced self-valuation throughout her PWI graduate school experience. She was cognizant that, in order to succeed, she would need to successfully navigate the hostile environment. In her career, her self-valuation would lead her beyond controlling images in the HBCU, where Black men were not particularly welcoming to her. However, she candidly stated that she has a "strong" personality, and that she "does not back down easy." Furthering Collins (1986) concept of self-valuation was President Robin James. She did not hesitate to explain that she "loves" when others doubt her capabilities. Further explaining that she sees this as an opportunity to show that she is "pretty darn intelligent." President James would further explain how she once "wiped the floor" with a White man who automatically assumed he had an advantage over her in the workplace.

### **The Interlocking Nature of Oppression**

Collins (1986) posited that the interlocking nature of oppression "shifts the entire focus of investigation from one aimed at explicating elements of race or gender or class oppression to one whose goal is to determine what the links are among these systems" (p. S20). According to

hooks (2015), gender oppression is as equally oppressing as race oppression for Black women. Taken together, the oppression of Black women leads to struggles that are different from that of White females and Black males (Guy-Sheftall, 1986). On average, Black women continue to hold the lower-level positions in higher education. In addition, they are at times seen as what Collins refers to as the “outsider within.” Although the outsider within the academy is often used in research to describe the treatment of Black women academicians in PWIs, this concept applies to this study as well. Given the origin of HBCUs, this is a particularly interesting concept. To illustrate, the low number of Black women presidents of HBCUs is representative of their outsider status within the walls of these institutions. Each of the women in this study acknowledged the disparity in the number of men vs women HBCU presidents.

Different forms of oppression manifested in the narratives of these women. President Hillary Truth experienced dominant practices at the PWI she attended as a graduate student (Grier-Reed, 2010). She shared stories that despite her answers being correct, her professors would still score her papers less than her peers. Years later, in her higher education career, she would experience Black males who were not receptive of her position. However, she refused to allow their actions to interrupt her success. Subsequently, Collins (2000) argued that "Black men who feel that they cannot be men unless they are in charge can be highly threatened by assertive Black women"(p. 157). President Robin James experienced oppression within the PWI where she was once employed. She shared how she was demoted for becoming pregnant, and that it was not uncommon for her supervisor to make comments based on her race. To add, the sexual harassment President Barbara Jordan encountered from a professor as an HBCU undergraduate coincides with the role that men play in exerting dominance over Black women (Collins, 2000).

### **Intellectual Thought and Political Activism**

The component of intellectual thought and political activism relates to the ways in which Black women use their intellect and activism as a means of rejecting oppressive practices (Collins, 1990). According to Collins, Black women's intellectualism is a form of activism. Moreover, Black women also utilize coalition building as a form of political activism. To illustrate, this level of activism includes coalition building with others seeking to eliminate discriminatory institutional barriers. The practice of eliminating institutional barriers was reflective in the narratives of the women in this study.

Each used their intellectualism as tools for success in the higher education environment. President Hillary Truth was strategic in her approach to advance her career. She knew that her success would not happen by chance, and that it was up to her to seek out research and career development opportunities. Her efforts paid off, as she was noticed by the president of her HBCU, and was ultimately offered her first executive position.

According to Collins (1990) Black women's relationships with one another is also a key element of working together to overcome institutional barriers. President Robin James spoke of the importance of coalition building among Black women HBCU leaders, stating that men have far more access to networks than women. In addition, President Barbara Jordan values the relationships that she has formed with other Black women HBCU presidents. This revelation furthers the need for Black women to come together under the auspices of sisterhood. As working together as a cohesive unit, may increase coalition building, which may ultimately help to combat discriminatory practices towards Black women in the HBCU.

### **The Importance of Afro-American Women's Culture**

The findings of this study align directly with Collins (1986) theme of the importance of Afro-American women's culture. According to Collins (1986), "Black feminists have not only



uncovered previously unexplored areas of the Black female experience, but they have also identified concrete areas of social relations where Afro-American women create and pass on self-definitions and self-valuations essential to coping with the simultaneity of oppression they experience" (p. S21). Furthermore, Collins (1986) argued that Black women share interpersonal relationships with not only their biological children, but also other children in their families, and children within the Black community. Similarly, each of the participants had Black women role models in their childhood. Each role model instilled values within the women. These relationships support the notion of the importance of Afro-American women's culture. For instance, President Barbara Jordan's bond with her mother, President Hillary Truth's bond with her grandmother, and President Robin James' bond with her aunt. These types of relationships are vital in sustaining Black women's cultural connections with one another.

To illustrate, President Jordan spoke of her mother as a hard-working woman, who was not only loved by her family, but also by the community as well. Her mother's selfless service to the community was instilled in President Jordan, as she described herself as a servant leader. Notwithstanding her leadership positions, she told stories of how she has no problem working the front desk and greeting visitors who come to her office. She takes pride in being a people oriented leader.

In addition, it can be articulated that President Hillary Truth's strong personality and "I don't back down easy" workplace outlook can be attributed to her relationships with her grandmother, who like President Jordan's mother, was also active in her community. She explained how her grandmother was instrumental in recruiting other Black people to vote, during a time when it was dangerous for Black people to do so. In similar fashion, President Robin James shared a bond with her aunt. She would initially enter the workplace in the same

profession as her aunt, further explaining that her aunt was "brilliant" and encouraged her to succeed.

Thus, through their experiences, Black women share interpersonal relationships with one another. Therefore, it is no surprise that these interpersonal relationships manifested in the adult lives of Presidents James and Jordan. As it relates to President James, she had an affinity for the wife of the president of her undergraduate HBCU. She mentioned how they shared similar interests, with both being in the same sorority and similar career paths. President Jordan also told stories of Black woman who were instrumental in guiding her through collegiate and career success. These findings support the notion of the impact that Black women have on each other's success. Furthermore, Collins (2000) posits that the bonds among Black women are necessary in sustaining Black sisterhood.

The use of Black Feminist Thought as the theoretical framework to this study aided in the researcher's understanding of the experiences of Black women leaders in HBCUs. Moreover, applying BFT to this study helped shed light on the following issues: stereotypes faced by Black women on their road to, and within their role as HBCU president; sexism within the HBCU; their strong relationships with Black female relatives; and their tools for success and empowerment. Such concepts were evident throughout the narratives of these women. Their will to overcome the odds was interwoven throughout their stories of empowerment.

### **Implications**

There are several implications within this study. First are the implications for HBCUs themselves. Based on the findings of this study, it is imperative for HBCUs to respond to the challenges facing Black women leaders within these institutions. Second are the implications for Black women HBCU leaders. These implications include ways in which these women can

enhance their career advancement. Last, the implications for future research will be discussed. This is an understudied topic, and additional research regarding the experiences of this demographic is paramount.

### **Implications for HBCUs**

Due to the lack of Black women serving as presidents of HBCUs, there is a need for these institutions to take action in recruiting and retaining qualified Black women. While it is noteworthy that HBCUs enroll a large percentage of Black female students, there is also a need to focus on the recruitment of Black women to serve in positions of leadership, including the presidency. In addition, HBCUs should ensure that Black women are equally represented on their governing boards; HBCUs enroll a large percentage of Black female students, thus adequate representation is essential. In keeping with the legacy of serving the Black community, HBCUs need to be proactive in their efforts to ensure that Black women are afforded the same opportunities as Black men to serve as president.

Thus, the recruitment and retention of Black women HBCU presidents should be a part of the institutions overall strategic plan. For instance, adequate funding should be allotted for programs to support Black women's career development, such as mentoring and networking and leadership training programs (Chang, et al., 2013; Wallace, et al., 2014). The women in this study acknowledged the importance of having a mentor to help guide them on their career paths. Through mentoring relationships, two of the women received beneficial career guidance and one spoke of the negative ramifications of not having a mentor. Taken together, is crucial for HBCUs to offer formal mentoring programs for Black women leaders.

Another component to providing career development opportunities for Black women is greater access to networks. There is literature suggesting that, on average, Black women lack

access to institutional networks (Lewis, 2016). As a result, they are at times tasked with finding networks outside of their departments (Chang et al., 2013) and institutions (Wallace et al., 2014). In fact, it was the lack of networking opportunities that led President Robin James to seek supportive networks outside of her institution. As such, HBCUs should offer networking opportunities through conferences and workshops, aimed at career development for Black women.

In addition to mentoring programs and access to networks, leadership development training should also be made available for Black women HBCU leaders. Particularly, Black women should be involved in the development of such programs. Consequently, leadership training programs developed by, and for Black women, are effective in navigating a challenging environment (West, 2017). In fact, leadership development training programs were found to have been beneficial in Black women's career development (Hague & Okpala, 2017; West 2017). The women in this study spoke often of the importance of learning new skill sets throughout their career development.

Furthermore, in order to lessen the underrepresentation of Black women HBCU presidents, it is necessary for HBCUs to have an understanding of the factors that aid Black women administrators in their career advancement. To that end, this study has the potential to provide institutions with pertinent information regarding the factors that may hinder Black women's career advancement, as well as the factors that may assist Black women in their career advancement. Moreover, this study has the potential to aid institutions in developing mentoring and leadership development programs. Furthermore, having an understanding of the strategies that help Black women develop as leaders may serve as a guiding force for other Black women.

### **Implications for Black Women HBCU Leaders**

The women in this study were resilient, dedicated, and determined to succeed both academically and professionally. They are go-getters in every sense of the word. Metaphorically speaking, they built their own doors, rather than waiting for doors to open for them. Each understood the nature in which Black women are judged harshly, and that complacency was not an option. As such, the onus of career development does not rest solely on the HBCU, but on the Black female leader in the HBCU as well. President Barbara Jordan shared:

You go in and try to learn what they do from the ground up, and how they do it. And how it affects the big picture. Because it's the big picture people that get to be in positions like this. And so, you don't say, let me do this cause I want to be a president, and I need to know this...what skill set can I bring to help sharpen this department up and get it going? You go in and you wanna learn everything, and you wanna help, and you wanna be helpful...what's your vision? And you know, if you go in with the attitude of life is all about learning, and helping, and not "I came in here to fix y'all, cause y'all broken," no one's gonna work with you in that world.

Therefore, it is necessary for Black women to be proactive in learning new skills and strengthening their leadership development with each position (Bates, 2007; Freeman & Gasman, 2014; West, 2017; Hughes, 2004). To add, given the notion that Black women receive “minimal access to the crumbs thrown at Black men and White women” (Clarke, 2015, p. 134), it is essential for Black women to hone their leadership skills. Based on President Jordan's advice, having the right attitude and work ethic can be the difference between career advancement and career complacency. Further advice for Black women hoping to ascend to the HBCU presidency was shared by President Hillary Truth:

The field is wide open...umm it doesn't mean that it's an easy field or that things will go the way that they want it to go the first time out the box. Maybe it does, but it's a service role that's worth pursuing. So I would encourage them to prepare themselves. You don't skip steps, when you skip steps you miss the opportunity to learn knowledges of operation. But I would say it's a worthy position to aspire to. And don't be afraid to be bold, be brave. And it's okay to look at doing things differently, to be innovative. It may mean that you have to go against the grain and go against the norm...I think that's okay. Its, you just have to figure out how to approach it, and how to bring people along, and bring people around to where you're trying to get the institution to go.

In similar fashion, Freeman and Gasmen (2014) and Gamble and Turner (2015) also found that Black leaders must be willing to take risks. As such, it is important that Black women be willing to take chances that would increase their career opportunities. For instance, according to President Truth, even though taking risks may not be the most popular option, it is a necessary option for professional growth. It is also crucial for Black women to be strategic in their actions, and have the wherewithal to be assertive in the face of adversity. Additionally, President Robin James shared:

I think you really are going to have to, even if it's not your nature, be outgoing and engaging. You have to establish those mentoring relationships, you have to make sure people know who you are, and they know your body of work, and so they're willing to vouch for you, so to speak. I also think again, good mentorship is important. The ability to listen a little bit...you don't have to take the advice you're given all the time. But you do have to act like it. I think egos are an interesting thing, I think you have to be, you know, willing to sit at the foot of an elder and listen to what they have to say. You can

decide on the way home in the car, if you're gonna use any of it. But you have to act like it's the most profound thing you ever heard, because those are the people in the positions to influence a search, or to nominate you for a search. And if they get the impression that you know everything, right? And that you are not collaborative, that you aren't prepared to lead, they won't help you. So building relationships, getting your name out there, being willing to listen.

The mentoring relationship is a key component in Black women's success in academia (Brown, 2005; Gamble & Turner, 2015; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Wallace, et al., 2004; Tillman, 2010). President James' guidance for Black women seeking to ascend to the HBCU presidency further shows the importance of mentoring for these women. However, as was the case with President James, there are times when mentoring relationships are difficult to obtain. As such, Black women should consider seeking out mentoring relationships, even when none exist within their institutions (Wallace, Moore, & Curtis, 2014).

The advice given by these women adds to the body of literature relative to Black women's career development. These findings show that there is a need for aspiring Black women leaders to take ownership of their career paths. Subsequently, each took initiative to being willing to learn new skills, take risks, and focus on climbing the career ladder. Their stories can serve to guide other Black women who seek to advance to the HBCU presidency.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Based on the findings of this study, there are three recommendations for future research: 1) the Black female HBCU student experience vs Black female HBCU employee experience, 2) a focus on a broader group of Black women HBCU faculty and leaders, and 3) the composition of HBCU board of trustees. A particularly interested find was in the stories of two of the women.

Each explained how their HBCU student experience was uplifting, where they were nurtured and provided tools for success in life. However, their experiences as HBCU leaders painted a different picture, one that included sexism and a disregard for their credentials. These varying perspectives warrant additional studies into these contrasting experiences. As such, there is a need to understand the reasons why the welcoming student environment does not carry over into the work environment.

A second recommendation for future research is the need to study a broader group of Black women HBCU leaders. Consequently, the use of more than three participants would provide for an increased knowledge of the experiences of this demographic. However, as reflected in this study, finding more than three participants can be a challenge. As such, future studies should include more than just Black women HBCU presidents, but other Black women employed in HBCUs as well. For instance, career advancement studies focusing on the experiences of Black women HBCU faculty, provosts, vice presidents, and deans would likely increase the number of study participants, as well as increase the literature on this topic.

A third recommendation for future research is the need for research focusing on the composition of HBCU boards of trustees. Since the inception of HBCUs, the composition of the board of trustees was heavily male, particularly White men. Presently, HBCU boards have a large representation of Black men and an underrepresentation of Black women. Thus, it is necessary to understand the role this gender disparity plays in the recruitment and retention of qualified Black women presidents of HBCUs.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

This study was not conducted without limitations. For example, out of the twenty-six Black women presidents that were contacted, only three agreed to participate in the study. This



could be attributed to fear of being identified, given the lack of Black women HBCU presidents. Additionally, because of the few women serving as HBCU presidents, the participants may have refrained from telling all of their stories, out of fear of repercussions from their institutions. However, as Black female in academia, I believe my shared identity with the women in this study aided in their comfort level of freely speaking with me. Additionally, the three participants in this study may not be representative of the entire population of Black women HBCU presidents. Furthermore, the findings may not be representative of all HBCUs. Thus, this study is not generalizable.

In addition, there are delimitations to this study. This study was limited to only current Black women HBCU presidents. As such, former presidents of HBCUs were not considered. However, this demographic may have been more willing to participate in this study. For instance, the women who are no longer in this role may be more open to freely discuss their experiences, without fear of retaliation. In addition, this study excluded other Black women in executive leadership positions in HBCUs such as Provosts, Vice Presidents, and Deans. These women may also have narratives of oppression and empowerment that they would like to share.

### **Conclusion**

Although the numbers of Black women presidents of HBCUs have increased over the past few decades, there still remains much underrepresentation. The time is long overdue for HBCUs to recognize the gender disparity within the role of the presidency. This study sought to chronicle the career advancement journeys of the Black women who have been successful in ascending to the presidency in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). HBCUs provide invaluable service and opportunities to Black students. Notwithstanding their large enrollment of Black female students, these institutions are heavily patriarchal in nature. This

study has highlighted the experiences of Black women HBCU presidents. These experiences range from positive aspects of making a name for themselves to overcoming challenges associated with sexism and stereotypes. These findings support the notion that even within HBCUs, Black women face similar challenges to their counterparts in PWIs (Bonner, 2001; Gasman, 2007; Kennedy, 2012).

Nonetheless, these women were determined in their pursuit of career prosperity. Each empowered themselves beyond difficulties to ascended to a role that Black women seldom reach. As such, it is my hope that this study will evoke additional studies on gender discrimination within the HBCU. Moreover, this study has the possibility to inform HBCUs of pertinent policy changes that reflect a commitment to recruit and retain qualified Black women to the role of president. Lastly, these women's stories of empowerment may serve as a guiding force for other Black women hoping to advance within the HBCU.

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## Appendix A

(Recruitment Email)

Greetings, Dr. \_\_\_\_\_:

My name is Tonia W. Horton, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Foundations Department at the University of New Orleans. I am currently conducting a narrative study on the career advancement journeys of the Black women who have been successful in ascending to the HBCU presidency. More specifically, I am interested in the storied experiences of Black women who have risen to the HBCU presidency.

I am reaching out to determine whether you would be interested in participating in my study. If so, your information will be kept strictly confidential. For instance, your name would not be used in the study, nor will your current or former places of employment be identified. In addition, if other names are mentioned, those individuals will also not be identified.

If you agree, your participation would consist of two interviews (approximately 1-1.5 hours each) over a 1-2 month period.

If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact me at [REDACTED]. In addition, you may also contact my advisor, Dr. Christopher Broadhurst, at [REDACTED].

Respectfully,

Tonia W. Horton  
Ph.D. Candidate, Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Foundations  
University of New Orleans

## Appendix B

(Letter of Consent)

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Christopher Broadhurst in the Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Foundations at the University of New Orleans. I am conducting a research study to chronicle the career advancement journeys of the Black women who have been successful in ascending to the presidency in historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

I am requesting your participation, which will involve two, 1-1.5 hour interviews over a 1-2 month period. If you choose to participate, your information will be kept strictly confidential. For instance, your name would not be used in the study, nor will your current or former places of employment be identified. In addition, if other names are mentioned, those individuals will also not be identified. Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you can withdraw from the study at any time. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used.

Although there may be no direct benefit to you, the possible benefit of your participation is expanding the literature on Black women HBCU presidents.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please call me at [REDACTED].

Sincerely,

Tonia W. Horton

By signing below you are giving consent to participate in the above study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Ann O'Hanlon, Chair of the University of New Orleans at [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]



## Appendix C

### Interview Protocol #1

#### Childhood, Youth, and College

1. Can you tell me about familial background (parents, siblings, household rules)?
2. Tell me a story about a Black woman/women in your childhood that you looked up to, who you believe was integral in molding you into the person you are today?
3. Tell me about your childhood experiences and interactions with other Black girls (in school and outside of school)?
4. Tell me about your experiences and interactions with children of different races and genders (in school and outside of school)?
5. How would you describe your experiences with your teachers in grade school?
6. Can you describe any cultural events/ceremonies you may have participated in as a child? If so, how was that experience?
7. Tell me about any instances of oppression that you encountered in your childhood? If so, how did you overcome it?
8. Tell me a story about your college years (undergraduate and graduate)
9. What has been your experience with mentoring (formal and informal) during your college years? Were there times when you believed your race and gender impacted any mentoring relationships?
10. What type of institution(s) did you attend (PWI/HBCU)? Can you share any stories where you faced racism and/or sexism in college?
11. Tell me about the strategies you employed to ensure the completion of your degree(s)?
12. Can you tell me about a time in college where you may have questioned your self-worth, and whether you belonged there? If so, how did you overcome this challenge?

## **Appendix D**

### Interview Protocol #2

#### **Career Development**

1. Can you tell me about a time when you faced challenges (if any) while navigating the higher education career pipeline?
2. Can you share with me your experience with stereotypes within your career?
3. Tell me a story about how you empowered yourself while climbing the career ladder?
4. Can you share your storied experiences as an employee in an HBCU?
5. Tell me a story about the culture of your institution?
6. Tell me about your perceptions of gender discrimination within the HBCU?
7. Tell me a story about your experience with mentoring in the HBCU (as a mentee and mentor and formal and informal)?
8. Tell me about your relationship with other Black women, Black men, and other races and genders in the HBCU.
9. What do you believe to be the HBCUs role in fostering career development opportunities for Black women?
10. What story would you tell to other Black women who are seeking to advance to the HBCU presidency?

## VITA

The author was born in Baton Rouge, LA and raised in Plaquemine, LA. She earned a BA in Psychology from Louisiana State University in 1998. In 2004, she earned a Masters of Public Administration from Louisiana State University. Her studies in the Educational Administration doctoral program at the University of New Orleans began in 2016. She has nearly twenty years of higher education experience, of which sixteen were spent employed in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).