The Experiences of Female Student Government Association Presidents at Public Research Institutions in the Southeast: A Narrative Inquiry Approach

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ABSTRACT

The lack of females in elected leadership roles trickles down to colleges and universities' student governance (American Student Government Association, 2016). As a way of understanding the experiences of these female student leaders specifically at public research institutions in the Southeast, I used a narrative inquiry approach focusing on how these women define and make meaning of their experiences as female student government association presidents. These two research questions served as the foundation to understanding their experiences: (1) What are the experiences of these female student leaders prior to being elected to serve as their student government association president at their public research institution in the Southeast? and (2) What are the experiences of female college student leaders who serve as student government association presidents at public research institutions in the Southeast?

Seven participants who met the requirements of being female and serving as student government president at public institutions in the Southeast were interviewed. The data collected through the in-depth semi-structured three interview series process (Seidman, 2006) was formed into individual narratives focusing on context and meaning-making for each participant.

Five significant themes emerged from the data analysis process: (1) pre-college experiences, (2) pre-president experiences, (3) the "chilly climate," (4) combatting the "chilly climate," and (5) their identity and presidency. Implications for student affairs professionals include recruiting women early for student government involvement, helping women develop strong relationships with mentors and breakdown.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my four-legged companion, Winston. He was my best friend and my number one supporter throughout this journey. He kept my feet warm and my heart calm while also giving up somethings that gave him joy like frequent long walks. While he was not able to show that support at the end of this journey, I imagine if he was still on this Earth, he would be wagging his tail in pure excitement when I told him I did it.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

The lack of women in elected leadership roles is a problem in local, state, and national government. On the political front, women could impact both policies and political agendas. However, women make up only 29.3% of elected state legislature positions (Center for American Women in Politics, 2019b). In the United States (U.S.) Congress, women make up a slightly lower percentage of 23.7% of the elected positions in the Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives (Center for American Women in Politics, 2019b). The U.S. ranks 100th in the world for women's representation in national legislatures, behind nations like the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Bangladesh (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2017).

This gender gap in female elected government leaders trickles down to colleges' and universities' student governance (American Student Government Association, 2016). According to the American Student Government Association (ASGA), student government associations serve as an advocate for the student community working to advance student initiatives at their respective institution (2016). The student government association (SGA) president serves as the leader impacting change on their campus illustrating the overall significance of these leaders on their campus environment (American Student Government Association, 2016). The impact of student governance and the SGA president is seen across campus, both defining the student experiences and advocating for all members of the student body (May, 2009).

Through a comprehensive review of the existing literature on women in leadership in the political realm and student governance, which I will highlight more in the literature review, women in elected political leadership roles face adversity and challenges in obtaining these positions and being successful in these roles. In a leadership role and organizations, like student government or higher education institutions that are historically male-dominated, women struggle to overcome the biases and assumptions surrounding gender differences in leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Fox & Lawless, 2011; Hoyt & Simon, 2016; Miller & Kraus, 2004; Paxton & Kunovich, 2003; Spencer, 2004; Wilson, 2004).

Statement of the Problem

Currently, women outnumber men in colleges and universities in the U.S. about 1.3 to 1 and this gap is expected to continue to widen over the next 10 years (United States Department of Education, 2016). While women are attending college at a higher rate than men, women are not being selected to serve as a student government association president at their institution at a similar rate. About 15% of women serve in this role at four-year colleges and universities nationwide (American Student Government Association, 2016). Women underrepresentation in this elected student leadership role creates missed opportunities to serve as the voice of the gender majority (Miles, 2010). In addition, this underrepresentation creates missed opportunities for women to gain valuable leadership skills (Miles, 2010). These women also miss out on gaining knowledge about the functions of the U.S. government, igniting the desire to become an active citizen who participates in many different facets of the democratic process (Schaper, 2009). Women who do not participate in student government at their

institution are also missing opportunities for professional development that lead to heightened career trajectory in politics or in their chosen field (Schaper, 2009).

Miller and Kraus (2004) acknowledged the need to add to the literature on women's motivation for seeking involvement in university student government in hopes to better understand the gender division in this leadership position. Erwin (2005) and Spencer (2004) also recommended further research focused on understanding the experiences of females in student government leadership positions to gain a perspective on these women's motivation to lead. A few studies on gender differences of college student leaders recommend that further research include an emphasis on female leaders and their experiences specifically in male-dominated settings like student government (Kezar & Moriarty, 2000; Montgomery & Newman, 2010; Schaper, 2009). While some research on women as SGA presidents exist, this research is limited and specific to geographic location and institution size. Currently, most of the research on college student females in leadership had small sample sizes and were conducted at midwestern colleges and universities (Erwin, 2005; Montgomery & Newman, 2010). There is a gap in looking at student leaders at colleges and universities in the South.

Conceptual Framework

To address the purpose of this study, one must view the research through a lens of a conceptual framework. The conceptual framework for this study is linked to the possible oppression in relation to the power differential that considers gender normative assumptions of others. Critical theory framework focuses on exposing the hidden relations of power while considering the historical and current reality of an environment (Butin, 2010). Men have historically dominated institutions of politics and the academy

creating an organization culture where the marginalization of women is part of conventional functions (Acker, 1992). In this study, an important historical foundation related to student government is that the dominant culture of White men established the environment of SGA and higher education institutions (Cohen, 1998). Therefore, the traditions and patriarchal values promoted in this conventionally male-dominated organization carry over into the success and challenges of individuals who do not align with the historic identities found in the organization or in leadership.

Critical Theory

The conceptual framework for this study consists of the relationship between a few important theories as they relate to the research questions and the use of narrative inquiry (see Figure 1). Critical theory is the overarching theoretical framework that focuses on the idea of oppression and the relationship of the oppression with either power, knowledge, or identity (Butin, 2010). Feminist theory focuses on gender and the ideas of masculine bias and power struggles around the construct of gender (Peterson, 2004). Feminist theory was challenged by African Americans who believed that feminism excluded the experiences and needs of Black feminists; a new term was created for Black feminists known as *womanism* (Collins, 2009; Walker, 1983). The theory of intersectionality also is part of my conceptual framework as it brings together the idea that the organization of power is not shaped by one's identity like race or gender, but these identities work together to influence the division of power in an organization (Collins & Bilge, 2016). All these concepts contribute to my research questions and the narrative inquiry approach to this study.

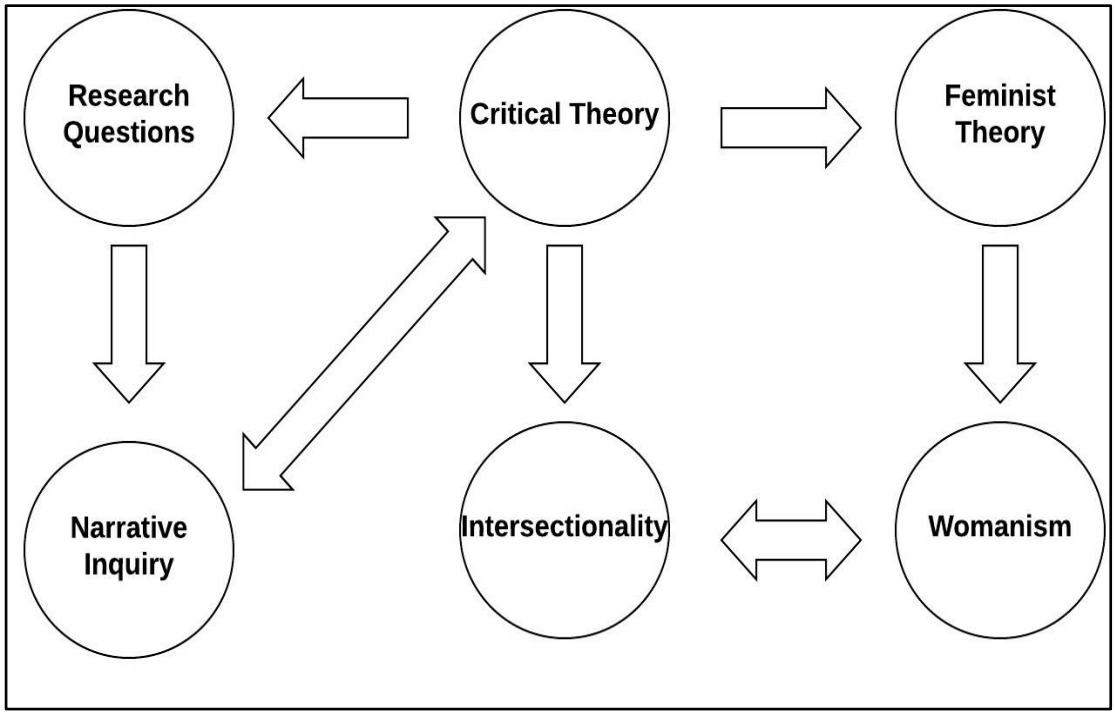

Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory is a subset of critical theory that focuses on the social structure of gender as the focal point of the inquiry (Lather, 1992). With the possible role of gender identity and the relationship of this identity to their leadership experiences, the feminist theory lens will be at the forefront of the experiences of these female college student leaders. In addition, gender normative behavior, masculine leadership characteristics, and differences in leading based on gender are all discussed in the current related literature (Boatwright & Egidio, 2003; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Montgomery & Newman, 2010; Schaper, 2009). The basis of feminist theory identifies that gender is not a category that refers to men and women and their material activities or their physical frame, but an analytical category that "refers to the construction of privileged masculinity and devalorized femininity and their ideological effects" (Lather, 1992, p. 39).

Feminism may be understood as a social movement with three historical waves: the first wave deriving from the abolitionist movement, the second wave deriving from the 1960s civil rights movement, and the third wave forming from the post-feminism movement that moves away from male oppression to female empowerment (Taylor, 1998). This historical context and the move to female empowerment in the current feminist wave may contribute to the experiences and challenges female student government presidents at higher education institutions face during their tenure in this role.

Arguments against the idea of three waves of feminism believe the historical context produces ideas that lead to political action, but feminism is not a product of social movements (Humm, 1992). Humm (1992) argued that feminism "depends on the premise that women can consciously and collectively change their social place" (p. 1). When approaching this study, the perspective that Humm argued concerning changing their social place may directly relate to the experiences of female student government presidents, who, while in these leadership roles were trying to change their social environment by defying the patriarchal values established in these male-dominated environments.

A subset of feminist theory, critical feminist theory, seeks to understand and explain the subtle forms of men's power and privilege under a system of patriarchy that leads to limitations and challenges many women experience in society (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2008). In response to the limitations under the system of patriarchy, feminist resistance theory examines women's lived experiences in higher education from the perspective of resisting the patriarchy and creating change as well as

how these women make meaning of these experiences (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Robinson & Kennington, 2002; Robinson & Ward, 1991).

Womanism

With some of the participants of this study identifying with racial identities, other conceptual frameworks come into play as a possible lens to explore their experiences and the meaning making of these experiences. Womanism was formed as a counter to feminism because of the omission of concerns and experiences of women of color (Taylor, 1998; Walker, 1983). Rooted in the experiences of Black women, womanism emphasized ending all forms of oppression, not just ending oppression related to the social constructs of gender (Philips, 2006). The motivation behind women of color running and serving as their student government president was an underlying principle that led to the creation of womanism. In both instances, women of color were motivated by their desire to represent viewpoints not currently being represented (Salas, 2010; Taylor, 1998).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality can serve as an analytic tool and lens when more than one social construct–race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, for example–work together and influence the way one may make meaning of their experiences or influence the way their environment interacts with the individual (Collins & Bilge, 2016). As mentioned in the discussion of womanism, feminism historically focused on the needs of White women that led to the development of womanism (Taylor, 1998). Intersectionality allows for multiple social constructs to be examined at one time (Collins & Bilge, 2016). For example, feminist theory cannot describe sexism as it relates to being a Black woman,

nor can theories that focus only on the role of race describe racism as it relates to a Black woman (Thompson, 1998). These experiences are not identical experiences in terms of race or gender as for Black women these experiences are about both race and gender (Thompson, 1998). This multiplicity of identities and intersectionality between those identities needs to be explored to describe the experiences of Black women. For female college student government leaders, the relationship between their multiple social constructs and their experiences need to be explored through this intersectionality theoretical framework to make meaning of their experiences.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to make meaning of the experiences of female SGA presidents and to empower these voices as well as understand the perspectives of this group of female leaders. Using narratives is appropriate for understanding the actions and experiences of others, as it is the way people understand their own lives (Kim, 2016). The use of narrative inquiry as a way of understanding experiences allows for the meaning making to occur through the ideas, memories, experiences, and feelings of this specific group of female leaders in relation to their social context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016).

Research Design

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the exploration of experience begins with Dewey's principle–continuity of experience. Continuity of experience is the idea that every experience builds from previous experiences (Dewey, 1938). A narrative inquiry approach for this study seeks to construct meaning of the female SGA presidents'

past experiences that shape their role as a leader now and impact their role as a leader in the future.

In addition, this narrative inquiry approach to the research design gave power to each individual female SGA president to define their perspectives within the social construct of their underrepresented voices (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Harding, 1988). In feminist perspectives of qualitative research, the focus of the research is from a woman's perspective of her own experience (Lather, 1992). This perspective designs research for women instead of merely about women (Lather, 1992). Keeping this feminist perspective in mind, the narrative inquiry approach allows for women to authentically express their experiences, memories, and feelings as it relates to serving as the SGA president at their institution.

Research Questions

Through this study on the experiences of female SGA presidents at public research institutions in the southeastern states, I sought to make meaning of the experiences of these leaders through the following questions:

RQ1: What are the experiences of female college student leaders prior to being elected to serve as their student government association president?

RQ2: What are the experiences of female college student leaders who serve as student government association presidents?

Data Collection

I interviewed seven female SGA presidents at public research institutions in the Southeast. Using Seidman's (2006) in-depth three interview series process, the first interview focused on prior experiences and history of the participant, the second

interview focused on the current experiences as a female SGA president, and the third interview allowed for reflection and meaning-making of their experiences to take place. The data collected through the series of interviews then was formed into individual narratives focusing on context and meaning for each participant. From the narratives for each participant, themes were discovered as it related to their individual meaning making and context focused on both the experiences leading up to serving as student government president and their experiences during their one-year term.

Significance of Study

As more females attend higher education institutions, there is added significance to focus research on understanding the experiences of female student government presidents and their motivations to lead in this capacity. With this change in the demographics at higher education institutions, more women may try to lead in these higher student leadership roles. By making meaning of current female student government presidents' experiences, one can apply these experiences to understanding the potential experiences other women may face in similar roles. These narratives can provide an understanding of the challenges these women face, produce a list of personal strategies used to navigate these challenges, and contribute to the development of strategies for higher education professionals looking to support female student leaders. As a professional employed in higher education, intentional efforts and workshops to encourage and support these women during their early leadership experiences at an institution, during their campaign experience, and during their term in office could also be developed.

Many times, when women hear about other women in leadership roles, they may be motivated to take a similar leap to lead; therefore, the storytelling in this research may encourage other women to seek out opportunities in leadership. This research could also support research on the existence of a "glass ceiling," a "labyrinth," and "imposter syndrome" (Clance & Imes, 1978; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Hoyt & Simon, 2016). Through this research, the existing theory on women's identity development focusing on both a holistic approach to student development and the way college students make meaning of their experiences could be supported by this research (Baxter Magolda, 2009; Brooks, 2000). In addition, this research can support theories on self-authorship and the transformational learning process for women (Baxter Magolda, 2009; Brooks, 2000). This research may also provide possible explanations of why the gender gap in elected leadership persists in government positions on the national, state, local, and university level and ideas of what can be done to help minimize this gap.

Delimitations

As the researcher, my identity can play a role in possible biases that need to be examined throughout the research process. I am a female higher education leader who, in my current role, serves as a resource to many female college student leaders. Therefore, throughout the research process, I have examined my assumptions, biases, and principles as they relate to my research. This self-reflection process encouraged me to keep these feelings, assumptions, and personal experiences in check through every stage of the qualitative research process. This validity check along with the use of rich data, respondent validation, and triangulation are described in greater detail in Chapter 3. My use of narrative inquiry ensures that I obtain rich data to support my conclusions which

Maxwell (2013) has mentioned as one of the strategies. The use of multiple interviews and personal reflective memos are some other strategies Maxwell (2013) mentions to help lessen the possibility of a validity threat.

These students' expectations of their one-year term may influence how the student feels about their experiences as student government president and could shape the way they make meaning and share their experiences. This research was qualitative in design and conducted via phone interviews. These student leaders have busy schedules. Depending on the time for each interview, participants may have felt rushed or fixed to a specific timeframe when to sharing their experiences. In addition, the rapport between the participant and the researcher may influence the participant's answers. As the researcher, I worked to establish a positive rapport with the participants; however, depending on the way each participant felt, each participant may not have always provided me with authentic or honest responses.

Limitations

The seven female SGA president interviews provided insights into female leadership specifically as it relates to serving as a student body president, but they will not be a generalizable sample. Although the female leaders shared their experiences, the data collected and analyzed will not be generalizable to other geographic locations and other types of higher education institutions.

Definitions of Terms

For the purpose of this study, terms will be defined as follows:

Female: For the purpose of this study, female gender identity is based on one's self-identified gender. Each participant will disclose to the researcher their gender identity as female.

Leadership: While a high position of power is not required to be a leader, leadership for this review focuses on selected and elected leadership roles. Leaders may serve as a leader without being selected or being elected into a position of power (Northouse, 2016). However, in democratic environments, to create policies and impact change, one must serve as an elected leader of a political office (Dittmar, Sanbonmatsu, Carroll, Walsh, & Wineinger, 2017). This same idea translates to campus governance as those in leadership roles within the student government association establish the agendas, develop policies, and advocate for the student community (May, 2010). Further, leadership is defined as both a learned behavior and a phenomenon shaped by one's experiences, historical environment influences, and societal norms (Komives, Dugan, Owen, Slack, & Wagner, 2011).

Public Research Institutions: Public refers to higher education institutions that receive state funding. Research institutions meet the requirements of either conferring at least 50 master's degrees or at least 20 doctoral degrees a year (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2018).

Student Government Association (SGA): Student government serves as the "official voice" of the student body for the purpose of this study in a higher education setting (Cuyjet, 1994, p. 74). The members of each institution's association oversee many of the administrative duties for the institution including allocation of student fees,

oversight of student organizations, and programming efforts as well as advocating for students' interests and policy changes (Cuyjet, 1994; May, 2009).

Southeast: Southeast, for this study, is defined as the following states: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

Organization of Study

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. In this chapter, I outlined the conceptual framework for this qualitative study as well as included the state of the problem, purpose, research questions, the significance of the study, delimitations and limitations of the study, as well as definitions of common terms used throughout this dissertation. In Chapter 2, I review the related literature on gender and leadership, women in political participation, and student government history, impact, and leadership. I also review related literature on women identity development models and transformational learning models focusing specifically on how women learn. Chapter 3 describes the qualitative methodology for this study and Chapter 4 presents narratives for each participant. Chapter 5 examines the common themes from the narratives. Chapter 6 provides a summary, discussion of the research findings, implications for current and further research, a personal reflection, and conclusion.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

To gain a better understanding of the underrepresentation of female college students in the presidential role in student government associations, a review of the existing literature is required. Chapter 2 contains a review of relevant literature by first focusing on student development theories related to meaning making for female college students. Then, there is a review of the existing literature on the general role gender plays in leadership. The review also includes a historical look at women in national or local government; understanding these women's experiences provides background knowledge to the probable experiences and influences of female college SGA presidents. A focus on student government associations from a historical perspective showcases the impact of this organization on students and the campus community. This research on the impact of student government is evidence to some of the missed opportunities described in Miles' (2010) qualitative research study. In conclusion, a review of the current research describing participation experiences of female college students in student government associations is presented.

Meaning Making and Student Development

Looking at how college students make meaning of their experiences and how they move through their environment involves a holistic perspective focusing on the context, which then plays a role in the actual construct of meaning (Baxter Magolda, 2009; Kegan, 1982). An advanced approach to meaning making involves understanding the

relationship between the context, be it in the past or present and one's emotions and thoughts (Kegan, 1982). Through this advanced approach of looking more holistically at the world and how emotions and thoughts work together individuals can make meaning of their experiences. Meaning making focuses on how people think, not what they are thinking (Baxter Magolda, 2009). Therefore, researchers "do not learn about a person's meaning making system by asking the person to explain it, but by observing the way the system actually works" (Kegan, 1980). Piaget (1950) described this meaning making as a process where people use assumptions to navigate how they were making meaning of their experience until they find conflict. If they find conflict, they may revise their assumptions that leads to growth in terms of more complex meaning making (Baxter Magolda, 2009).

In a person's college years, specific ways of meaning making can emerge which include "becoming aware of one's own composing reality, self-consciously participating in an ongoing dialogue toward truth, and cultivating a capacity to respond . . . in ways that are satisfying and just" (Parks, 2000, p. 6). Understanding the possible ways college students can make meaning of their experiences provides a lens for looking at the specific process in how they personally reflect on the meanings behind their experiences. Baxter Magolda's (2001) longitudinal study on women in adulthood provided context to what she called, *self-authorship,* or their capacity to define their beliefs, identity, and relationships. She found that these participants, when "trusting their internal voices," took responsibility for how they interpreted reality and how they reacted to that interpretation (Baxter Magolda, 2009, p. 631). Once these participants built this internal trust, they organized these choices into an "internal foundation" that guided them on how

to navigate their reactions to reality (Baxter Magolda, 2009, p. 632). While most of the participants did not experience the third element of self-authorship until their 30s, participants at this point then "secured internal commitments" (Baxter Magolda, 2009, p. 632). Using these internal commitments, women were comfortable with navigating the challenges and felt content with the possible disorder they may encounter from the challenges (Baxter Magolda, 2008).

When creating meaning of their experiences, women rely on narratives and storytelling to help them navigate the meaning making process. Baxter Magolda defined self-authorship as a way for women to make meaning of their reality (2008). Transformational learning is also seen as a way one can make meaning of their experiences as it is transformational "learning that leads to some type of fundamental change in the learners' sense of themselves, their worldviews, their understanding of their pasts, and their orientation to the future" (Brooks, 2000, p. 140). According to Brooks (2000), transformational learning for women occurs when women share their stories; allowing for them to claim their own voices. While the participants in this study may have found their voice and how they make meaning of their experiences, understanding the possible learning that can take place through the sharing of their stories is relevant to recognizing how these women make meaning of their lived experiences as student government presidents.

Gender and Leadership

The gender gap in terms of leadership focuses on the disproportionate number of women serving in lower level positions and not in leadership roles in organizations compared to the number of men in those same roles (Powell & Graves, 2003).

Explanations to why this occurs revolves around the fact that women are less likely to receive formal job training, encouragement and support, or be included in key networks compared to men that are key to mobility in one's career (McGuire, 2002; Powell & Graves, 2003; Taylor, 2010). These explanations relate to possible barriers women face in the workplace due to lack of human capital and the role gender stereotypes and prejudices may play in one's work environment (Hoyt & Simon, 2016).

In a 1986 *Wall Street Journal* report, the term *glass ceiling* was created to describe the invisible barriers women face as they work to achieve leadership positions in the business sector (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). The glass ceiling illustrated the idea that even women who were rising within their organization were eventually hitting an invisible barrier that kept these women from obtaining higher leadership roles (Eagly & Carli, 2007). In a recent study by the Pew Research Center (2015), Americans believe that the glass ceiling prevented women from climbing the highest ladder in either the politics or business sectors.

However, since this concept was introduced, researchers Eagly and Carli (2007) coined a more contemporary illustration of challenges and experiences a woman may face attempting to achieve leadership positions as a labyrinth. According to Eagly and Carli (2007), the glass ceiling illustration was misleading as it suggested that women have equal access to entry-level positions and did not recognize the different strategies and different barriers women must use to reach any level of both entry-level and leadership positions. In addition, the term glass ceiling created the assumption that the barrier for women is at a specific level in organizations (Eagly & Carli, 2007). The labyrinth illustration described the complexities and numerous barriers women encounter

as they work their way to top leadership roles while the glass ceiling metaphor assumed women never reached top leadership positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

In addition, the labyrinth metaphor visually represents the additional barriers women must overcome or avoid to become effective in leadership roles and can provide a lens to view current research in the realm of gender, leadership, and effectiveness. The illustration of a labyrinth allows for the complexities to exist in terms of barriers women face, illustrating the fact that women no longer must only overcome one invisible barrier, but numerous barriers that exist throughout a women's leadership journey (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

While much of the foundational research of Eagly and Carli (2007) revealed the assumptions with gender differences in leadership both in leadership styles and possible leadership barriers, a large majority of the American public believe men and women share many key leadership traits including intelligence, honesty, decisiveness, innovation, and ambition (Pew Research Center, 2015). According to the research, this idea of believing there are no gender difference in leadership does not translate into action in work environments that are typically male dominated (Davison & Burke, 2000; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995). For example, one meta-analysis study reported that in male-dominated work environments, men's effectiveness as leaders surpassed women's effectiveness (Eagly et al., 1995). In another meta-analysis integrating the findings of 49 reports, Davison and Burke (2000) found that resumes with male names were preferred to resumes with female names for masculine jobs.

Traits that people correlate to successful leadership attributes like empathy and collaboration do not translate to female politicians in the same way they may correlate to

a manager or supervisor (Schneider & Bos, 2014). In a study using classic methods to determine stereotype content, Schneider and Bos (2014) discovered that female politicians were defined more by their deficits than their strengths. Respondents from this study viewed female politicians as lacking male stereotypical leadership qualities in addition to not possessing the advantage leadership qualities typical to females, like empathy and compassion (Schneider & Bos, 2014).

When considering attitudes toward women, overall people perceive women in a positive image, however these perceptions do not hold true for women who excel in traditional male roles, like chief executive officer (CEO) or government leader (Ely & Rhode, 2010). These successful traditional male leadership roles and environments have women facing additional challenge between success and likability; the more successful they become, the less likeable they become (Ely & Rhode, 2010). Eagly and Carli (2007) also described the implication of women being constrained to more stereotypically feminine roles to be congruent with their findings that more women emerge as leaders in specific feminine areas versus other areas.

A closer look at women's aspirations to lead shows women's aspirations develop and change as their environment and self-efficacy shift (Brown & Segrist, 2016; Coffman & Neuenfeld, 2014). This shift involves feeling valued through strong relationships from peers and a strong supportive environment (Devnew, Berghout Austin, Janzen Le Bar, & Shapiro, 2017). When women see leadership behaviors as desirable, when they believe they are prepared to lead, and when they see the value of their impact to be more significant than their potential losses, then they aspire to be leaders (Devnew et al., 2017).

Aspirations to lead for women are a thoughtful and intentional process, while for men the process may be more impulsive (Devnew et al., 2017).

Even when women take on leadership roles, there is not a significant increase in the number of women in these leadership roles. One of the challenges for women in these leadership roles is the added pressure due to the higher visibility surrounding the theory of tokenism (Cook & Glass, 2014; Kanter, 1977). Many females in leadership roles in male-dominated environments do not feel strongly connected to their gender; therefore, they do not encourage or promote other women into leadership roles, which in turn is failing to open these leadership roles to more women (Kaiser & Spalding, 2015).

The literature focused on women in leadership provides explanations for the gap in leadership roles within organizations including the political sector. In addition, this literature described the research on key leadership traits associated with gender which plays a role in perceptions of women as successful leaders. It also illustrated the aspirations for women leaders as they relate to leading male-dominated environments which are similar environments to college and university student government (American Student Government Association, 2016).

A History of Women's Political Participation in the U.S.

When the U.S. founding fathers drafted the U.S. Constitution, the rights for women to play an active role in the democratic process were not part of the original document (American Association of University Women, 2016). When women suffrage movements advanced the issue of the right for women to vote, culminating in the 1920 passage of the 19th Amendment, women were able to play a more active role in the democratic process (American Association of University Women, 2016). With the

addition of women voting and taking a role in the democratic process, the assumption was that more women would take on leadership roles within the political system (Duverger, 1955). This small victory did not lead to a gender balance in political involvement as women were almost completely absent from political leadership whether it was in the federal, state, or the local city government (Duverger, 1955).

This historical perspective of women not being represented in the political process still holds true today, although more women take on an active role in the democratic process (Center for American Women in Politics, 2019a; Duverger, 1955). Duverger (1955), the first researcher to bring to light the total absence of women from political leadership, helped shift the attention from the number of women participating in politics through voting to the lack of women in elected offices.

Electing women to public office is vital not only as part of the belief in the idea that representative democracy must be representative of the population, but also in the belief that women and young girls need female role models in political leadership roles (Burrell, 2007; Spencer, 2004). Political leaders play crucial roles in establishing policies addressing gender inequality; without women serving in these roles, these policies are not being addressed to the extent they would be addressed if a woman's voice was at the table (Rhode, 2017).

Understanding the historical context and the role women played in the political realm serves as a foundation for looking at the barriers women face in terms of the advancement in political focused leadership roles like government. This historical context described in this literature showcases the significance of college women serving

in leadership roles in their student government as well as the possible impact that can occur when women serve in these roles.

Challenges Females Face When Running for Political Office

The challenges women face when running for political office were first argued by Duverger (1955). Using a comparative study, Duverger reviewed reports from 15 countries including the United States; however, for the second stage surveys were conducted in France, Germany, Norway, and Yugoslavia. While the limitations of comparing results to different countries may be less reliable, general trends did emerge including the three main barriers women face when running for public office.

Duverger (1955) contended that women encountered three main barriers when running for public office. These barriers focus on the notion of the belief that people prefer to be represented by men, men control the political parties and resist the addition of women for fear of losing control of the party, and the electoral systems prevent women from winning elections (Duverger, 1955). Duverger (1955) based the idea concerning electoral systems on the fact that when there were men re-running in incumbent races, men have a better chance of winning, leaving women out of filling some political offices controlled by incumbents. The other two barriers described by Duverger (1955) required systemic change. These barriers require Americans to make a culture shift where women become preferred to represent constituents, and women play an active role in political party leadership (Fox & Lawless, 2011).

These historical barriers still hold true today; although, some researchers believe gender-based challenges create additional barriers for women choosing to run for a political office or trying to win a political office (American Association of University

Women, 2016; Chin, 2011; Fox & Lawless, 2011; Kaufman & Grace, 2011; Paxton & Kunovich, 2003; Wilson, 2004). Using a quantitative approach, Fox and Lawless (2011) surveyed 2,036 respondents from professions that yielded the highest proportion of political candidates to examine political ambition and self-efficacy in terms of gender. Their findings strongly suggested that traditional gender role socialization led to the perception that women were not embraced in the political sphere. This directly affected women's self-efficacy. This additional barrier may look like it can be blamed on women's struggles with confidence, but the uphill battle women face due to not being embraced in this sphere creates this additional barrier (Fox & Lawless, 2011).

Some additional challenges for women trying to close the political leadership gap include societal expectations of work and family life balance, biases associated with feminine leadership versus masculine leadership, persistent sex discrimination, and the lack of effective networking opportunities and mentors (American Association of University Women, 2016; Wilson, 2004). The White House Project reviewed nearly 400 political campaign ads to decide on the best campaigns to receive feedback from a diverse group of potential voters (Wilson, 2004). Using a dial that each participant could turn up or down while viewing the campaign ad helped measure effective candidate traits. One of the main takeaways from this experiment was the idea of "face credibility." Before the actual campaign ad started when the only trait displayed of the candidate was their gender, the participants made decisions about leadership potential (Wilson, 2004). Participants turned the dial down or made no movement to the dial when the candidate was a woman, while participants turned the dial up within seconds of seeing the male candidate (Wilson, 2004). Therefore, men had an instant advantage and women had to

prove they were worthy of the elected office position (Wilson, 2004). The biases and potential sex discrimination associated with women serving in these leadership roles, whether intentional or unintentional, led to women having to work harder to obtain an elected office win.

In a study using national survey data and analyzing the content of news coverage from 30 U.S. Senate campaigns in the 2006 election, Hayes (2011) found that gender was a much less powerful trait in voter selection than party stereotypes. However, the campaign news coverage that focused on gender stereotypes in relation to the Republican and Democratic party played a large role in the decision process of voters (Hayes, 2011). News media drawing the relationship between gender and party affiliation played a powerful role in candidate victories (Hayes, 2011).

Government Elections

Women's participation in U.S. government elections began with the right to register to vote, and since 1980, more women were registered to vote than men (Center for American Women and Politics, 2019a). In addition to more women being registered to vote, more women have voted in government elections than men since 1980 (Center for American Women and Politics, 2019a). While women are actively participating in the voting process, women are elected to government public office less frequently than men (Paxton & Kunovich, 2003). Paxton and Kunovich (2003) discussed the reasoning behind underrepresentation of women elected to government public office from a socio-political perspective as the influence of women candidates related to the structure of society. Their research defined the role of society in creating gender bias as the reason women were not elected to government public offices (Paxton & Kunovich, 2003).

More recent studies on gender differences in relation to elected government public office offer a different perspective to the same problem of underrepresentation of women in elected government public offices. Researchers found that when women run for office, they were just as effective in terms of winning, so these gender differences were not due to women winning fewer elections (Lawless, 2015; Sanbonmatsu, 2015). Sanbonmatsu (2015), using a mail survey to legislative leaders, discovered a gap between party leaders' views of gender electability with election results. While women running for office were as effective in terms of winning as men, both groups perceived women's chances of winning as less than men. This added perception of women losing elections may be correlated to the behavior of men not recruiting women to run for office as well as women choosing not to run (Kanthak & Woon, 2015; Sanbonmatsu, 2015).

Using a computer-based experimental design, Kanthak and Woon (2015) had 350 participants complete a problem-solving task with incentives that tested aversion to a traditional male-associated task. From this study, Kanthak and Woon (2015) demonstrated that the role of possible unfavorable circumstances and the role of selection in an election play in a women's decision to run for a political office. The unfavorable circumstances surrounding the competitive context of campaigns and elections play a role in women choosing not to run (Kanthak & Woon, 2015). This study also revealed that women and men are equally likely to volunteer when the representative is chosen randomly, but women are less likely to choose to run if the result is chosen by an election (Kanthak & Woon, 2015). With this research, Kanthak and Woon (2015) refocused the idea of risk aversion away from women's beliefs in their skills and leadership to run for a

political office and aligned the idea that this risk aversion for women in the political realm was defined by the specific competitive context of campaigns and elections.

Potential candidates are more likely to run for an elected office when they face favorable circumstances; therefore the unfavorable circumstances, including the additional "chilly climate" women face during the election process, are leading to women choosing not to run (Fox & Lawless, 2004; Sandler, Silverberry & Hall, 1996). In a recent article, Sweet-Cushman (2016) argued that the gender gap in political leadership positions may have to do with gendered differences in risk perception and risk aversion. Before running for an elected office, women focus on the potential risk involved in being a candidate for an elected leadership role (Sweet-Cushman, 2016).

When assessing the risk, women are also considering the desire to overcome obstacles in relation to the "chilly climate" (Sweet-Cushman, 2016). The "chilly climate" for women can be described as women are less tolerant to mistakes, men have inherent bias against women, women receive more questions from others concerning their credibility, and women have to work harder than men to be taken seriously by their colleagues and potential voters (Fox & Lawless, 2004; Pew Research Center, 2008; Pew Research Center, 2015; Swers, 2013). The Pew Research Center (2008) conducted 2,250 telephone interviews with a representative sample of adults in the U.S. From these telephone interviews, 54% believed discrimination against women is a somewhat serious or serious problem in society. The "chilly climate" for women in terms of the "twice as hard; half as far" mentality also encompasses gender discrimination (Pew Research Center, 2008).

Women Running for President

Women's access to politics can be influenced by cultural, socioeconomic, and political factors (Tremblay, 2007). Hogan (2001) studied why some districts were more likely to elect women than other districts. He discovered that districts more likely to elect women were comprised of cultures more accepting of new groups entering politics and had a higher number of college-educated people. This study showcased the role culture plays in women winning elections (Hogan, 2001; Wilson, 2004). When political establishments develop a culture which includes the ideas that voters should have high personal placement on values related to being more accepting to new groups and these same establishments redefine the characteristics of a leader to not only include masculine traits then these establishments have developed a new culture which would dissolve current structural impediments that are being placed on working mothers (Hogan, 2001; Wilson, 2004).

A majority of U.S. presidents emerge from political involvement at the local or state levels (Wilson, 2004). Therefore, the lack of women in the political pipeline is a serious issue for electing a woman to serve as president (Wilson, 2004). However, the pipeline for women leaders is expanding with women entering the workforce in larger numbers, having longer job tenures more closely resembling the careers of men, and taking on roles once reserved for men (American Association of University Women, 2016). While the political pipeline is becoming less of a concern, the political ambition of women is still seen as the significant barrier to women running for president (O'Leary & Shames, 2013).

In a 2008 poll, 51% of Americans believed that the country was not "ready to elect a woman to a high office" (Pew Research Center, 2008). However, in the 2016 election, a woman, Hillary Clinton, served as one of the primary party's nomination for president, and gender did not seem to be a factor for voters (Pew Research Center, 2016). According to an October 2016 poll, 51% of voters stated that gender was not a factor in how Hillary Clinton was treated and in their planned decision on which candidate to vote for during the presidential election (Pew Research Center, 2016). While the results of the poll showcased that most voters did not see gender playing a role in the political election, the breakdown of these results among Clinton supporters and gender relayed a different message with a majority believing that she was held to a higher standard because she was a woman (Pew Research Center, 2016). Fox and Lawless (2011) in their "Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study," revealed that despite comparable credentials, women were less likely than men to perceive themselves as qualified to seek a high political office like a presidential office. These perceived concerns with self-efficacy and the belief by many that women were held to a higher standard likely continue to contribute to the gender gap in high elected offices (Fox & Lawless, 2011).

The research on the challenges and barriers women face as political leaders including running for an elected position is important context. This research can be contextualized to women running and being elected in their student government leadership roles. While some of the challenges focused on work and family life balance may not apply to female college student government presidents as most will not have this family structure, many of the other challenges these women face like gender bias and the

influence of culture and perceptions of voting participants may apply to women student government presidents' experiences.

College Student Leaders and Gender Differences

Concerning student leaders and gender differences, two studies concluded similar results on gender differences in student leadership. Using Kouzes and Posner's Leadership Practice Inventory (1998), Erwin (2005) focused on measuring student government members' perceived leadership behaviors. The results gathered from the 323 student government members at eight midwestern public colleges indicated no gender differences between their perceived leadership behaviors measured by the inventory (Erwin, 2005). Schaper (2009) examined gender differences in student leadership with a survey completed by a convenience sample of 88 student government leaders in California community colleges using Kouzes and Posner's Leadership Practice Inventory (1998). Research findings from this study found only significant gender differences in student government leaders' self-ratings in the "Challenge the Process" practice from the Leadership Practice Inventory (Schaper, 2009).

In two other research studies, the findings did indicate gender differences in self-ratings on leadership ability. Kezar and Moriarty (2000) analyzed survey results of 1,987 freshmen with a follow-up of college students at 352 institutions to see the impact of leadership experiences and student organization involvement in both men and women. Women rated themselves lower than men on leadership ability both as a freshman and after four years of college. Also in this study when discussing experiences that impacted their personal leadership development, women favored more of a collaborative or shared leadership approach while men favored a positional leadership experience. Therefore,

positional leadership experiences did not seem to be important to women's personal leadership development (Kezar & Moriarty, 2000). This same idea of shared leadership was also discovered in a study focused on the reason why women seek leadership (Boatwright & Egidio, 2003).

In a more recent study, Montgomery and Newman (2010) analyzed gender differences in traits of student leaders using Avolio and Bass's (2004) Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire. This study focused on a specific midwestern technical university comparing perceived leadership traits from self-ratings and group member ratings of 24 female and 13 male presidents of student organizations. Significant differences were found between male and female presidents' self-ratings with females rating themselves higher on the measure in the questionnaire related to caring and males rating themselves higher on the measure in the questionnaire related to passive leadership (Montgomery & Newman, 2010). In addition, this study found that group members rated male leaders higher on a measure in the questionnaire related to vision. The contradicting results highlighted the diverse knowledge, research, and opinions specifically to whether gender differences existed in how people lead.

Some research studies discovered some specific challenges that college women leaders face. Looking at specific challenges college women leaders face, Haber-Curran (2013) performed a qualitative study with in-depth interviews with four women at one institution. Her findings found their leadership role created challenges related to balancing their time and relationships with others as a leader and student. In addition, their leadership role also challenged them to learn how to navigate the large organization and environment context. This navigating involved learning to adapt their leadership

approach and behavior to effectively lead their organization (Haber-Curran, 2013). While this study was limited with the focus on only four college women leaders, the context of the different leaders provided some interesting perspective. Each leader was involved as a leader in a different organization type comprising some of the more common leader roles across a typical campus community: Greek, student government, athletic, and cultural (Haber-Curran, 2013).

While the research focused on overall gender differences in leadership showed a significant difference, the research focused on the existence of gender differences in leadership for college student leaders was mixed. Some studies found that there were differences in gender in terms of approach while other studies found no significant gender differences in college student leaders. While this study focused on college student leaders, this research offers a backdrop to the possible conflicting findings that could be discovered between the different participants. In addition, the current research on gender differences in leadership focused on how the student leader perceived their leadership ability, there was a significant difference in the high self-ratings men showcased when reflecting on their leadership ability compared to the lower self-ratings women shared (Montgomery & Newman, 2010). This study allows for these women student leaders to make meaning of the experiences that showcase their abilities as a leader; based on the research, women self-ratings of their leadership abilities may be lower.

Student Government History and Impact

Historians show that student governance has been a part of higher education institutions in the U.S. since the late 1700s with the role of students in governing higher education institutions substantially increasing over the years (Cohen, 1998; Janc, 2004).

According to historians, student governance in the present form evolved from the student activism that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s colliding with the student struggles to resolve frustrations with higher education administration and policies (Cohen, 1998; Davis, 2006; Klopf, 1960). Thus, student governance became the tool to establish change and ensure the students' concerns were expressed to administrators (Cohen, 1998; Klopf, 1960). Student government was established to first and foremost serve as the "official voice" of the student body to higher education administrators, alumni, and other institution constituents (Cuyjet, 1994, p. 74). In addition, student government associations oversee many of the administrative duties for the institution including allocation of student fees, oversight of student organizations, and programming efforts as well as advocating for students' interests and policy changes (Cuyjet, 1994; May, 2009).

Higher education traditions and founding values were developed with only men in mind (Solomon, 1985). Women were not part of higher education institutions until the 20th century; however, growth in the number of women attending colleges and universities began to steadily increase in the 1940s (Nash & Romero, 2012). Not until 1980 was there an equal number of women and men enrolled in colleges in the United States (Horany, 2002). Women served as student government association presidents at large public institutions beginning in the 1960s; however, there was no consistency in the number of women serving in these roles at large public institutions (Cuyjet, 1994; Johnson, 2011). A historical understanding of the patriarchal environment of higher education and student governance may serve as one factor of the gender gap in leadership (Johnson, 2011).

A historical context of student government as well as an understanding of the impact this organization has on growth and change in colleges and universities showcases the traditional male-dominated environment thread that still exist in the roots of the organization. In addition, understanding the impact of student government associations in creating change showcases the significance in having leadership in this organization reflect the student demographics.

Student Learning in Student Government

While the impact of student government on colleges and universities is evident, there is also an impact on students involved in student government. Janc (2004) investigated the leadership experiences of five members of a state-wide higher education student advisory board and found that these students' experiences helped motivate them into political activism and strengthened their role as active participants in their university community. Janc (2004) also determined that through these experiences the students gained skills that increased their time-management and stress management ability. Dias (2009) surveyed 19 former student government presidents from one institution about the post-college impact of their experiences. Over half of the former student government presidents indicated the skills they learned while serving as president applied to their current career roles. Former student government presidents described the role of presidency increasing their knowledge about leadership, organizational skills, and ability to build strong personal relationships with others (Dias, 2009).

The learning described in the research for student government leaders illustrates the personal growth opportunities college student leaders have at their fingertips when involved in this organization. Women are missing out on this learning because there are

less serving in leadership in student government and this study will shed light on possible learning outcomes that women student government leaders may experience in their involvement with this organization.

Students of Color in Student Government

While my study focuses on the role gender plays in students' experience in student government, a review of the literature on students of color in student government is important as my research includes women of color. Sutton and Kimbrough (2001) examined the involvement of students of color in college student organizations specifically in universities in the South. The 989 students surveyed classified themselves as student leaders with only 17% stating that their leadership role was in the student government association. When looking at historically Black colleges, more students of color participated in student government than students of color at predominately White institutions (Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001).

In a study using in-depth interviews, six undergraduate and six graduate students shared their experiences with being Black student leaders on a predominantly White college campus (Domingue, 2015). The challenges these student leaders faced involved difficulty interrupting stereotypes, difficulty interrupting microaggressions, and creating an environment that sharpened their awareness of their racial and gender identities (Domingue, 2015). These Black women college student leaders reported feeling misunderstood, silenced, and disregarded leading to challenges when working through conflict and collaboration (Domingue, 2015).

A study on how leadership experiences affect the self-ratings of leadership ability in terms of African American women's self-ratings found that these women believed

that being elected to the presidential role was their strongest indicator of their leadership ability (Kezar & Moriarty, 2000). Black women college student leaders were motivated to lead to foster Black community on their campus and address their feelings of marginalization (Domingue, 2015).

Salas (2010) interviewed 38 women student leaders from the California State University System (with 76.3% of participants describing themselves as students of color) on their student government association presidential ambitions. In this study, most students of color who decided not to run for president did not feel knowledgeable enough to serve in this role or passionate about serving in this leadership role. Those students of color who chose to run wanted to represent other students' viewpoints, needs, and concerns (Salas, 2010). Salas' (2010) study also determined that the presence of role models and mentors who were also African American was a positive influence on the desire leading to African American women running for student government election.

One study investigated the experiences of Hispanic women leaders at a Hispanic-serving institution through both individual and group interviews (Onorato & Musoba, 2015). One specific student interviewed was involved in student government; her specific experiences described in reflecting quotes in the research illustrate the role mentors played in her involvement on-campus as well as her personal desire to want to help others (Onorato & Musoba, 2015).

With female women of color participants in this study, the existing literature as it relates to these women's experiences and personal perceptions of their ability to lead in student government sheds light on possible findings. Based on the participants'

experiences, the research in this study will add to the existing literature on female women of color's experiences as they lead their student government organizations.

Female Students' Participation in Student Government

According to data collected by O'Leary and Shames (2013), over 40% of women who currently serve in the U.S. Congress served in their student government in their youth. This data collection also revealed that many females who served in student government in high school turned away from politics in college as the same concern of leadership self-efficacy described by Fox and Lawless (2011) came into play when women enter college (O'Leary & Shames, 2013).

Miller and Kraus (2004) surveyed student government association leaders at 21 midwestern comprehensive universities about the gender demographics of current leaders, previous leaders, and current participants. An analysis of the data showed while women held 47.9% of student government association positions, the majority, 71.4% of student government association presidents and vice presidents were male. This research illustrated women's interest in student government association as well as illustrated the gap between their interest and leadership representation (Miller & Kraus, 2004). Miller and Kraus (2004), when looking at the previous five years, found that women served as student government association president only 25.7% percent of the time. This data served as another example of data that illustrates the gap in women serving in the presidential role of their student government organization.

Spencer (2004), looking specifically at the 12 schools who were members of the Big XII Conference over a 14 year period, found only 18.83% of student body presidents were women. However, in Erwin's quantitative study (2005) on gender differences in

student government association leaders, 41.7% of the 115 students who identified themselves as leaders within student government association were women. In this same study, only 25% of the president positions were female. This again illustrated that females involved in student government were serving in leadership positions just not the highest leadership position, that of the president (Erwin, 2005).

The Benefits and Challenges.

Miles (2010), through her research from one-on-one interviews with five female student government presidents, discovered some benefits to serving as leaders in this organization. These benefits of improving leadership skills, building confidence, and gaining networking opportunities helped these women grow both personally and professionally as well as set them apart for success in future endeavors (Miles, 2010). Women not serving in these leadership opportunities missed out on personal and professional growth that would support leadership opportunities in their future work (Miles, 2010).

Spencer (2004) examined the experiences and motivation of 16 women student government association presidents at Big XII Conference institutions. She discovered that women student government association presidents were involved in student government at their institution early in their college career. Through personal interviews with participants, Spencer (2004) reported that women student leaders experienced gender bias including developing fewer personal relationships than their male counterparts with college administrators who were also predominately male. Miller and Kraus (2004) also spoke towards the possible rationale for the underrepresentation of

women in student government stating that women may not want to be involved if these organizations were not addressing concerns of women.

Miles (2010) interviewed five female student government presidents from different midwestern institutions where participants were asked to describe their experiences as president. In these interviews, the challenges these students shared were not specific to gender, but specific to the role of a student body president. The challenges the student body president faced whether male or female involve learning the responsibilities, balancing the relationship of student and leader, as well as interacting with campus community members (Miles, 2010). The research findings of Miles (2010) described some of the challenges that student government leaders faced while both Spencer (2004) and Miller and Kraus (2004) spoke to additional challenges women student government association presidents must overcome to feel accepted and encouraged in their leadership role.

Most similar to this study, Damell (2013) sought to understand the "impact of gender as it related to the women's experiences in the role of student government president" (p. 12). Damell (2013) also wanted to understand the possible impact of their experiences in terms of their career trajectory post-college. Using a qualitative phenomenological framework, Damell (2013) interviewed 14 former women student government leaders from universities on the east coast. In the findings, Damell (2013) noted that these women were motivated and had a desire to get involved on their college campuses, many had prior involvement in student government. According to her findings, the main motivation these women had for running for president focused on their

passion to connect with students as well as acting on encouragement they received from others (Damell, 2013).

In her research, Damell (2013) also found that having strong relationships with other students, administrators, and the organization advisor were important to their personal development as a leader. All participants interviewed felt the skills they acquired from their experiences as student government association president to be unique and beneficial to future career aspirations and goals (Damell, 2013). Three women from this study described their experience as student government president as helping them achieve being selected for their post-college job or helping them alter their career trajectory due to the role that being president had on helping them realize their passions (Damell, 2013). These women in this study also expressed that their experience as student government president helped them feel more confident in their leadership abilities (Damell, 2013).

Student government leadership experiences not only provided women with additional challenges to navigate, but also these experiences were shown to be both valuable and rewarding. From the research, while women student government presidents had to navigate gender dynamics and the challenges that could come from those experiences, these women built strong relationships, developed as leaders, and used the skills gained to aid in finding their post-college employment.

Summary of Literature

The research on the history and purpose of student governance in higher education institutions provides a contextual framework for understanding the importance of this organization as well as the significance of organization traditions, which play a

role in both the structural and cultural underpinnings of student government associations. In addition, the research illustrates the impact of student governance on both the institution and the student leadership. Student government is often the sole provider in voicing the concerns of the student body to administration as well as deciding on the use of student fees and funding. While institutions may not value the significance of this organization, the research discussed indicates the value for both student leaders in student government and the institution as a whole.

The research reviewed in this chapter also serves as background knowledge about the role gender plays in leadership specifically in relation to elected government leadership. The research looked broadly at women in government political offices in terms of their personal barriers, their successes, and reviewed possible explanations to the gender gap in these leadership positions. The literature then looked specifically at female students' experiences as leaders at their institutions. This literature illustrated the challenges female students faced in leadership roles at colleges and universities as well as provided some gaps in the literature that this study would focus on filling.

As one of the most significant student leadership roles on a university campus, there is still little research on the experiences of women serving as student government president. Most of the studies on female participants were not currently serving in this role, but were reflecting on their previous experiences as student government president. This study will look at these women's experiences as they navigate the role as president; these women will not have to rely on memory, but many of the experiences discussed will be recent experiences in the role. This focus on females sharing their current experiences as student government president will add a new layer to the research that

currently exists on understanding the lived experiences of female student government presidents.

With women actively participating in student government leadership in different capacities, the interest in student government leadership exists; however, women are underrepresented in the president role. The underrepresentation of female students in this highest campus leadership role needs to be investigated. These college student leaders' stories are not being told, and hopefully, by shedding light on their personal narrative, I can better understand their motivation, experiences, and why a gender division in leadership in these vital campus organizations exist.

In Chapter 3, I present the methodology that served as a procedural guide to how I gained understanding of the experiences of female SGA presidents at public research institutions in the Southeast. Chapter 4 includes the personal narratives for each of the seven participants based on the three semi-structured interviews. Chapter 5 focuses on the findings based on thematic codes found in the data from the interviews and narratives. I will conclude in Chapter 6 with the discussion on the findings and recommendations based on the experiences and narratives of the participants.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to make meaning of the experiences of female SGA presidents in order to empower their voices and understand the perspectives of this group of women leaders. This chapter includes a description of the research design, data collection methods, and the procedures for data analysis.

Research Design

I used narrative inquiry as a way of understanding experiences allowing for the meaning making to occur through the ideas, memories, experiences, and feelings of this specific group of female leaders in relation to their social context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), context was important in narrative thinking. For this study, the context or environment of leading in a male-dominated organization served as a frame for the narratives of these women's experiences and how they purposefully interact with these environments, others, and themselves. The relational progression of interaction with the environment, others, and themselves led to a dynamic narrative inquiry process (Daiute, 2014). Part of the dynamic narrative inquiry process also included identifying patterns and themes, uncovering the commonalities that exist across each participant's experiences, while also finding the unique aspect to each narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

This study of the experiences of female SGA presidents at public research institutions in the Southeast focused on making meaning of their experiences through the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the experiences of female college student leaders prior to being elected to serve as their student government association president?

RQ2: What are the experiences of female college student leaders who serve as student government association presidents?

Setting

The interviews all took place via a phone meeting where most participants spoke to the researcher from their student government office personal line. Phone interviews allowed for me to accommodate busy student leader schedules. Phone interviews also provided a sense of anonymity for the participant in terms of not physically having to meet the researcher. This helped each participant feel comfortable and open and created an environment where each participant shared their experiences authentically as they did not have any bias and assumptions about the researcher's physical appearance holding them back from sharing their experiences.

Southeast

Data from the Institute for Women's Policy Research (2015) shows the largest gap in terms of gender equality in both compensation and leadership positions is in the southeast region of the U.S. In terms of the data on closing the wage gap, most southeastern states were in the bottom third when compared to other states (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2015). Focusing on employment and earnings, this report gave a composite score to each state based on the gender earnings ratio; poor scores were

given to the Southeast with the highest of the southeastern states, North Carolina, receiving a score of a "C+" (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2015).

This report compared states in all areas in terms of gender equality: political participation, employment and earnings, work and family, poverty and opportunity, reproductive rights, health and well-being, and violence and safety. The southeastern states were rated as the overall "worst states" for gender equality with Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Florida specifically mentioned (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2015). The setting of research institutions in the Southeast allowed for an additional layer to the study. Research institutions in the Southeast centered the research on a public university setting that struggles with gender equality (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2015). For the purpose of this study, southeastern states were defined as the following states: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

Research Institutions

Research institutions include both doctoral universities and master's colleges and universities defined by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (2018). The average student population for the institutions that served as part of the initial sample size were 24,000 students with a 1:1 ratio of women to men. Many of these institutions were in smaller college or university towns with only a handful of these institutions being in a larger city. The research provided a space for these female leaders at large research institutions to make meaning of their experiences as a SGA president and encouraged these women to provide narratives of their successes and challenges.

This study also showcased their unique experiences as a group of leaders and added to the overall body of knowledge of women in leadership.

Participants

The research sample involved purposeful sampling to ensure I included participants who were current female SGA presidents at public research institutions in the Southeastern United States. Research institutions included both doctoral universities and master's colleges and universities defined by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (2018). "Southeast," for the purpose of this study, was defined as the following states: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. There were 40 institutions (see Appendix A) that met the requirements of being classified as doctoral universities or master's colleges and universities and public four-year institutions (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2018).

Sampling and Selection Procedures

The criteria for participant selection for the study was student government presidents elected in spring 2018 who served as the student government president from fall 2018 to spring 2019 at their public research institutions located in the southeastern states and self-identified as female. Because the interviews were planned over the course of their one year serving in their role, the interviews were organized to allow for the students to be in their roles long enough to have experiences to share.

Target sample size was 50% of current female SGA presidents at public research institutions in the southeastern states. For the 2018-2019 academic year, there were 15 women SGA presidents at public research institutions in the southeastern states. While I reached out to each current possible participant via email, I had seven female student

government presidents participate in the research study as well as all three individual interviews during the course of their one year serving as president. Each participant was kept anonymous in all interactions over the course of the three interviews including in all transcribed interview materials. Seven confirmed participants allowed for an almost 50% target sample size to occur, creating a good sample size for this study. According to Creswell (2014), narrative research included only a few individuals; therefore by including a larger sample size of seven participants and with three semi-structured interviews, there was rich descriptive data, which in turn allowed for saturation to occur. As the researcher, I knew saturation occurred when the themes found through coding had rich examples and descriptions from many of the participants.

The SGA advisors helped with the initial contact for each female SGA president. I used this gatekeeper to aid in the first introduction to the potential participant (Creswell, 2014). I was not serving as an SGA advisor; therefore, I did not have strong relationships with the advisors. However, I shared interest with SGA advisors because they are also members of the student affairs and higher education administration communities. The relationship with each female SGA participant began via email contact with the initial invitation to participate in the study.

Data Collection

As the SGA elections occur every spring, I was not be able to reach out to participants until early summer. Once my participants were elected, I was able to identify them as possible participants in the study. I used in-depth semi-structured interviews, specifically Seidman's (2006) three interview series, to collect the data to form the narratives. According to Seidman (2006), "Understanding the experiences of other

people and the meaning they make of that experience" is the foundation of in-depth interviews (p. 9). Seidman (2006) also mentioned the value of individuals' stories as they were at the "heart of interviewing research" (p. 9). The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for a more fluid interview process where the participant drove the interview, while the researcher used a list of questions to keep the interview moving forward when needed.

The instrument I used to collect the data from the semi-structured interviews included a voice recorder which recorded the in-depth over-the-phone interviews. In order to accommodate each participant's schedule, I used phone interviews. My identity as a White female was hidden from each participant through the use of phone interviews. This created a non-biased relationship between me and each participant allowing them the ability to be candid with their experiences. With the voice recorder, I used the audio files to aid in transcribing the data.

Approval to Conduct the Study

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from Valdosta State University prior to beginning the study (see Appendix B).

Consent to Participate

Each participant was sent via email a consent form (see Appendix C) with the initial letter of cooperation (see Appendix D) to participate in this study. At the beginning of each phone initial interview, I read the consent script (see Appendix E) to the participant to achieve the needed consent. Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect anonymity at the time of the first interview.

Interviews

Each interview was a standard 90-minutes as Seidman (2006) suggested. When debating the reason behind the 90-minute time frame, Seidman (2006) stated that "given that the purpose of this approach is to have the participants reconstruct their experiences, put it in context of their lives, and reflect on the meaning, anything shorter than 90 minutes for each interview seems too short" (p. 20). The first interview took place in the early part of fall semester, early in the participants' leadership role, and focused on their previous leadership experiences and their experiences through the election process. Later in the fall semester, the second interview took place and focused on participants' current experiences as a student government president. The third interview took place near the end of their term as president. While Seidman believed all interviews should be closer together, he stated that if the purpose was not lost, different spacing between the interviews could be considered (Seidman, 2006). To ensure the connection between the first two interviews, which Seidman (2006) believed was important, these interviews took place between 8 to 10 weeks apart, while the third interview took place between 12 to 16 weeks after the second interview. See Table 1 for timeline of each participant with pseudonyms.

Each semi-structured interview had a list of specific questions and topics to ask. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility to explore experiences that aided each participant in forming their narrative. The first interview with a focus on the history of the participant helped me build a relationship with each participant. This first interview also added context to their experience as a woman student leader. The second interview with the participant focused on their current experiences as a female student

government president, while the third interview allowed for reflection and focused on making meaning of their experiences including the possible challenges discussed in previous interviews.

Table 1

Participating Women Interview Timeline

Pseudonym	Interview One	Interview Two	Interview Three
Esther	August 5, 2018	November 14, 2018	March 12, 2019
Madison	October 10, 2018	November 20, 2018	March 12, 2019
Sarah	August 2, 2018	November 21, 2018	March 13, 2019
Grace	September 21, 2018	November 20, 2018	March 13, 2019
Olivia	November 1, 2018	January 10, 2019	April 1, 2019
Chloe	September 18, 2018	November 27, 2018	March 19, 2019
Hanna	October 3, 2018	December 12, 2018	April 2, 2019

Interview Questions

The list of interview questions using a research matrix (see Appendix F) was created with Seidman's (2006) three-series interview in mind. Using my two research questions as a foundation for the interviews, the first research question looking at their past experiences was the focus for the first set of interview questions that related to their history and experiences that led them to run for president. Their current experiences as student government president were addressed in the last two interviews which focused on learning about the participants' current experiences in the role as SGA president and allowed for reflection about their year in the role. In the third interview, each participant was given time to reflect on their term as president. The researcher used more probing

questions, which focused on helping the women share what they learned and what legacy they hoped they left behind.

Data and Document Analysis

First, I constructed a narrative for each participant based on the information shared in the interviews. In order to keep anonymity, each participant received a pseudonym. When constructing each story, I relied on my interpretive perspective of the information from the interviews; however, I paid attention to the words used by the participant as well as the structure the participant used to construct the answers during the semi-structured interview process. As the researcher, I noted in my personal memos that each of these stories was co-authored by me, the researcher (Mishler, 1995). I was a co-author indirectly as I transformed the texts and dialogue of the interview into a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end (Mishler, 1995).

I used an approach described by Saldaña (2016) to help me construct each narrative and used an approach described by Daiute (2014) to analyze the data through a linguistic method. These approaches allowed me to focus on both the use of language and the structure of the narrative to make meaning of the experiences. When looking at both the language and structure of each narrative, I also kept my conceptual framework of feminist inquiry as a primary lens.

Analysis of Data

For the experiences described in the interviews, I used a more classic approach to developing the narrative, "the six part Labovian model" described in Saldaña's (2016) coding manual (p. 156). This process helped me construct the narrative as I took the transcripts and placed them into clauses and then classified each clause into one of the six

elements of the model: “abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, result and coda” (Saldaña, 2016, p.156). These six elements comprise a story structure people use when orally communicating a narrative (Saldaña, 2016). Using the six elements, my goal was to use rich descriptive detail to create a stand-alone story that depicted the meaning making of each participant in terms of her overall experiences as a student government president.

For example, the six elements served as way to put together each narrative as I was able to take the dialogue from each interview and organize it within the six elements to make a complete story. The “six part Labovian model” was a framework which helped me focus the interview dialogue into a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. First, I used the classification to organize the dialogue and then ensured chronological order of their experience based on the timeline each participant discussed in the interviews. See Appendix G for a example of a “six-part Labovian model” table used to help organize the interview transcript.

In addition to focusing on the event-centered pieces of the narrative using Labovian, I focused on the experiences of each participant by analyzing the specific language and content in a more interpretive manner described by Daiute (2014). Daiute (2014) described an approach to data analysis in narrative inquiry that focused on using evaluative devices to look at narratives. Dauite’s (2014) approach focused on looking at challenging situations through a framework that looked closely at cultural values and problems like power differential struggles and gender normative conforming behaviors to help make meaning of these experiences. Each narrative part where one focused on the challenges was communicated using a variety of possible meanings in

terms of the participant's experience, knowledge, opinion, and self-discovery while I also considered the social construct of the time, place, and purpose being described (Daiute, 2014). To analyze these narratives, I focused on the evaluative language that Daiute (2014) described as a way for researchers to "deepen their understanding of meaning by identifying significance" (p. 157).

Evaluative language makes meaning by looking closely at the language used and the context of this language (Daiute, 2014). Evaluative language does not look at the explicit language or the nouns and verbs, but the implicit language, "the words between the nouns and verbs" (Daiute, 2014, p. 154). Evaluative phrases hint at the purpose of the story (Daiute, 2014). Evaluative language includes categories of "psychological state expressions, intensifiers, qualifiers, casual connectors, negatives, hedges, and valence" (Daiute, 2014, p. 156). I used these categories of evaluative language to identify patterns to aid me in making meaning of the narrative without losing complexity of the story.

According to Daiute (2014), the steps to analyzing through this approach included looking simultaneously at each narrative story that shared a similar challenge or barrier and creating a table that showcased the "in between words" into the evaluative device categories (p. 154). See Table 2 for an example of a table created that looked at evaluative devices in one of the participant's transcript. After completing this step, I used the final column of the table to list how the different categories of evaluative devices contribute to the meaning of the narrative. These contributions became patterns for either follow-up interview questions or revealed possible significances of the narrative meaning (Daiute, 2014). The use of evaluative devices also helped showcase patterns of possible narrative purpose and functions that included "humanizing, minimizing,

qualifying, intensifying, and connecting," which helped identify important narrative meanings that were not explicit in the stories (Daiute, 2014, p. 164).

Table 2

Evaluative Devices Example

Pseudonym	Transcript Text	Evaluative Device	Contribution to Meaning
Esther	"I *think* challenges would include *just* dealing with a lot [of] people that don't *necessarily think* I should be in my role. That's been hard as well, *especially because* sometimes people don't *necessarily* give you a reason."	*think*: psychological state expression, cognitive	A dimension of consciousness- what Esther believes
		just: negation	A noticeable evaluation that to Esther something is out of the ordinary
		necessarily and *especially*: qualifier	Judgements to how Esther evaluates these challenges
		because: casual connection	Cause and effect of why Esther believes it is "hard"
Chloe	"I joined the group message for exec, I was *afraid* to even say anything *because* they were making jokes like women can't read… and *really* uncomfortable things that were *just really* out of line."	*afraid*: psychological state expression, affective	Chloe's feelings
		because: casual connection	Why Chloe was afraid
		really: intensifier	Marks a significance to the narrative
		just really: negations	A noticeable evaluation that to something is out of the ordinary

Analyzing narratives through a unit of analysis for their structure and content was a good starting point in the data analysis process (Saldaña, 2016). Therefore, I also used memos and journaling extensively as I read the transcribed interviews and narrative stories to ensure I used a fluid inquiry approach to my narrative analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) warned that in narrative inquiry when the researcher placed stories in strict categories, codes, or themes, they may not depict the how and why behind the experiences. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) believed in order to gain an understanding of what their experiences were like and be able to draw conclusions about how these women made meaning of their experiences, a more fluid approach to looking at the data was important. I found the memo process essential to being able to have a more fluid approach to my inquiry.

Data Analysis Instruments

To help with the coding procedures, I used thematic charts as well as created specific charts focused on evaluative devices (See Table 1) and the "six part Labovian model" (See Appendix G) to organize the transcribed data from the interviews and narratives as well as the data from my personal memos (Saldaña, 2016). These thematic charts were based on themes seen in the narrative text to help establish the findings from this research. See Appendix H for an example of one of the thematic charts created for one of the narratives.

Validity and Trustworthiness

My connection to female leadership begins with my personal journey as a female leader. My involvement during my years as an undergraduate student included serving in many leadership roles that required an interview, but I personally found the stress of an

elected leadership role like student government something I did not want to pursue. I decided to pursue a career in higher education because I wanted to be a mentor to female student leaders and help these leaders through their college journey, similar to the role my mentor played in my journey as a student leader. In my current role, I serve as an advisor, mentor, and friend to female student leaders who are looking to share their personal challenges and stresses as they grapple with the pressures of being a female leader. Based on my experiences and the experiences that other females have shared with me, I examined my assumptions and my biases as I developed the narratives for each SGA president. These biases and assumptions could have led to framing questions for the interviews or framing the data to fit into what I perceived these females experiences to be like; therefore, I had to continue to understand how my researcher lens may influence the study and avoid any possible negative influence (Maxwell, 2013).

One of the ways I kept my possible researcher bias in check was to continue to examine my assumptions, biases, and principles as they relate to my research. During the research process, after each set of interviews I completed Maxwell (2013) exercise 2.1 (p. 34) where I journaled about my prior experiences, my goals, and beliefs and how these items shaped my approach to my research as well as what advantages or disadvantages these things may bring to my research. This helped me focus my reflection and helped me understand my biases, assumptions, and principles as a researcher. In this exercise, I examined my experiences, assumptions, and feelings as they relate to the experiences of the participants of the study. I wrote in a journal about what I believed were my strengths as a female leader and what personal experiences my identity played in me being a successful leader or facing challenges as a leader. A continuous examination of these and

explanation of my research lens helped me develop steps I personally took to ensure I kept my personal experiences as a female leader in check. This showcased my research integrity and adds validity to the study. While being able to completely avoid personal beliefs and values was not possible, naming these in my research helped with possible validity concerns present in qualitative research. Maxwell (2013) stated that, "Qualitative research is primarily concerned with understanding how a particular researcher's values and expectations may have influenced the conduct and conclusions of the study (which may be either positive or negative) and avoiding the negative consequences of these" (p. 124). The best way to strengthen the validity of this study was to scrutinize my own biases, assumptions, feelings, and experiences as they relate to female student leaders and name these very items in my journal reflections.

Member-Checking

After the third interview, I presented each participant with their personal narrative to ensure that I was interpreting the participants' perspectives of what occurred in their experiences as a student government president as well as ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning behind their experiences (Maxwell, 2013). Member checking also provided an opportunity for participants to comment on the findings (Creswell, 2014). However, I did not receive any comments from participants that would add to the findings. Participants did provide correspondence letting me know that the information and the meaning making in the narrative were aligned with how they made meaning of their experiences. After both the first and second interview, I developed some clarifying questions to ask in the following interview to help ensure that the context

behind their previously shared experiences were in line with the participants' actual meaning making.

Triangulation

I also triangulated the data by using different data sources and examining all the sources when forming my patterns and themes (Creswell, 2014). The use of multiple interviews and keeping a personal journal served as the form of triangulation, another strategy mentioned by Maxwell (2013) and Creswell (2014) to help add validity to the study.

Researcher Interviewer

I have connections both socially and intellectually to the topic I studied: college female student leaders. In my undergraduate years at Berry College, I served as a student leader in many different capacities. I struggled with finding my place as a female student leader and faced challenges in my different leadership roles that shaped my personal leadership journey. My career path in higher education administration was chosen because I wanted to help college student leaders, specifically women, be successful and gain confidence in their role as a leader, in turn, playing a role in shaping their life after college. I am passionate about this topic as I want to see women be successful leaders. I define successful leaders as overcoming challenges, breaking barriers, and crushing gender stereotypes—all while helping their organizations grow, be innovative, and visionary. Serving as a mentor, advisor, and supervisor for young female leaders, I work daily to help these women showcase their confidence without coming across as overbearing, mean, or emotional. These descriptive words may be a biased perspective

that I brought to these interviews. Therefore, I shaped my interview questions with an understanding of how my bias may be present in the qualitative research process.

My connections to this topic outside of my work and my personal journey include the few women leadership institutes I have attended where I have established relationships and mentors as well as my close female leader friends. Both of these groups shared with me their struggles and challenges related to being a female leader and allowed me to share my challenges with them. Many times, I am a listening ear as my female colleagues, friends, mentors, and students share with me their personal challenges as they grapple with the additional pressures and stresses of being a female leader. Based on my experiences and the experiences that other women have shared with me, I believe that a female leader has additional stresses and barriers in their way that male leaders rarely experience. Some would classify that belief as an assumption, but when looking at the experiences of those around me and my own experiences, I would classify this assumption as a fact. This fact was checked at the door when I developed my interview questions and when I analyzed the data from the interviews. I may want to be searching for these similar experiences and could either frame questions that are leading or analyze the data to fit this frame.

Working in an environment where women are not advancing as quickly as their male counterparts, I personally feel connected as I have struggled to advance as quickly. This struggle and assumption about advancement has shaped my focus for this study as I want to focus on successful college women student leaders (who have advanced) to make meaning of how they have reached this success. Initial questions related to this idea of advancement that shaped my study include: What sets the few that do apart? Is

confidence involved? How are men perceiving them through this success and advancement?

Unconsciously, I assumed that female leaders face challenges in this role that stem from their struggle to build trust and confidence from their male followers. Through this research, I hoped to find out if this is actually an occurrence or if this an assumption based on my personal experiences. This idea of the role of trust in female leaders assumed that men may play a significant role in a woman's leadership experiences and challenges. All my assumptions played a role in how I approached this study. I wanted to know more about the challenges and barriers female college student leaders face, particularly as it relates to working with men. As strongly as I feel about my personal beliefs surrounding the idea of female leadership, I allowed the narratives to be ideas, experiences, and beliefs from each individual participant.

Chapter IV

RESULTS

As noted, women outnumber men in colleges and universities in the U.S. about 1.3 to 1 and this gap is expected to continue to widen over the next 10 years (United States Department of Education, 2016). However, this rate of more women attending colleges and universities is not transferring to student government president roles with only 15% of women serving in this role at four-year colleges and universities nationwide (American Student Government Association, 2016). Understanding why there is a gap in women serving as a student government president, even though more women are pursuing academics, is needed so student affairs professionals can help encourage women college students to take the steps and gain the leadership experiences to pursue this high impact role.

Exploring the lived experiences of females currently serving as student government president and shaping their experiences into narratives gave the power to each individual female to define their perspectives within the social construct of their underrepresented voices (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Harding, 1988). Each female was able to authentically express her experiences, memories, and feelings as it relates to her current experiences serving as the student government president at her college or university.

This study on the experiences of female SGA presidents at public research institutions in the Southeastern United States was designed to gain an understanding of

their experiences during their one-year term as student government president. The following research questions guided the study include:

RQ1: What are the experiences of female college student leaders prior to being elected to serve as their student government association president?

RQ2: What are the experiences of female college student leaders who serve as student government association presidents?

These questions led to discussion not only on how each student experienced their one-year term as student government president, but also how previous experiences helped shape their desire to pursue this high impact leadership role. During these three interviews over the course of the one-year term, these females also described the role their identities played in how they experienced their presidency and how they made meaning of these experiences.

Each of the seven participants shared her lived experiences as the student government president at her public research institution in the Southeast addressing the research questions above. Three of the students identified as White and four students identified as women of color. Using their dialogue from the interviews and placing these stories through my personal lens, the individual narratives below provide a holistic perspective of each participant of the study.

Esther: "Success is Just Seeing it Through"

Esther grew up in a single-parent home where she first saw drive and dedication from watching her mom who was "trying to better herself when nobody in her family supports her." It was the drive from her mother and the hard work ethic that stemmed from her Haitian culture that set her on a path focused on success. As a Haitian first-

generation American, Esther described the Haitian community as "big on school, big on hard work, big on just making sure that you're doing what you're supposed to do to make sure that you succeed."

Esther saw herself as a leader at an early age when she became a big sister. This additional family responsibility where someone depended on her made leadership more tangible. It was not a "superhero status," but a leader being responsible for others, teaching and helping them so that one day they too can teach and help others. This idea of leadership that focuses on empowering people to empower themselves is evident in both her high school leadership experience and college leadership experience first as a member of the high school step team and then in her first college leadership role as a college orientation leader. In both roles, she was young and new to these experiences as a new member of a step team and a first-generation college student; however, it was her desire to help others that led to her making an impact in these very different leadership roles.

Esther was not one who would seek out leadership roles; she would wait until she felt she was needed or asked for help, trying to avoid "step[ping] on anyone's toes . . . if someone's not asking for my help, there's not a willingness to learn or listen." As a first-year student, her involvement as a college orientation leader, an office assistant for the student union, and planning a freshmen leadership institute started her journey to finding roles where she was needed to be a leader at her institution. As a Black woman at a predominately White institution, her identity played a role in how she felt she was needed as well as how she chose her leadership involvement. It was seeing the need for

diversity in leadership roles that led her to take the first step and become involved in student government executive leadership serving as vice president.

However, serving as vice president came with stigma as many people saw her playing right into the organizational culture of their student government association. Usually, the vice president was a minority with a White student government president, and by serving in this leadership role, she was continuing that narrative. To many of her peers, she was the token, and it was during that year serving as vice president that she may not have learned a lot about herself as a Black woman but "the experience made it blatantly in [her] face."

The following year, Esther was motivated to run for student government president. She saw the need for her to serve in this leadership role and knew that she was the most qualified person to run. However, when talking about how others felt about her running, she said, "when I was running a lot of people were against me running for student body president . . . no one said I wasn't qualified; they just didn't want me in this role." She ran on a full minority ticket, which helped in terms of having close relationships with leaders who understood her as they "all have some sort of shared experiences with oppression."

Some of the experiences and challenges of being a Black woman leader in her role as vice president of the student body shifted over into her new role as president. Esther struggled with the idea of having others question her ability and her being at the table, "I felt a lot during my time as vice president and sometimes as student body president where you're in a space that you totally deserve to be in, but you just feel like

you're not supposed to be there." When speaking about her experiences in this leadership role she went on to say:

> I think challenges would include just dealing with a lot [of] people that don't necessarily think I should be in my role. That's been hard as well, especially because sometimes people don't necessarily give you a reason. Sometimes especially when you have like me, people who won't have an actual reason for why you shouldn't do something. They'll just be like "you don't look the part, or you don't have this. You don't have that." Things that don't necessarily matter to the position and you could be told you're qualified, but people will still think that.

Being a Black woman gave her the ability to focus on fixing the racial imbalance in student government that she felt was so evident by the lack of previous women presidents or minority presidents, "Diverse leadership leads to more diverse membership." Esther felt although she worked to establish more diverse membership, after her year as president the power dynamic in the next president's leadership could result in the racial imbalance swinging back. When reflecting on the role power plays in how student government evolved or did not evolve, she said, "Student government brings out the best and worst in people because it's such a pseudo world of power on every single level." The legacy of a previous president can be small or disappear quickly when new leadership comes in, the only legacy that the next leader cannot take from Esther is her being one of the few Black women student body presidents at her institution.

While being a Black woman president allowed her to set the agenda and make small changes for racial and gender balance at her institution, it had some challenges in how she represented herself at a predominately White institution.

> It's already difficult attending a predominantly white school and being a minority, but being the student government president of a predominantly White institution, it's particularly difficult because I can't relate to the majority of my student body, so attending events for IFC or Panhellenic aren't necessarily the best things for me just because I look so much different than everybody else, but I always have to make a show to make sure that I am acting a certain way so I can appeal to different audiences.

She found advocates in the peers and student leaders around her; her male vice president advocated on her behalf in a lot of different circumstances over the course of the year. Esther felt support from her peers, but the relationships with faculty members and advisors in this role were "toxic." When reflecting on her advisor relationship, Esther did not see her advisor as the first person she would go to for help as she felt this person was not always genuine and supportive. She went on to say, "If you don't know the answer to something or if you need help with something, there's not necessarily a real open environment to ask for help."

Not only the challenges in terms of how her identity played out in her relationships, the confidence in the role as student government president, and the lack of support from professional staff, the stress of a typical day was also a challenge that took a toll on Esther over the course of her year as president. When describing a typical day in her president role, Esther said:

> I wake up and I am immediately stressed because there's so much to do during the day. I typically have classes in the morning. I go to my classes in the morning and then I go to my office hours. At my office hours, I'm just answering emails

> and communicating with people and talking to people and texting different organizations, different groups, different people in my cabinet, and different people on my executive board to make sure that they're staying on track. Then 12:00 hits. Ding, ding, ding. There's an emergency because there's always an emergency, right? I get a text. I get an email. I get a call. Something just happened on campus or something has happened in regard to our administration or something has happened in the local community. Have to handle that immediately. Then, I drop everything that I am supposed to do and go handle that. Then, I come back and then I am attending general body meetings for different organizations or I'm attending our executive branch meeting that happens every Thursday or I'm attending a cabinet meeting. In between that, I like to eat and drink water and try to call my mom and make sure she is doing well. Then after that, at night, my studying skills come alive. I then study from 9:00 typically to 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning. Then I do it all over again.

To Esther, it was the stress that women in general place on themselves to handle so much for others and neglect their own needs that created a lack of self-care that was not sustainable.

> I don't think it's just a Black woman thing, I think it's a woman thing in general where you care so much about the organization or what you're doing that you just neglect yourself . . . I was put in positions where I had to choose between my self-care or feeding people and I chose to feed people all year.

Success to her as student government president was just seeing it through; completing the year as president to Esther was success. She may not have

accomplished all her campaign promises, but she did make strides to seeing those through as well. In this role as student government president, Esther learned to appreciate the bigger picture and realized that the personal motivation may not be what "gets you through things [but] it's the consistency, the hard work, and dedication."

Esther, when reflecting on her overall experience in student government, compared it to "a really great hug that's now a little too tight and uncomfortable, but nevertheless, it's still a great hug." Her experiences as student government president included many hardships. However, the opportunity to learn, the opportunity to experience the challenges, and for her, to find a way to see them through as well as the opportunity to motivate the next young leaders were the positive experiences that created that "really great hug."

Madison: "Firm but Flexible"

Madison is a first-generation college student from a small town. During her last two years of high school, she attended a public residential school where she served in leadership roles as both a residential advisor and in an equivalent position to a head residential advisor. According to Madison, her leadership experiences started before serving in leadership roles at her residential high school; it was her role as a team member in a softball team for 11 years that played a significant role in having her peers see her as a leader. Madison described her softball experience as:

> Typically, [it does have] traditional leadership roles such as team captain . . . [in one game]. Where we had a particular play that was complicated. Nobody really knew what to do, so everybody on the field looked to me to see what to do next. That was the moment where, not only did I see my peers recognizing a form of

leadership in me in that moment, and as a resource in that moment. But also, I felt confident in my own leadership to be setting the pace and setting the expectations for plays moving forward.

In college, she was quick to get involved with student government serving as a member of the student conduct board in the judicial branch. While on the student conduct board, Madison took on different leadership roles in this branch ending with being elected to serve as the chief justice. After the challenging campaign process to be elected as chief justice, Madison swore off possible other leadership opportunities within student government that required campaigns and elections. However, after toxic leadership in the executive branch and with only one president and vice president team running, Madison decided that she needed to run for president as she had "firm beliefs that it [the only ticket running for president and vice president] wouldn't be good for the hope of the organization."

While the chief justice campaign process was challenging, the campaign process for the presidential ticket, being that it was a longer process, was more stressful and time-consuming leaving "almost no time for academics." Due to one ticket not receiving 60% of the votes, Madison and her vice president had to participate in a run-off process that only added to the stress of working to win the election. Madison and her vice president as a full female ticket shared something else in common that ended up playing a role in moving a final debate away from campaign promises to a more personal attack. Looking back on her campaign experience Madison said:

> We did run into kind of personal or less than savory perceptions of us and the ideal that asking questions around can two married women be in this role? Will

> they have the time to commit? Do they need to be at home? They'll also be trying to build a family at the same time. Can they do these things? Instead of trying to engage that rhetoric . . . [we focused on helping them] understand why that's not an appropriate conversation versus allowing it to become a personal attack.

The inappropriate questions during the debate ignited a fire in students across campus with many voters turning out to vote and take a personal stand on the ability of Madison and her vice president to serve in these leadership roles and have families. Madison was excited for the support, but at the same time in the back of her mind thought "what level of disappointment will people feel, and will I have let them down if we do not win?"

Madison and her vice president won the election, but the doubt her opponents called into question would lead to her feeling at times that she had something to prove. When she reflected on her performance as student government president and being a married woman in this role, she mentioned the gender pressure she felt at different times during her year as president:

> I know that my performance in this role is not a reflection on, or a standard for . . . I don't need to be setting the standard for what it means to be a woman in this role, or a married woman in this role. But, there is a perceived pressure of doing my gender and being a strong woman in leadership and the additional pressure of not and almost sometimes feeling as though you can't mess up, or at least not publicly and that people can't find out that you've messed up in ways that I think about if I were from the role looking in, or I was on the outside looking in it would seem natural and seem appropriate . . . I would think it makes sense that

> people make these mistakes, but being in the role, there have been moments where I felt extra pressure because I didn't want to disappoint women . . . [I would ask myself questions like] "Do I need to stay extra than other people would to prove the point?"

As the year progressed for Madison, this pressure started to fade "more is being accomplished than has been in past administrations, that's been helpful in helping alleviate" the pressure. Besides her marriage status and gender, she also faced challenges as a first-generation college student in her presidential role. According to Madison, one of the first lessons you learn as a first-generation student "is that you don't know pretty much anything. You get used to being wrong pretty quickly and you get used to not knowing things pretty quickly or being the quote unquote perceived to be the dumb person in the room." Madison relied on her team approach to leadership from her days on the softball team to help navigate this additional challenge. She chose members for her executive cabinet based on understanding what each person was knowledgeable about so she would have knowledgeable people on her team to compensate for her personal gaps in knowledge.

Madison made large strides in her specific platform promises as well as evolving the culture of student government. When discussing her accomplishments, Madison's version of success was marked as progress on each piece of her campaign platform and leaving a legacy of moving student government success from being about the individual win to the best outcome for the students. Her approach to making progress relied on creating a strong team, enabling others and being "firm but flexible . . . firm in

what you want or in the change that you need or the goals, but flexible in what that execution of that may look like."

With a team approach to leadership, relationships were key to Madison's success; she had a strong bond and open dialogue with her vice president. When describing the significance of this relationship, she said the relationship was "very positive, very empowering . . . something that I would not trade for the world." Madison continued to express that the strong relationships with her peers exceeded her expectations and helped her have a momentous year as student government president. However, she did not express similar positive messages when discussing the relationships with administration and her advisors. When comparing the two different groups, Madison said:

> I expected better from the university [administration], I expected support from the university, I expected professionalism from the university, and I haven't gotten that, so I've been very disappointed in that. However, the relationships internally with my team, with my vice president has exceeded expectations.

Navigating the significant conflict due to lack of support and professionalism with the advising staff, Madison learned to stop focusing so much of her efforts on fixing advising and refocus her efforts on advocating for students and moving her campaign promises forward. The support she normally would receive from her advisors, she found in her executive team.

While the lack of support from advisors did create some additional challenges in her year of serving as student government president, Madison still found opportunities to

leave a legacy, learn about her strengths, and build the confidence in her approach to both navigating her environment and her role as a leader.

When sharing some of her learning lessons, Madison specifically focused on how she learned to connect with "marginalized" groups on-campus:

> I learned quickly that the key to success is just being a bridge and connecting marginalized communities to the administrators or to whatever room they need to be in . . . if they're having trouble getting through to somebody that you're helping pave that way.

Madison also discussed how she learned from her student government presidential experience how to make changes stick:

> [one thing the] SG president role has taught me is that sometimes there's needed change, but there are outdated policies or rules or regulations that prevent that from happening . . . [creating change involves] helping find tasks and developing a path for change and then removing barriers.

As a leader, Madison's biggest personal lesson to help her continue to be an effective leader in the next steps of her journey post-graduation involved taking her leadership role seriously, but not taking it personally. When describing what that meant in more detail Madison said:

> Don't take it so seriously. Take the role seriously . . . take your progress seriously, but don't take things so personally. I guess I felt everything very deeply in the role. When people were unhappy, when people were angry with me, when something didn't go the way I wanted it to, I felt it very personally, and I would just recommend not doing all that emotional labor.

After graduating, Madison will use her student government experiences and lessons learned as she pursues teaching before applying to and attending law school.

Sarah: "Don't Put Limits on Yourself"

Sarah grew up in a single parent home with a younger sister. When thinking about her high school experiences, it was her experience as a drum major that shaped her definition of leadership. It was from this experience she learned the difference between being a boss and a servant leader, "leadership isn't about being a boss and being mean . . . but more about serving and setting an example." When it came time to go to college as a first-generation and Pell eligible student, she decided to attend a large public institution. Knowing the navigation of this environment could be challenging, Sarah decided to attend "College Ready," which gave her the ability to take classes and start a little early to gain the confidence she felt she needed to navigate the large institution environment.

As a first-generation college student, she did not want to take any experiences for granted because "it was a big deal" to her. Sarah believed that her desire to serve others as a leader related to being a first-generation student, "it just makes me more appreciative of the opportunity to lead others." When looking for ways to get involved, Sarah thought about student government, and while there were not many leaders in the organization that "looked like her," if she could join, it would be a great opportunity. She was excited about the possibility to join a large student organization that both made an impact in the campus community and served students. Sarah took a leap to lead and ran for senate, but was not elected. She was upset. This was not the first student organization she tried to join and was not elected or selected for membership. Describing how she felt on her

walk alone back to her residence hall after hearing she was not elected, she said, “I keep putting myself out there, I don’t know what’s going on.”

After many attempts to join organizations, Sarah was selected as a member of an organization that gives tours to potential new students and their families. Being selected for this organization gave her the confidence to find other ways to be involved on campus. While being selected to serve as a tour guide was a turning point for Sarah, it was a discussion over dinner with her friends from “College Ready” that motivated her to take another leap to lead. In this discussion, her friends, who were all women of color, noticed the current homecoming court did not have representation that looked like them. Sarah, when reflecting on the reason there were no women of color on the homecoming court said:

> I think it’s because people who look like us, we don’t think that’s for us, so none of us try . . . and if there’s nobody on the court this year who doesn’t look like us, it won’t be because nobody that looks like us didn’t show up.

Sarah applied for homecoming court and was selected. It was through this role that Sarah made a connection with the current vice president of student government, and when a senate seat opened midway through the year, Sarah applied and was selected.

Coming into senate halfway through the year was tough for Sarah. With strong opinions, cliques, and feeling like she was “completely outside of that circle,” Sarah had to push through her mindset to find her confidence to speak up and share what she was thinking on an issue. When reflecting on her senate experience, she said:

> I think the biggest thing was my own mindset in myself just pushing through. Not feeling so ostracized that I just decide not to come. So, it went through my mind,

> "Maybe I should just quit this. Maybe I should just move on." It wasn't that anybody didn't want me to succeed or . . . I don't know that they even noticed at all. It was more about me than anybody else. I had to keep showing up. I had to keep listening and trying to figure it out even though I wasn't directly in those social circles . . . it really taught me how to have my own opinion, be strong minded and not let that automatic feeling of I don't belong here overtake me so much that I just completely believe [it] and exit the organization as a whole.

Sarah, as a freshman, continued to find her own way within student government. She worked hard to fit in with this very different group of leaders and the vice president noticed. Sarah was asked to help the vice president with an upcoming campaign, which led to her being selected to serve as the Deputy Chief of Staff where she specifically worked with the three freshmen student government groups. The following year she continued her involvement in student government as the Director of the Legacy Camp and the Director of Programming. With all her years of serving in leadership roles within student government, many people in student government would ask her if she was planning on running for president, and she replied, "absolutely not" and she "meant it 100% whole-heartedly."

When the time to decide if she would run for president approached, Sarah realized her "absolutely not" was rooted in fear and doubt. She was fearful of running a campaign, running against the vice president she had worked with all these years, and doubtful of her abilities to be a good president. After much reflection, Sarah felt like she "would be doing nobody a service by not running out of fear." Sarah knew she would

love the job and believed she was the most qualified for job; therefore, she felt a responsibility to run.

The campaign process was challenging with the other candidate having to go on trial for campaign violations, and he did not receive any repercussions for his actions. Sarah believed if she had to face trial for campaign violations, "it would not have been the same." Right after the other candidate was found not guilty for the campaign violations, it crossed her mind to not run anymore, "I just want to wash my hands clean with this. I don't want to be a part of it." However, with the support she received from so many students who were cheering for her and inspired by her tenacity to continue in the process, she knew she could not quit, but needed to finish out the race for presidency. Sarah had strong campaign efforts to help her solidify a victory, but she still faced hurdles mostly with herself. When describing these hurdles, she said:

> There are people who would like to see you not succeed. Yes, systems sometimes aren't always set up for you to succeed, but I mean the biggest obstacle in my case was myself. I had to push past the "I don't belong here feeling" and put myself out there and give it all that I had and realize that, you know, I was the biggest obstacle. It wasn't that people didn't want me.

Sarah felt the most qualified however, during the campaign process she never explicitly uttered those words. Even though internally she was struggling with her confidence, she was making history as the first Black woman student government president at her institution. Sarah believed she was charting the path for others:

> Somebody's got to be the first. Work through it and then people are going to feel comfortable doing it now after you. My gender and the color of my skin just

> happen to be the outside [norm], but I'm right where I need to be. So, just because other people aren't used to seeing me there and I'm not used to seeing me there doesn't mean that that's not what it's supposed to be . . . and I really wanted all students to know that there are no ceilings to your possibilities because of where you come from or what you look like.

Until much later in her actual term as president that she would be able to feel confident with the fact that she was the right person to serve in the role. When she would have these inner dialogues of not feeling like she "belongs in the room, even as president," Sarah would focus on her faith to help hush the inner dialogue:

> I'm rooted in my faith, so I really believe that I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing right now . . . I've just been given a grace to do so. Again, it can be tough, but I come back to my faith when I need to.

Sarah also had a great support system that she would lean on as well when she was having these inner struggles with "feeling out of place." She had a core group of close friends, members of her executive team, and her advisor to lean on for support.

While Sarah had to overcome her mindset that would have her second guessing her abilities, she also faced obstacles from others that she attributed to her race and gender. Sarah had assumptions that she would have to be prepared to debunk. When discussing one of those assumptions she said, "because I'm a woman [they thought] I was soft . . . but soft doesn't mean I'm fragile." Sarah had to be aware of the assumptions she may experience from others and be prepared to prove them wrong.

One of the ways Sarah had to navigate her race and gender as well as assumptions was in the way she communicated to others. In describing the communication process with students, she said:

> I had to rethink my language. I couldn't say diversity anymore, I had to say representation. For me, a Black woman to say diversity, it just was dangerous, I could never, ever, ever get too emotional and too angry, because then I'm the angry Black woman. So, every day and every move that I made, I had to watch how I spoke, what I said, I had to be very filtered which is kind of exhausting. But if I wanted to be effective at my job, I had to do those things.

And with administrators, her communication efforts were similar:

> I had to make sure when I went in there to advocate, that I have every single number, every single fact just because I'm a woman and Black. I'm not sure which one is more impactful in that, but I had to make sure that I had myself together, and I had to speak and be very articulate . . . I think I have to work harder to build a political capital.

Recounting a conversation with a member of her executive team about a few members of cabinet who would not look at her when they were talking to her, she said they told her, "Listen, they have never had interactions with Black people, let alone a Black woman as their boss. So, it's just weird. It's not like they dislike you or anything, it's just so different." Another obstacle Sarah struggled with was from the Black community where she was told "you're not Black enough . . . why don't you do something for the Black community" when in a discussion with peers about how Black people do not feel comfortable in a White space. It was all these "little small things that people say" that

were “exhausting” leading to her having a breakdown in her second semester. When thinking back to that experience, Sarah said, “things like that are just exhausting and hurtful when you see how others or the world views not only other minority students . . . but they view me.” When she got to the point of exhaustion, she would go back to using her support system and doing a little self-assurance.

> [I would be asking myself] am I doing well enough, am I Black enough, or am I White enough for the White people? I would just use my support system and rely on self-assurance to get to that point that I chill out and know that I am enough.

Sarah’s leadership style became a reflection of having to cope with these experiences. When reflecting on how her leadership style evolved, she said:

> I have borrowed influence . . . Your time is not only yours, somebody else’s, somebody’s entrusted you to do something. You don’t just get to get a nameplate and put your feet up on the desk. So, I think that’s what leadership has become in my head and in my life. Less of standing up tall and being loud and more of being responsible with the lives and the resources that has been given to you.

Sarah faced both obstacles with her inner dialogue and with her environment, but these experiences taught her a few key lessons that she will take with her after graduation. When reflecting on some advice she would share to others based on what she learned, she said:

> I mean even if the world wants to put limits on you, don’t put limits on yourself. I think our biggest obstacle is, “Oh, I can’t do this because I’m a woman,” or, “I can’t do this because I’m Black,” or, “I can’t do this because I’m a Black woman.” And I think it’s just sad that we do that to ourselves. So, don’t even do

that to yourself. You have enough obstacles to face without creating an obstacle for yourself.

Sarah also believed this experience taught her some things about "how the world works." Sarah explained this big takeaway as:

> One really hard pill to swallow is that the struggles that I've faced as a Black woman, and the little remarks, things of that nature, aren't going to change. I mean, that's just how the world works. And, so that was hurtful to realize how the world sees me. And of course, not the entire world and I'm not saying, "Woe is me." But I think I just got a reality check of how the world works and how my race and gender are going to reflect how I'm treated and how hard I have to work.

Some saw Sarah's one year as presidency as an easy experience. When talking with the next student government president, he mentioned she had it "easy because she was the first," but her response to him was "if it were easy, I wouldn't have been the first." This was another example of an "everyday battle" she had to take in stride. However, to Sarah those obstacles and challenges were all worth it when reflecting back on how she enjoyed her experience as president, she said, "I think I just came [into it] knowing that I would have to work hard, that there would be tough days and rewarding days, and I just came into it with that mindset. I was right, but it's been great."

As Sarah closed out her year as president, she had some perspective to share in terms of legacy. She said:

> When you're president there is this automatic pressure that nobody told you about to be the best president there ever was. You have to have the biggest programs. You have to have the best Earth-shattering change making policy implemented. I

decided to let go of that pressure. And to just meet the needs of students, and to just do a good job every day . . . and when I think about my legacy, I really hope that the little seeds that I planted in the few people's hearts will grow and they'll continue to make sure that we are thinking of everybody and not just ourselves.

Grace: "I Am Worthy"

The daughter of military parents with two younger siblings, she called many towns home throughout her younger years; Grace took on a lot of responsibility in her family household. Her family finally settled into a town by the time Grace started high school, allowing her to find opportunities to get involved in various high school organizations. Through extra-curricular involvements she realized she had the potential to lead others. Reflecting on these high school experiences, Grace said, "If it weren't for those fundamental years in high school of taking on those leadership roles and getting comfortable and pushing myself, I would never have pursued a leadership role in a student government association."

Grace turned to student government at her university during her freshmen year as she was selected to participate in a special student government program called the "Freshmen Associates." When thinking about her first university student government experience, she noted that this experience "empowered me and made me feel like I was part of this family at the university. I felt like I had a purpose and I felt like people depended on me." This experience began her involvement in student government. She went on to take on her first leadership role within the organization during her sophomore year as a senator who chaired a committee that had all junior and senior members, "That was my first time leading somebody older than me. I was intimidated because I did

not feel as if I was capable, as if I was worthy at that point. I think I had a little bit of imposter syndrome." Grace saw this experience as another turning point in her leadership journey as she affirmed, "okay, I can do this. I was selected for a reason." She navigated this leadership role by being vulnerable and honest with her committee members when she felt like she needed context or had procedural questions.

After her experience as senator, Grace was elected as vice president of the student government association. The previous vice president was not excited to ensure the transition process was a success as he had just lost an election. The lack of a transition process took a toll on her confidence. She walked into this position thinking "I'm not prepared for this, and I'm going to flop. This is going to be a fail." It was in this role she realized that her desires to want others to think she was perfect and had it all together was affecting her ability to delegate, "That was a pivotal moment in my leadership style. I try to take on everything and it overwhelms me." Grace was not sure where the need to be perfect stems from whether this was from having strong and incredible role models in her parents or if her gender played a role. However, working to overcome these feelings to be perfect was a constant battle through each of her leadership roles in student government.

After serving a year as vice president, Grace decided to run for president. When it came time for the campaign process, Grace ran unopposed, so she did not have to participate in any campaigning and would be installed as the next student government president at the end of her junior year. Instead of feeling excited about serving as student government president, after three years of other leadership roles and involvement in student government, she felt discouraged as the student media questioned her credibility

because she did not win an election. She stepped into the position with the weight of being unopposed weighing heavy on her confidence.

> I didn't feel like I did anything to earn or deserve the position . . . I came into this role, I think, with low self-esteem. I really low-balled myself. I told so many of my friends and family members, "I don't think I can do this" . . . [it] felt like I had to be like them or better than them, so I really hindered myself by comparing myself to past leaders.

Over the course of the year as president, her confidence in her role as president grew from supportive affirmations from others, including her advisor, mentors, and her peers.

However, the feelings associated with going unopposed would show back up in different moments of her presidency when she did not feel respected, struggled with perfectionism, or believed she had to prove something to someone or society. When Grace was with alumni or older administrators, she had to navigate these feelings of self-doubt. At different university functions, when she would bring her significant other, alumni and administrators would assume that he was the president of student government and begin asking him questions about student government leading her to feel like she had to "prove something to someone or society that just because I'm a woman doesn't mean that I'm the arm candy." Similarly, Grace recalled another experience she tried to navigate:

> They treat me very professionally, but for some reason, I've had multiple encounters with men cutting me off. I'm not sure if it's my age or if it's the fact that I'm a woman or if it's both or if it's I'm blonde. I don't know what it is, but I feel like they don't take me seriously or professionally, so that's been a little

> frustrating this year, having to navigate through that . . . Like maybe I need to assert my dominance more, maybe talk louder when they talk over me . . . and that certainly took a toll on my confidence because I thought, well maybe what I have to say isn't quite worth someone's time to listen to. Or maybe what I'm saying is so stupid they feel the need to stop me . . . I think that played a significant impact on embarking this journey. I didn't know if what I had to say was actually significant, but I've been able to overcome that.

Grace could not confidently account that these experiences were in direct relation to only her gender as she saw other identities like her age or the fact that she was blonde, which could have played a role in having to prove herself in these situations. However, she did believe that women leaders in general "have to work a little bit harder to be respected and to be taken seriously." Grace learned to navigate this over time by focusing on being intentional in her word choice as well as asserting herself by physically taking up more space in meetings.

When reflecting on her journey to delegate more, control less, and understand that perfect was an unattainable goal, Grace described the process as involving both self-reflection and garnering support from others:

> It took me failing a lot. It took me finally opening up and peeling back the layers and being vulnerable with people to get through that to take a couple of steps forward. Now, sometimes I literally have to just wake up and look in the mirror and say, "It's okay if you're not okay. It's going to be okay." I'm not perfect. I can never be perfect. No one's perfect, and no one expects me to be perfect.

> I surround myself by the right people who lift me up and encourage me, and who tell me that even though I'm super flawed, I'm super loved.

Each one of these challenges helped her learn to embrace her strengths and the value she brought to the table, building up her confidence so she could recognize her leadership ability and lead the executive team to make some positive changes.

Grace and her executive team focused on creating more opportunities for students to be a part of student government cultivating a more inclusive culture. Her battle to overcome perfectionism by delegating to other members that played a large role in creating these opportunities for more student involvement in the organization. When sharing her experiences with grappling with the need to delegate more as student government president, Grace shared:

> I started delegating not because I stopped wanting things to be perfect. It was still hard, but because I wanted others to have the opportunity to learn, even if it's from failure . . . sometimes, people do fail, but I'm there to help them pick up the pieces and to help guide them . . . I think there's a delicate balance between being a leader who delegates and allows others to do it on their own and being a leader who delegates, but follows through and guides and helps people by supporting them.

Grace developed a leadership style in her year as president, focused on empowering others through delegation that was intentional in helping others learn as well as finding opportunities for her to continue to learn too, all while remaining humble, "Being a leader doesn't mean that it's all about you . . . you might accomplish some great things and bring a lot to an organization, but you have to be humble about it."

While she navigated self-doubt and the process to develop her leadership style, Grace had continuous support from different members of the university community. This support was essential to her ability to navigate her year as president. In describing her advisor relationship, Grace said:

> She has been an amazing advisor and helped me tremendously with SGA . . . in terms of just advising me on tough situations and decision making. Preparing me for significant meetings I was really nervous for . . . she encouraged me [by telling me] that "I am beautiful, and don't be ashamed of that, and don't feel like you can't tell people who you are. Don't feel like you have to put on a mask. Just be vulnerable and embrace who you are because it's beautiful and it can really offer a lot to this world."

Grace spent her year as president focused on setting up the future of the organization for success. She did this by making a culture shift from an organization that had leadership who were self-serving to establishing more opportunities for others to be a part of the success, which in turn developed more leaders as well as active members in the organization. When thinking about the future, Grace hoped this legacy would continue, but mentioned the significant role being president played in helping her understand what direction to pursue after graduation. When describing her year as president, Grace said:

> This has been the most rewarding opportunity of my entire life. I've made some of my best friends. I've learned so much about myself, both good and bad. I've developed my own passions. It's really affirmed what I want to do past college . . . I never could have prepared for such an incredible year, and it's been

exhausting, but it has been a lifelong memory I will cherish. Of course I've had days where the tears are running down my face, but at the same time, I think I've really found who I am as a person and as a leader, and I've found what I'm passionate about, and I've found what I'm pretty good at, through trial and error.

As Grace enters the next phase and attends law school, she plans on applying the many lessons that she has learned through her involvement in student government to these next steps. She has learned how to navigate challenging experiences and has a firm understanding of how perfectionism plays a role in the ways she moves through this world. This has become a passion worth pursuing.

Olivia: "It Doesn't Make You Weak"

Growing up in a single parent home in a mid-sized city with one older brother, Olivia knew she did not "come from the nicest of homes," but she worked hard to "rise above that." She chose to be involved in organizations in high school that would build her confidence and communications skills so she could be comfortable with others and be taken seriously as an intellect. When describing the significance of her debate team experience Olivia said, "I was no longer doubtful of my intelligence level, so that made me feel like I could actually talk to people." With the growth in her communication skills and her confidence, Olivia discovered the role that strong communication skills could play in how she led. From her experience on the debate team, she realized she was good at "conceptualizing a vision" and "inspiring people to take on initiatives that they never thought they would take on."

With a good understanding of these strengths, Olivia would enter college looking for ways to capitalize her organization involvement by finding organizations that would

allow her to use these strengths. According to Olivia she saw, "involvement in student government as a way to apply her strengths and make an impact." She saw student government as a possible leadership path but was not sure she would receive enough votes to win a senate election race. Early in her freshman year, Olivia found a community home in her sorority. When describing this significance, she said, "this was a really pivotal moment . . . because I had the support of my sisters and the support of their friends, it just gave me a really big confidence boost to run for senate." Olivia, after winning a senate election spot at the end of her freshmen year, started out behind due to not being present over the summer. During the fall, she quickly set out a to make a name for herself within student government by taking an active role in expressing her opinion. In describing her senate experience, Olivia said, "It got to the point where every single time there was something new on the floor, my senate president knew I was going to say something."

During her early experiences with student government, poor leadership was prevalent with the past four presidents resigning before the end of their term. She felt that the current culture of student government was not welcoming and did not truly listen to the student body. Administrators and close friends recommended Olivia to run for president as they knew she could help change that culture. With the recommendation from others, she ran for president on the first all-woman ticket in university history. The campaign process was expensive with Olivia and her vice president candidate "spending money they did not have." Initially to Olivia, the all-woman ticket brought some reservations, but she soon saw it as their strength. When reflecting on the connotation of an all-woman ticket, Olivia said:

> I was nervous about it because there's always that little thing in your head that says, you know, what are you going to do when you get the jerk that doesn't care and says they're not or he's not voting for you because you're an all-woman ticket and it looks liberal, or you're an all-woman ticket and we just don't think you'll be able to do it because the last president was a woman and things like that. I think it was our strength. I also think that it was a really good gentle . . . newsflash to people that women can do this job, and we do this job well, and that it's okay to vote for an all-woman ticket.

With her and her vice president candidate's campaign plan, focusing on ensuring more students' voices would be heard throughout their year in office, the all-woman ticket won. Once Olivia was convinced they won the election, she began to question if she had the experiences to do the job:

> I'm pretty sure we won, but what are we going to do if we do win. And it kind of just hit me like, maybe we really weren't prepared for it. Maybe this really wasn't a good idea . . . I don't really know anybody up there. I don't even know the process. Just all these thoughts were going through my head of why I shouldn't have done it . . . I always think that I'm not doing something right or it won't work out in my favor. I'm like a pessimist when it comes to my own future, but an optimist when it comes to everything else. I think the why just came from nerves and came from the fact that I have only been a senator. I have not gotten involved in student government how other people were, and do I deserve this position? Do I deserve it at all? Or does someone who's been involved deserve it?

Olivia only serving in student government as a senator knew the transition process before she officially was sworn in as president would be vital to calming her nerves and preparing her the leadership role as student government president. However, the transition process into her role as president brought some challenges with the previous president not taking any role in getting her prepared for her year as president. When describing the transition process for her and her vice president, Olivia said:

> We relied on our professional staff, our administrative staff to really help us get on the ground running, but I think it would have been a lot easier if I had more information. I would have been a lot more confident in the decisions that I was making within the first 2 months had I had an actual transition into the role.

To help with her transition and with her year as presidency, Olivia established key relationships to lean on for support throughout her year in office. When describing the gravity of these relationships, Olivia said:

> It's important to surround yourself with people who . . . are understanding of your position, who respect you, who trust you, and who want to see you succeed. If you don't, then you're not going to succeed at all. You're going to feel like you're alone in this.

She had strong relationships with faculty members, recounting one specific faculty member who served as key reference for her Olivia said, "It was just a really great opportunity for me to see that there's someone that believes in me that isn't my mom or my grandma." She had a strong relationship with the student government advisor who Olivia described as "my rock, she's someone that I can always go to when I'm worried about something or really happy about something." Her vice president shared

the same vision for their year in student government leadership. While they "may arrive at it in different ways" Olivia being "louder" and her vice president "more methodical," Olivia felt that she "couldn't imagine doing this without her." Relationships were key to Olivia's success, specifically relationships with other women. When describing this importance Olivia said:

> I think that women are more relatable and like more accepting of faults, or they relate more to what you're saying, how you're feeling. Like when I'm angry, I cry. I didn't realize that until my director said that. She's like, "You're not weak. You're mad and you're just crying because you're mad and that's okay." It wasn't until she said that, that I actually accepted that as an okay way of dealing with my emotions.

Many times while sharing her experiences and her approach to leadership Olivia mentioned while there were a few instances where her gender may have led to her feeling disrespected from others. Overall she believed that her gender played a significant role in her successes of meeting her main goal to make student government more approachable and inclusive. Her main area of concern where she felt her gender negatively impacted her effectiveness involved showing emotions and empathy or allowing her extroverted personality to be misinterpreted. "Once I was casted as being empathetic or when I didn't hide my emotions, it was seen as a way to steamroll me." When describing how her energetic personality played a role, Olivia said:

> Just because I'm not loud and energetic, you think that I'm in a bad mood, but other times it is because I'm in it or I'm really focused on something. I think what's hard is people don't see a middle for me. They only see me either being

> loud and energetic or mad, or not mad but just upset when it just means I'm focused . . . I feel like sometimes people just don't respect that about me.

After reflecting on some of those experiences, Olivia went on to say:

> My role as a woman in this position makes people want to come up and talk to more, that I'm more approachable . . . I think that men just aren't as open about things . . . I think in the past it's just always been like . . . I know something you don't know and like that means I'm more powerful. It's like no. Knowledge is power, but you've got to share that knowledge.

One of the main goals for her year as president was creating a student government environment which was more welcoming and inclusive. Olivia saw her gender as a benefit in making this happen:

> I think when you see someone that looks like you in a position, you go for it. The fact that we're both women in very powerful positions, other women were like, "I can do it too," or "I can take on that position." I also think that my VP and I really empower feminists to come out. The majority of men that work with us are feminists.

While Olivia saw her gender as a strength and developed a strong support system to help her navigate her year as president "just like any new president," she still had a "few surprises" that shaped her experiences:

> I thought that I would still be able to have a life when I became president and it's really just like no. You are always viewed as the president, always. While I like waking up and knowing I have a purpose sometimes I would wake up and not want to go into the office. There are some days I'm like, "I just want to be a

> college kid that's 22. I don't want to do this anymore," but that's rare. I can count that on one hand, but when it does happen, I just focus on where I get my satisfaction, knowing we're making a difference, my team and me.

Discussing her struggles to move projects forward Olivia stated, "I didn't realize how much administration takes their time, while students expect results quickly. Finding that balance has been difficult this year." By the end of her term, Olivia and her team were able to figure out how to push initiatives through. When describing her successes, she said:

> It takes a lot for me to talk about it. I don't like to say what I've done. I like to say what we've done and when I think about it that way. I'm really happy to say that no matter how much the students wanted the results quickly, at least we got the initiatives done within the year, and the administration worked on those initiatives with us. Whereas in the past, it just wasn't the case. It was normally like, you had to be a 2-term president to get all of your initiatives done, or you'd only get three initiatives down within the year and we've gotten like ten.

Chloe: "Doing Things for the Right Purpose"

Chloe started her involvement in student government in third grade. While she lost her first election, she won a student council spot representing her specific third grade class. Her passion for student government continued as she held different leadership roles with student government through middle school and high school. According to Chloe, many of her classmates her senior year told her to run for student government president, but she did not think she was qualified for that role. Instead, Chloe ran and

was elected as parliamentarian whose role in student government involved conducting meetings and running events when the president deferred to her.

During each one of her campaigns and election processes, her parents played a significant role in supporting her as well as giving her lessons that shaped her leadership style. When reminiscing about the lessons that played a role in her approach to leadership, Chloe had a specific story to share:

> My dad and my mom told us about how we live in this great house, but you can't forget everyone else that brought you there, and that the people who built that house and how everyone's important and how everyone can play a role. So, not to disregard anyone or obviously ever be discriminatory. So, that was something that definitely shaped me a lot, appreciating every person that helps complete a project or that has an idea.

With the significance of student government playing a large role in her life, Chloe knew once she started college, student government would be where she would get connected to the campus community and work to make an impact. She quickly got involved serving as a senator her freshmen year. During that year she was selected as "senator of the year." In that same year, Chloe was promoted to committee chair of the Wellness and Sustainability Committee. It was in this role Chloe had her first experience of other male members of student government trying to make her feel less significant or important to the organization. When describing her promotion to committee chair, Chloe said:

> I was promoted to committee chair of the Wellness and Sustainability Committee . . . which people had kind of made fun of because it was a committee that didn't

> really do much before, we had changed it and done a lot with recycling. So, he [higher ranking senator who became vice president the following year] was annoyed that our president, who was a female, appointed me to it, so would always call my committee the wrong name.

Chloe explained that this was the first of many examples where she felt disrespected by the men in student government. After the selection of the initial executive board, Chloe joined this board when she was elected as President Pro Tempore. The only other female on the executive board congratulated her on her win but followed up her congratulations with "glad there's another girl in the exec board. You don't know what I deal with." Chloe was unsure if working with her male executive cabinet members was going to be as difficult as her initial warning from the other female on the executive board, but soon found out that the warning was not an exaggeration. As Vice President, Chloe described her initial experiences as part of the executive cabinet as:

> I sat in on the first meeting and I was told to be silent. I was disrespected so many times. Anything that I said was not important enough . . . When I joined the group message for exec, I was afraid to even say anything because they were making jokes like women can't read. We should revoke women's rights to vote . . . one of the executive members would constantly joke about taking the treasurer out on a date or how they were married, and she belonged to him. They were going to be together forever and really uncomfortable things that were just really out of line. It was just kind of like it's a boys' club . . . our group message at one point was jokingly called Boys Rule.

While the student government advisor did get involved and these instances stopped, Chloe believed the executive members just found other ways to "make it hard to work with them."

> I was kind of hated. I was seen as like a bitch or someone who wasn't there to have fun and who was too serious. It made it really hard for me to get things done. It came out in different ways [like], "Oh, sorry. I forgot to put your resolution on the agenda," or, "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't respond to your email in time for me to get your request in" so he had set that tone before I even walked into the exec board of discouraging women, disliking women, discrediting anything I could say before I was even there.

Chloe knew that the only way the culture could shift is if she became president and then personally could take the steps in shifting the student government association culture to a more inclusive and welcoming environment. Chloe decided to run for president; however, the campaign process proved to be challenging. Chloe was running against the incumbent president who worked so hard the past year to make things difficult. These difficult experiences did not stop with her interactions with her competition. She had an instance where, while visiting a fraternity house to campaign, the fraternity president blatantly checked her out in front of the other members of the fraternity. According to Chloe, "it was just something obviously my opponent didn't go through at all and I felt so disadvantaged." Chloe also turned in a serious campaign infraction and was told she was "overreacting," and nothing was done to the other candidate because "he could get away with stuff."

Despite the challenges she described, Chloe campaigned hard, had a platform that reached a diverse group of students, and won the election. After winning the election, many other members of student government did not believe she was elected because of these factors. According to Chloe:

> After I'd won, I've been kind of treated as this popular sorority girl who won instead of getting here off of accomplishments or ambition . . . it became a popularity contest kind of thing, like, "Oh, she won because she's popular," or, "Oh, she won because she has a huge sorority behind her," and disregarding kind of the accomplishments that I had to that point.

While she knew she had the experience to serve as student government president, that was called into question in a discussion with members of student government because she was only a junior:

> The last two times that we've had junior presidents they were men. It's not really something that you see when . . . on our campus that a woman is running as a junior. It's kind of been like any person who's been elected as a woman on this campus is a senior, they [women] . . . need to have as much experience as possible.

Chloe knew she was going to have to prove herself as student government president to both other students in the organization and administration, but she was ready to do so. She understood that knocking down some of the biases and assumptions that she faced from some of her identities like gender, age, and sorority member status would be a continuous process.

Focused on advocating for students and being a representation of the student opinion, she was cognizant in the way she presented herself both in terms of physical appearance wearing "appropriate and modest" outfits and in how she communicated to others with use of precise language. Chloe knew she was being critiqued more for those things and if she wanted "to be taken seriously" she needed to be "very, very aware" of how she was presenting herself to others. She would seek feedback on her outfit choices from others she trusted to confirm that she was not being "too feminine" in meetings where she knew those in attendance were mostly men. When speaking, Chloe would intentionally "use a stronger voice" and remove all language fillers.

Chloe found support from other women during her year as president. She described an experience in an administrative meeting where her voice as a student advocate was called into question due to a change of opinion from the previous president. A female faculty member in the meeting reiterated Chloe's opinion to get the group to listen to Chloe's feedback. She appointed women to the executive board "who didn't want to run for student government because they didn't think they would win" to create a supportive community of women in student government. In doing this, she also was "able to represent the campus more accurately" with a majority female campus reflecting in a majority female student government executive board.

One of her goals as student body president was to create a student government that reflected the student body. After her one year as student government president, the legacy she is leaving behind in terms of the organization reflects this, not only with her appointing more women, but also in her appointing more students from minority groups. She recognized that "White students do win out in elections over minority students just

because they're White and they know more people" so when there was an open seat, she was intentional in appointing minority students and women.

Chloe and her executive cabinet worked hard to change the environment of student government to be more inclusive as well as change the perception of student government leadership positions from the idea of "being one of the administrators" to "still being one of the students." She focused on these goals with her executive cabinet because she saw herself and other student government leaders as advocates for the student body. Her values of inclusion, responsibility, authenticity, and integrity were the driving force behind her actions. When describing what drives her actions, Chloe said, "integrity is a huge word for me. I think that's something that I always come back to, are making sure I'm doing things for the right purposes."

Navigating her presidency, Chloe felt like she was always learning, and this need to learn played a role in how confident she felt as a student government president and as a leader. In describing her thoughts on being a leader in her community, she said, "I feel like the word leader is such a confident word and I almost see myself as learning too much all the time to consider myself a full leader." It was not until spring semester when Chloe felt like a student government president. In her reflection on this idea, Chloe stated, "I think I was expecting to be sworn in and feel like this is all put together . . . I wasn't expecting how long it would take me to actually feel like SGA president." She believed it took longer than expected to feel like president because she felt like she spent the first half of her presidency having to prove herself to others.

Student government is important to Chloe as she has always been involved in it in some capacity. As she starts her senior year, she will begin her second term as student

government president. Describing how she feels about her second term and student government experience, Chloe said:

> Student government has shaped who I am, but I don't think I have become my positions, I think I've always made my positions more of myself . . . keeping this in mind and as I get ready for my second term, continuing to have the student voice heard outside of SGA is going to be one of the most successful things to focus on.

Hanna: "My Existence to the Space is Already Resistant"

As a first-generation Liberian-American, Hanna grew up in a predominantly immigrant community with two older brothers. When describing her parents, Hanna made a clear distinction that while her parents were divorced, they still played a supportive role in her life. Her first leadership involvement in high school was with DECA, an emerging leader organization for high school students interested in marketing and other careers within the business sector. It was through her involvement leading the direction of this organization as a state representative that helped her uncover her passions. When reflecting on the significance of this experience, Hanna said:

> I discovered my passion for working with other students and making sure their needs are accommodated, but also wanting to be a leader myself, especially when it came to public speaking and interacting with people and just making sure that their needs are being met. So, I really think DECA was a catalyst for me in a way that I don't necessarily give credit to all the time.

Once it was time to attend college, Hanna decided to attend a college near her hometown knowing this environment was familiar to her. This familiarity provided her a

little more confidence in believing she would be able to find a home in the university community. However, early on Hanna realized that she did not feel like she was part of the campus community, which "bothered" her so when she found out student government had a senate opening, she applied hoping she could find her home there.

Hanna found her home in student government and took on many different leadership roles within the organization over her first three years of college. When describing her experiences during these years as a senator, the vice chair for the academic affairs and constitutional review committee, and the speaker of the senate she said, "I felt like I not only knew what I was doing, but loved what I was doing. I was really passionate about the work we were doing advocating on their [students] behalf in trying to make changes on campus." During this time in these different leadership roles within student government, Hanna developed her approach to leading others. When commenting on the evolution to her approach, Hanna said:

> I think I developed my approach as a servant leader [through student government] I'm always going to go out of my way to help others if I have the opportunity and privilege to . . . other people might not see the value in it, but I think as a leader it is necessary to get to know all the people you are working with on a personal level and find ways to help, to advocate for them.

Hanna loved her involvement in these different leadership roles within student government and was confident in leading. During her year as speaker of the senate, she felt push-back once from a male senator when she was communicating to this senator; he was not following the process of senate correctly. This senator only made the needed

change after hearing a similar message from a male member of the executive team. When reflecting on this experience, Hanna said:

> I thought I was the only person having issues with him, but it was other female leaders within SGA that were also having issues with him . . . and I thought it was because I wasn't communicating effectively, and I think it was just because of who the communication was coming from.

With all her diverse leadership experience in student government, running for president was a natural progression. The campaign process was exhausting, Hanna describing this experience said:

> I became hyper aware of the ways that I appeared on campus . . . I started becoming more aware of like what I did on campus. I smiled more and I felt like I had to be 10 times more happy from the time I was running . . . The need to be on was exhausting.

Hanna and her running mate worked hard to be prepared for the debates leading up to the election; however, Hanna was not sure if that was seen by students as a good thing:

> Some people, I felt like it was well received like, "Oh, you're so prepared for what you're gonna do. You really have this all on paper." And for some people I wonder if I came off as disingenuous or overly confident which is something that I kind of worried a lot [about] when I was running because we were so much more prepared in comparison to them. I think some people thought we were assuming we had it. We were assuming we were going to win because we were so prepared.

With those thoughts in the back of her mind, Hanna was excited when the campaign process was over, and it was time for the student body to vote. Due to a system failure, a re-vote took place and Hanna was "devasted the campaign process wasn't over and worried the win wouldn't feel legitimate."

However, Hanna won the election, but started the transition into president without a thorough transition from the previous president. When commenting on the transition process, she said, "I personally think that the outgoing student body president didn't necessarily want me to win, so I feel like I didn't get all of the customary treatments that another person might have if they were transitioning."

Hanna, excited about the year as student government president, realized early on that this experience was not meeting her expectations. She was facing challenges, the organization was not "as strong as it used to be," and some specific relationships were straining her ability to be successful in her role. When describing the turmoil, she said:

> SGA just overall isn't as strong as it used to be . . . and, I feel like because it isn't as strong as it used to be, I feel like I'm finding myself picking up the extra slack, just to make the organization work. And, SGA used to be a powerhouse on campus. So, I think it's frustrating to look at it fall now. And, I feel like it's partially my responsibility because I'm the prominent face of the organization.

Coming into her presidency knowing she would have to pick up the "extra slack" to help turn the organization around, Hanna had to quit all the other organizations and jobs she was involved in as "the only thing [she] could literally focus on was class and SGA."

Hanna noticed quickly that some of the senators were creating an environment that was not welcoming and that was having a negative effect on the organization:

> When senate started going downhill a lot of the minority and female leadership left, that was my first time seeing such, because I felt like their voices were no longer valued. So, a lot of students who look like me left the organization because they felt like they weren't being heard, and they felt like it wasn't a substantial use of their time anymore. That was really frustrating, and I think what was more frustrating is I was bringing that conversation up and, because of the identities of the people at the other branch, they didn't want to hear it . . . There are so many times as I tried to have these conversations with senate or similar conversations with administrators that I felt like I just shouldn't be in the spaces that I was in. I don't deserve to be in the spaces that I'm in and being in the spaces that I'm in isn't helping anybody.

Hanna struggled with feeling like she was not being heard; many times she was talked over or interrupted. While she felt like these interruptions were not "intentional," they made her feel devalued. Explaining how these interruptions made her feel, Hanna said:

> It's frustrating and I feel disrespected. [I know] what I am saying is important, no matter what. And, I should be given the same respect that I'm providing to other people and I feel like so often that just doesn't happen for me.

Hanna would put those frustrations aside so she could hone her effort towards trying to help other leadership and members in student government and university administration understand the importance of being inclusive. Hanna went on to say:

> There are so many identities that need to be properly represented and expressed and given a seat at the table. And if you're not cognizant that certain groups of people aren't . . . their concerns aren't being voiced; you are going to forget about

them . . . I know that I can't be the only person thinking those things. I think I'm just the first person to say it loud enough for people to turn around and listen.

Hanna, at the end of her year, reflected on her desire to redefine the culture and feels like she was not able to make the strides she hoped to accomplish on cultivating an inclusive environment so all students' concerns would have a voice:

> I don't think I was able to redefine it, and after talking to my advisor a lot about the end of this year, I think a lot of it has to do with the identities that I have, being completely honest to have the identities that I have and the contrast with the other leaders that I had to work with. So, I'm a Black woman, they're mostly White men. I felt like a lot of the times when I was saying things from like one perspective . . . they were falling on deaf ears. It's kind of like they didn't want to hear it.

With her focus on trying to rebuild the culture consuming her year as president and not going as planned, Hanna wanted to finish strong, she said, "I think so much stuff didn't go the way I'd hoped it did the first semester, I just want to finish out my term strong." To do this Hanna turned owning her confidence in how her identities shaped her ability to lead and finding support in others. Hanna had a firm understanding of the intersectionality between her identity as a "Black hyphen woman." When describing this she said:

> I'm a Black woman with a hyphen not a space . . . being a Black man is very different from being a Black woman . . . the way I move through the world is completely different because I'm Black and I'm a woman at the same time. I'm never just a woman, and I'm never just Black, I'm both always, at the same time.

> So, I have to acknowledge that and understand how it contributes to not only . . . the relationships that I have but the way people receive me. It's because I'm both.

She saw this playing out in how others tried to include her in conversation, to the point that people are either "overcompensating" or "erasing" her identities:

> I think as a Black woman; some people like to make it like it's the only thing that I am, or some people forget that I'm a Black woman. There's no in between . . . [in] conversations I felt like either I was the token in the room or people would erase my identity so that the conversations would go more smoothly . . . People either tip-toe around me on what they need to say, or they blanketly just delete all the identities that I have so they're more comfortable having the conversation.

Her identities also made her worried about how others were perceiving her, she said:

> Some days insecure is not the right word, but I get worried about what my perception from other people is; being a Black women in this role, a lot of the things I think I'm doing like my mannerisms, I wonder if it comes off as rude or aggressive . . . or if I'm coming across as intimidating or maybe I should smile more . . . When I voice my opinions, I get worried that it's being interpreted as angry.

When Hanna had these worries, she relied on her relationships with others who shared similar challenges or who she knew she saw as "people in [her] corner" to help her find her confidence. Some of the strong relationships she had included other Black women in leadership roles. Hanna shared one piece of advice she learned from them "They used the phrase 'my existence to the space is already resistant'." She went on to say that "me being in this space is already causing a conversation." Her student government advisor

also was a supportive relationship she would turn to for support. When explaining the significance of this relationship, Hanna said:

> When I think about every single time I wanted to quit, or every single time my feelings were really hurt, or I would just [be] facing a situation that was very difficult and I couldn't see a way out, she'd be helpful in getting me to be as calm, cool and collected as I could about it.

Hanna learned that when it comes to being student government president you do not have to face it alone, "even though I'm going through this specific experience by myself, there are people who are watching me go through this experience who can help me with it as well." Hanna may have faced challenges, but to those looking in at her year as student government president saw that she was "engaged the entire time." When reflecting on her year Hanna said:

> I can look back on this season with either fond memories or some not so fond memories, but it's okay because I was able to finish it because there were so many times I didn't think I'd be able to make it to the end of being student body president. I'm proud of myself that I was able to . . . but I do wonder if I was either a man or White would this job have been easier, but I kinda think I know the answer to that question.

Summary

Each of the seven student government presidents shared their individual perspectives of their leadership journey and lived experiences as a student government president. These women also shared their learning takeaways, challenges, feelings, and their aspirations both personally and professionally. Their experiences varied and the

way they made meaning of these experiences was affected by their identities, their student government association environment, their presidential goals, and the level of support from others they could turn to during their year as president. The following chapter highlights the common themes among participants as well as how their personal understanding of feminist theory and intersectionality shaped how they made meaning of these experiences.

Chapter V

FINDINGS

Introduction

Currently, women outnumber men in colleges and universities in the U.S. about 1.3:1 and this gap is expected to continue to widen over the next 10 years (United States Department of Education, 2016). However, in the political realm, women do not make the same advancements with women making up only 23.7% of elected U.S. national government positions and 29.3% in state legislature elected positions (Center for American Women in Politics, 2019b). The lack of females in elected leadership roles trickles down to colleges and universities' student governance (American Student Government Association, 2016). With women actively participating in student government leadership in different capacities, the interest in student government leadership exists; however, women are underrepresented in the presidential role (Miller & Kraus, 2004).

The underrepresentation of female students in this highest campus leadership role needs to be investigated. Central to this study were the unique perspectives and lived experiences of seven women who served as student government president over the 2018-2019 academic year at their large public research institution in the Southeastern United States. Narrative inquiry research design was an appropriate approach for this study. This approach gave power to each individual female SGA president to define their perspective within the social construct of their underrepresented voice (Clandinin &

Connelly, 2000; Harding, 1988). Due to the semi-structured interviews resulting in rich and descriptive data, efforts were made to protect their identities (Seidman, 2006). Pseudonyms were assigned to each woman and only general information regarding their demographics has been included based on their answer to how they identify themselves, noted in the table as "personal identity descriptors" (see Table 3). Specifically, this study aimed to address the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the experiences of female college student leaders prior to being elected to serve as their student government association president?

RQ2: What are the experiences of female college student leaders who serve as student government association presidents?

Throughout the data collection, the forming of each woman's experience prior to running for student government president and during their year as president, the conceptual frameworks of critical race theory, feminism, and intersectionality were continually present and considered. Keeping these frameworks in mind, the narrative inquiry approach allowed for these women to authentically express their experiences, memories, and feelings as they relate to serving as the SGA president at their institution as well as make meaning of these experiences through their personal lens. The research and the findings are presented through the lens of these frameworks, their personal lens, and the way each woman made meaning of the experiences shared. In analyzing the meaning making for each participant's narrative, five significant themes emerged from the data analysis process: (1) pre-college experiences, (2) pre-president experiences, (3) the "chilly climate", (4) combatting the "chilly climate," and (5) their identity and

presidency. With each theme, several subthemes emerged and are discussed in further detail throughout the findings.

Table 3

Participating Women and Demographics

Pseudonym	Personal Identity Descriptors
Esther	First-generation Haitian American, sister, first-generation college student, Black woman
Madison	First-generation college student, married, independent from parents, works part-time, woman
Sarah	Single-parent home, first-generation college student, Pell eligible, Christian, Black woman
Grace	Military family, Catholic, sorority sister, woman
Olivia	Single-parent home, from a small town, strong woman
Chloe	From a "higher tax bracket," sister, daughter, woman, feminist
Hanna	First-generation Liberian American, from a city, Black woman

Pre-College Experiences

An important re-occurring idea discussed by the seven female student government presidents was the way their pre-college experiences impacted their desire to be involved in student government at the college level, which in turn jumpstarted their path to presidency. Table 4 lists the pre-college experience for each woman that they personally felt impacted their involvement in college and in student government. Each woman's pre-college experience was vastly different; however, similarities were found in their individual perspectives on the impact of their experiences.

Table 4

Participating Women and Pre-College Leadership Experiences

Pseudonym	Pre-College Leadership Experiences
Esther	High school step team
Madison	High school softball
Sarah	Drum major in high school
Grace	President of mentoring student organization in high school
Olivia	Debate team member in high school
Chloe	Various student government roles since the 3rd grade
Hanna	DECA state representative in high school

Non-Positional Experiences

A few of the women chose to share leadership experiences that were non-positional. In these shared experiences, the women were not in a leadership role, but took on leadership responsibilities in other non-positional ways. For example, Esther discussed her role as a member of the step team, "I wasn't the captain or co-captain, but I did find myself leading some of the girls when it came to advice . . . or consoling girls after a setback." In addition to Esther, Madison described a non-positional leadership experience as a member of the softball team that impacted her and gave her the opportunity to impact others. Madison described her softball team member experience as:

> Nobody really knew what to do, so everybody on the field looked to me to see what to do next. That was the moment where, not only did I see my peers

> recognizing a form of leadership in me in that moment, and as a resource in that moment, but also, I felt confident in my own leadership to be setting the pace and setting the expectations for plays moving forward.

Olivia chose high school extra-curriculars that would focus on building her confidence and communication skills; it was her experience as a member of the debate team where she first started showing qualities that would make her a leader. When describing the significance of her debate team experience, Olivia said, "I was no longer doubtful of my intelligence level, so that made me feel like I could actually talk to people."

Two of the participants had additional family responsibilities serving in non-positional leadership roles as the older sibling, they specifically mentioned their first leadership role as sister. As a leader at home, Esther first saw herself leading when she took on additional family responsibility serving as a role model to her younger sister. With two military parents, Grace moved many times, so she took on additional responsibilities at home serving as leader to two younger siblings.

Positional Experiences

The other four women shared the impact of their pre-college experiences through positional leadership experiences. Sarah served in the highest leadership role within her high school marching band as drum major. Grace was involved in many student organizations where she held leadership positions, but it was her experience creating an organization focused on mentoring seventh graders that had the biggest impact. Chloe held positional leadership roles in student government; she described her first leadership experience as a member of student council representing her third-grade class as having an impact on her continuous student government involvement. Hanna served as one of six

state representatives for DECA, which was an emerging leader organization for high school students interested in marketing and other careers within the business sector. When reflecting on the significance of this experience, Hanna said:

> I discovered my passion for working with other students and making sure their needs are accommodated, but also wanting to be a leader myself, especially when it came to public speaking and interacting with people and just making sure that their needs are being met. So, I really think DECA was a catalyst for me in a way that I don't necessarily give credit to all the time.

The Impact of their Pre-College Experiences

Three of the women when sharing the impact of their pre-college experiences, both familial and extra-curricular, discussed the impact of those experiences in relation to how they developed the initial drive, discussed more in the following sub-theme. Discussed in the final sub-theme as it relates to the impact of pre-college experiences, these pre-college experiences for all seven women influenced their initial personal definition of leadership which played a large role in how each participant would later lead as a student government president.

Developing Initial Drive

While all women had personal drive and determination, three of the women mentioned personal drive in relation to family background and early pre-college involvements, which in turn served as one of their motivations to pursue leadership involvement at their university. Specifically, Chloe began her student government experience in the third grade; to her, student government was a "passion." She reached out to administration at her institution about being involved in student government prior

to starting classes her freshmen year of college. When reflecting on her years in different roles within student government, Chloe said:

> I think now I'm kind of looking towards, who am I without student government because I've always been in it, and I've always known my place where even if I wasn't the leader, if I wasn't the president, I could always be the person in student government who was knowledgeable or who was always trying to improve.

Olivia also contributed her determination to her pre-college involvement; in these involvements, Olivia first found success as a leader. From her experience on the debate team, she realized she was good at "conceptualizing a vision" and "inspiring people to take on initiatives that they never thought they would take on." Once understanding her strengths through her high school involvement, Olivia looked for opportunities in college to use these strengths. According to Olivia, she saw, "involvement in student government as a way to apply her strengths and make an impact."

Esther's drive toward success was attributed to her family and cultural background, the hard work ethic and focus on success stemmed from her Haitian background. As a Haitian first-generation American, Esther described the Haitian community as "big on school, big on hard work, big on just making sure that you're doing what you're supposed to do to make sure that you succeed." This played a role in her desire to continue to find ways to take on leadership roles when she started college which in turn led to her involvement in student government.

Defining Leadership

Through their experiences in involvement activities in high school, many of these women discovered their personal definition of leadership. Once they defined leadership

and what type of leadership was important to them, they used this to search for leadership roles to pursue at both the high school and the university level.

Three of the women continued their leadership involvement in high school in their initial organizations because it was through these involvements that they could continue to serve and empower others. Hanna chose her initial involvement in DECA and then her later involvement in student government because she "discovered her passion for working with others and making sure their needs are accommodated." Sarah and Esther, in their early involvement, saw their roles as leaders as specifically "servant leaders." Sarah described this personal style of leadership as "more about serving and setting an example." Additionally, Esther's leadership was defined by both her familial leadership role as a big sister and her involvement on the high school step team. Leadership for her became more tangible and she no longer saw leadership as a "superhero status," but more of something anyone could do that focused on being responsible for others, in addition to teaching and helping others.

Gaining Confidence

Two of the women explicitly mentioned how their pre-college experiences set them up to make an impact in student government at the university level. With her student government experience beginning in elementary school, Chloe was confident that she would get connected and continue her involvement through this organization. She specifically contributed her experiences in student council and student government in high school to her confidence to quickly step into leadership within student government on the university level. Grace was involved in many leadership positions in high school, and, while she did not attribute one experience to her gaining confidence as a leader, she

saw all those years of high school involvement as significant to building her confidence. Reflecting on these high school experiences, Grace said, "If it weren't for those fundamental years in high school of taking on those leadership roles and getting comfortable and pushing myself, I would never have pursued a leadership role in a student government association."

Pre-Presidency Experiences

All seven women were involved in student government leadership roles prior to deciding to run for president. Each woman set out to charter their own path within student government at their institution. Table 4 shows their university leadership experiences that helped them gain knowledge and experiences. The knowledge and experiences became factors that helped them make the decision to run for student government president.

These women found their roles in student government using different avenues to help rise within the organization. For most, they were quickly elected into leadership opportunities. Grace, Madison, Esther, Chloe, and Hanna ran for openings in student government positions during their first semester of their college career. Grace, Chloe, and Hanna took leadership roles within student senate while Esther and Madison started their leadership positions as selected leaders of special committees or appointments. Grace spoke of her first student government experience as monumental; she said, "[it] empowered me and made me feel like I was part of this family at the university. I felt like I had purpose and I felt like people depended on me."

Table 5

Participating Women and Pre-Presidency Leadership Experiences

Pseudonym	Pre-Presidency Leadership Experiences
Esther	College orientation leader, Freshmen Leadership Institute Planning Committee Chair in student government, Vice President
Madison	Student Conduct Board, Chief Justice of the student government judicial branch
Sarah	Sorority member, campus tour guide at university, Senator of Student Government, Deputy Chief of Staff in Student Government, Director of Legacy Camp in Student Government, Director of Programming in Student Government
Grace	Freshmen Associates, Student Government Senator, Vice President of Student Government
Olivia	Sorority Member, Senator of Student Government
Chloe	Senator Student Government, Committee Chair of the Wellness and Sustainability Committee, Vice President
Hanna	Senator Student Government, Vice Chair for Academic Affairs committee, Constitutional Review Committee Chair, Speaker of the Senate

Two women took a slower approach to their involvement in student government. Olivia waited until later to become involved, while Sarah lost the first senate election opportunity, and was then later appointed to a role in the organization. Olivia and Sarah, who both waited a little longer to become involved in student government, diligently found other ways to become involved with hopes of finding a place within the organization. For example, Sarah saw student government as an opportunity for her to become a leader in an organization that did not have many leaders that "looked like her." However, she lost her initial senate race and was able to find a different avenue through her involvement as a representative on the homecoming court. In this role, she made

connections with members of student government. The specific connection with the vice president at the time led to her filling an open senate seat midway through her first year.

Olivia found her first involvement as a member of a sorority. This involvement was pivotal to her feeling confident in running for a senate position in student government. When describing this significance, she said, "I had the support of my sisters and the support of their friends; it just gave me a really big confidence boost to run for senate." She waited until the end of her first year to run for an open senate position and was elected, starting her involvement in student government later than some of her peers.

While each woman had experiences that alone could have made them competitive in a student government election process, it was not based on feeling confident in their experiences alone that led them to run for student government president. In contrast to Damell's (2013) findings in her qualitative study of 14 former student government presidents, two other motivating factors played a large role in the participants' desire to run for student government president. For four of the women, it was the purpose of creating an inclusive student government environment that played a large role in their decision, and the other three women felt an undeniable responsibility to run.

Defining Purpose

The pre-presidency experiences of these women could have been enough motivation for them to take the leap and run for student government president. However, in four of the seven women, the desire to run for presidency emerged from the need to be in a role where they could focus on a building a more inclusive student government environment.

Chloe, Olivia, and Esther knew a culture shift in terms of creating a more inclusive environment that reflected the student body and welcoming environment needed to occur within the student government associations at their respective institutions. All three focused their campaign on this message, reaching out to a variety of constituents and finding ways to advocate for a variety of students. When reflecting on this goal and how she was the best candidate to push it forward, Olivia said, "I think when you see someone that looks like you in a position, you go for it. The fact that we were both women . . . other women were like 'I can do it too.'" Esther clearly stated how she would be able to focus on the racial and gender imbalance in her presidency by stating, "Diverse leadership leads to more diverse membership."

Sarah saw her identity as a Black woman as a way to empower others and found motivation in her ability to chart the path for others, "I really wanted all students to know that there are no ceilings to your possibilities because of where you come from or what you look like." Sarah's primary motivator of empowering others by charting the path for others also became the foundation for another motivation, her purpose.

While this purpose was the initial driving force for these women to run for president, it also became a driving force as they navigated the traditions that inherently created a "chilly climate" for women and women of color.

Responsibility to Run

Some of the women also discussed an inherent responsibility to run, whether they felt this responsibility internally or from administrators, peers, and friends. For some, the feeling of responsibility played just as significant a role as their previous experiences in the organization.

Madison was not initially planning on running for student government president as her prior experience with the election process deterred her from wanting to do another campaign process. However, after experiencing toxic leadership in the executive branch and with only one president and vice president team running, Madison decided that she needed to run for president as she had, "firm beliefs that it [the only ticket running for president and vice president] wouldn't be good for the hope of the organization."

Similar to Madison, in Olivia's early experiences with student government, poor leadership was prevalent. Olivia felt that the current culture of student government was not welcoming and did not truly listen to the student body. Administrators and close friends recommended Olivia run for president giving her that extra push and sense of responsibility. She knew she could help change the culture, but knew she only could make the needed changes from the role of president. If she was not going to do it, who else would.

While Sarah did see her running as an opportunity to show students that, "There are no ceilings to your possibilities," she also initially was not planning on running until she focused on her reason behind her initial response to not run. After much reflection, Sarah felt like she, "would be doing nobody a service by not running out of fear." Sarah knew she would love the job and believed she was the most qualified for job; therefore, she felt a responsibility to run.

The "Chilly Climate"

For all seven women, there were challenges in terms of student government traditions and the foundational organization culture described by one of the participants, Chloe, as a "boys' club" that led to this environment being seen as a "chilly climate" for

these women. The seven women in my study described the "chilly climate" in terms of the overall organizational culture, the presence of inherent bias against women, and the challenges with both the election and transition process.

Organizational Culture

Three women specifically mentioned the organizational culture of student government impacted their experiences. The traditional male-dominated student government environment affected how they could lead or how they could evolve the culture of student government to be more inclusive. Esther discussed how the struggle for power within the organization was for her at times a "pseudo world of power" where one may have power in terms of being the leader, but someone else in the organization was really making the decisions. Esther, looking to grow in her leadership experiences prior to running for president, was selected as vice president; however, serving as vice president played into the organizational culture that was already established. She felt she was a leader as the vice president, but to others she was being the "token" as she played into the narrative of not taking the leading role in the organization and saving that role for a White male. Esther broke that narrative the following year, when she was elected as student government president; however, she would face challenges because she did break the narrative.

In addition to Esther, Hanna as a Black woman, also felt that she was working in a hostile environment because she was so different than the norm. She wanted to evolve the organizational culture, but she felt that the actions of others, specifically White men in the organization showed that they did not value female and minority voices. Hanna described how she was trying to share with them [White men] that the environment was

hostile to minorities and women, but "because of the identities of the people… they didn't want to hear it."

Chloe, before she was president, came into a "chilly climate," and it was her initial experiences with the toxic organizational culture that led her to want to run for president so she could work to change this culture from within. Working with men in the organization as part of the executive branch was difficult. After Chloe reported the toxic culture of the "boy's rule" environment, working with the men of the executive branch became even more difficult. Chloe believed the executive members just found other ways to "make it hard to work with them." Chloe described how she was hated within the executive cabinet as:

> I was seen as like a bitch or someone who wasn't there to have fun and who was too serious. It made it really hard for me to get things done. It came out in different ways [like], "Oh, sorry. I forgot to put your resolution on the agenda," or, "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't respond to your email in time for me to get your request in" so he had set that tone before I even walked into the exec board of discouraging women, disliking women, discrediting anything I could say before I was even there.

Inherent Bias

For all seven women in this study, their identities were outside the norm of leadership within student government. Four women described the "chilly climate" in terms of inherent bias that they had to work against in order to be seen as a leader and valued for the perspective they brought to the table. Hanna described this being outside of the norm in the words of her mentor as "my existence to the space is already resistant"

and then Hanna went on to add "me being in this space is already causing a conversation." The inherent bias and the "chilly climate" came from being outside the norm.

Esther faced this bias when she ran for president. She said, "When I was running a lot of people were against me running for student body president . . . no one said I wasn't qualified; they just didn't want me in this role." To Esther, she felt that her peers did not want her to run because she did not "look the part." Madison also faced this inherent bias during the campaign process as her leadership ability and her vice president's leadership ability was called into question because they both were married women. Madison and her vice president were asked questions from the other candidates during a debate that called their abilities into question, "[They were asked] will they have time to commit? Do they need to be at home? They'll also be trying to build a family at the same time, can they do these things?" For Madison, this inherent bias displayed through these questions from her peers would play in the back of her mind when she was making decisions as well as serve as a lens from which she would view and create her meaning making of her term as president, her experiences, her successes, and her obstacles.

Sarah saw the student government environment as "chilly" and experienced inherent bias throughout her time in student government at her institution. These "little remarks" took a toll on her personally. When thinking back to these experiences, Sarah said, "things like that are just exhausting and hurtful when you see how others or the world views not only minority students . . . but they view me." For her being a Black woman brought the inherent biases from others. Sarah did not see these struggles she

was facing as Black woman as something that was only attributed to the student government environment. She attributed this to "that's just how the world works." Sarah went on to describe this "really hard pill to swallow" as:

> That was hurtful to realize how the world sees me. And of course, not the entire world and I'm not saying, "woe is me." But I think I just got a reality check of how the world works and how my race and my gender are going to reflect how I'm treated and how hard I have to work.

Elections and Transitions

While all five of these women decided to run, these unfavorable circumstances surrounding elections and transitions, also described in Kanthak and Woon (2015), played a role in creating this "chilly climate" for these women. The experiences during these traditional elements of the political process to become student government president set the tone for the rest of the year and played a role in how these five women experienced their term as president.

Madison at first did not want to run for student government president as she already experienced a difficult campaign process for her leadership role in the judicial branch. She knew the campaign process for president would be more challenging and she felt it was. When discussing the challenges and stresses that came with the campaign process Madison said "[it left] almost no time for academics."

During Chloe's and Sarah's campaigns, both women mentioned feeling disadvantaged because of their identities. Each woman experienced the other candidate receiving preferential treatment. For Chloe, when she reported the other candidate for a campaign infraction, she was told she was "overreacting." According to Chloe, nothing

was done to the other candidate because, "he could get away with stuff." Sarah had a very similar experience. During her campaign process, the other candidate went on trial for campaign violations and did not receive any repercussions for his actions. Sarah believed that if she had to face a trial for campaign violations, "it would not have been the same." For Sarah, the lack of repercussions for the other candidate almost led her to quit.

Olivia and Grace faced challenges with the transition process because the outgoing president did not want to transition the women into the role. Olivia felt that without a transition process from the outgoing president, she was unprepared when she started her term. When describing this process, Olivia said:

> We relied on our professional staff, our administrative staff to really help us get on the ground running, but I think it would have been a lot easier if I had more information. I would have been a lot more confident in the decisions that I was making within the first two months had I had an actual transition into the role.

For Grace, the lack of a transition process took a toll on her confidence. She walked into this position thinking, "I'm not prepared for this, and I'm going to flop. This is going to be a fail." Grace and Olivia stepped into their term feeling a little uneasy while Madison, Sarah, and Chloe felt a little defeated even though they had just won the election. These two traditional elements are their first experiences which established a "chilly climate" and in turn was a personal lens that these five women would use to construct and make meaning of their experiences throughout their term as president.

Combatting the "Chilly Climate"

The seven student government presidents attempted to combat this "chilly climate" by finding a supportive community by building relationships and being strategic with selecting their peers that would run on their ticket. The other sub-theme for how participants combatted the "chilly climate" was how many of these women redefined success in their role as student government president.

Finding a Supportive Community

One of the main ways all seven women worked to combat the "chilly climate" environment of student government was to build a supportive community whom they could turn to for advice and encouragement. For these seven female student government presidents building this supportive environment involved developing strong relationships from many different areas including family, peer, mentors, advisors, and administrators.

When sharing her experiences, Chloe first discussed the support of her parents as playing a significant role in both her pre-college and college involvement in student government. Many of the leadership lessons she attributed to her passions in this work came from experiences that her parents made sure she understood. Later in her role as president, Chloe found support from other women whether it was a female faculty member who reiterated Chloe's opinion to get the group to listen to her feedback or the fact that she worked to help appoint other female students to leadership roles within student government. Appointing these women, Chloe was creating a support system for herself and the other women of student government as well as working hard to ensure student government was "able to represent the campus more accurately."

Grace looked for support from others especially with helping her navigate her personal battles with self-doubt and navigating the inherent bias that stemmed from the organizational culture of student government. When explaining the significance of this support, Grace said, "I surround myself by the right people who lift me up and encourage me, and who tell me that even though I'm super flawed, I'm super loved." She went on to specifically describe the positive relationship she had with her advisor:

> She has been an amazing advisor and helped me tremendously with SGA . . . in terms of just advising me on tough situations and decision making. Preparing me for significant meetings I was really nervous for . . . she encouraged me [by telling me] that "I am beautiful, and don't be ashamed of that, and don't feel like you can't tell people who you are. Don't feel like you have to put on a mask. Just be vulnerable and embrace who you are because it's beautiful and it can really offer a lot to this world."

Hanna also relied heavy on relationships of women whether they were her peers, mentors, or her advisor. She personally pursued support from those who she knew would be "people in [her] corner" and people who understood what it was like to be a Black woman and a leader. Some of the advice that she kept close to her when she was combatting the challenges that came with the "chilly climate" came from other strong Black female leaders. Hanna also described how her advisor, a female Black woman, was significant to helping her through the challenges she faced:

> When I think about every single time I wanted to quit, or every single time my feelings were really hurt, or I would just [be] facing a situation that was very

> difficult and I couldn't see a way out, she'd be helpful in getting me to be as calm, cool and collected as I could about it.

A few of the female presidents–Olivia, Esther, and Madison–specifically ensured their running mates shared similar gender or racial identities to ensure that supportive community already existed within their executive cabinet. Olivia described the gravity of these relationships as:

> It's important to surround yourself with people who . . . are understanding of your position, who respect you, who trust you, and who want to see you succeed. If you don't, then you're not going to succeed at all. You're going to feel like you're alone in this.

Her advisor, who Olivia described as "her rock" and her vice president who Olivia described as someone she "couldn't imagine doing this without," were both women. Olivia found the support of other women essential to her navigating the role of student body president. When describing this importance, she said:

> I think that women are more relatable and like more accepting of faults, or they relate more to what you're saying, how you're feeling. Like when I'm angry, I cry. I didn't realize that until my director said that. She's like, "You're not weak. You're mad and you're just crying because you're mad and that's okay." It wasn't until she said that, that I actually accepted that as an okay way of dealing with my emotions.

Madison also ran on a full female ticket and when describing the significance of the relationship with her vice president, she said the relationship was "very positive, very empowering . . . something that I would not trade for the world." She explicitly created

her executive team focusing on finding people on her team to compensate for personal gaps in her knowledge. However, she struggled to find the supportive community in her relationships with administrators like her advisor. When comparing the relationships with her peers and the relationships with administration Madison said:

> I expected better from the university [administration], I expected support from the university, I expected professionalism from the university, and I haven't gotten that, so I've been very disappointed in that. However, the relationships internally with my team, with my vice president has exceeded expectations.

Esther did not run on a full female ticket, but she did run on a full minority ticket which she believed helped her navigate the chilly climate. She said she surrounded herself with leaders who "all have some sort of shared experiences with oppression" knowing they could lean on each other throughout the course of the year. Throughout the course of the year, she found support with members of her executive team; her vice president advocated on her behalf in many different circumstances. However, she described the relationships with faculty members and administrators like her advisor "toxic." Describing these relationships as not always genuine or supportive, Esther went on to say, "If you don't know the answer to something or if you need help with something, there's not necessarily a real open environment to ask for help."

Defining Success

For these women, a way to combat the "chilly climate" was to define success in relation to a place or a task they found attainable. It was when they put success into perspective that they felt either confident in their presidency or confident in how they worked through the "chilly climate" of student government. For these women leaders,

success was focused on two main underlying forces. Success to them was completing their year as president and staying authentically true to who they were or by completing tasks that they had included in their initial platform. Esther, who initially discussed success as it related to her Haitian culture, thought about success as student government president in terms of finishing the year. She said, "I think success, honestly, in this role, is seeing it through . . . I just had a very difficult time with the role, based on a lot of different situations . . . I think it's a success that I finished." Hanna had a similar definition of success she said, "I was able to finish it [her term] . . . I'm proud of myself that I was able to." Chloe saw staying true to herself as a measure of success. Important to her, her success was measured by "still being one of the students." Being authentic was important to her and throughout her experiences, she reiterated this premise when discussing her successes.

Other women saw their success measured more by the completion of platform objectives. Grace, whose platform objectives included empowering others to be involved, defined her success in this role as two parts. First, success to Grace was learning how to work with some of her personal constraints like her desire for perfection, and secondly, success was her meeting her platform objective of developing leaders so she could leave a legacy. Grace described this revelation as "being a leader doesn't mean that it's all about you," finding ways to be intentional in helping others learn and empowering others became a personal motivator as well as a way she defined her success as president.

Madison, who focused on transparency during her year as president, believed success was measured by "having made progress in every capacity of the platform."

Olivia measured success as a team reflected in this message, “I don’t like to say what I’ve done, I like to say what we’ve done” and described success as:

> At least we got those initiatives done within a year . . . normally [past presidents] had to be a two-term president to get all of your initiatives done or you’d only get three initiatives done within the year and we’ve gotten like ten.

Their Identity and Presidency

At the onset of this study, the researcher made a conscious effort to not introduce the role of gender or race or other important identity indicators (see Table 3) into the interview process. As interviews progressed, these descriptors were brought up organically when these women shared their experiences. Their gender and race became part of the conversation and the women used their identity to make meaning of their specific student government president experiences. For the women student leaders in this study, a similar hyper-awareness to their identities helped them make meaning of their experiences as a student government president.

All seven women discussed the role gender played in their experiences as well as mentioning other components of their identity and the role those pieces also played out in their experiences as student government president at their institution. Their identity did not always have a negative impact on their personal journey; however, it played a role in how they moved through their experiences, worked within the student government environment, and made meaning of these experiences. For example, when Hanna reflected on her year wondered, “If I was either a man or White would this job have been easier?” Re-occurring sub-themes within their narratives that were significant to the shared idea that their identity played a role in their experiences include how they:

navigated their feelings, found their voice, struggled with self-efficacy, and navigated the pressure.

Navigating Feelings

Four women specifically mentioned the role their identity played in how they could express or navigate their feelings. To these women their feelings were on either end of the spectrum and there was no middle ground. Olivia saw this challenge with navigating her feelings. When describing this dichotomy, Olivia said:

> Just because I'm not loud and energetic, you think that I'm in a bad mood, but other times it is because I'm in it or I'm really focused on something. I think what's hard is people don't see a middle for me. They only see me either being loud and energetic or mad, or not mad but just upset when it just means I'm focused . . . I feel like sometimes people just don't respect that about me.

Olivia also saw showing emotions or empathy as a way others would "steamroll" her in relation to how others would interact or play on her emotions when there was a challenge or a problem that needed to be solved. Sarah had similar experiences with how her feelings were interpreted and how she navigated the best way to express those feelings. For Sarah, she faced an assumption from others that "because [she's] a woman, [she] was soft," but to her "soft doesn't mean [she's] fragile." Knowing this assumption, Sarah had to assert her feelings and emotions so others would take her seriously and respect her.

Madison felt that when she took everything "too seriously" it wore her down, in terms of the "emotional labor" she put herself through. When describing what she meant in more detail Madison said, "take your progress seriously, but don't take things

personally. I guess I felt everything very deeply in the role. When people were unhappy, when people were angry with me . . . I felt it very personally."

Hanna felt not only her gender played a role in how she navigated her feelings. Hanna worried about how others may perceive her, describing this worry:

> Being a Black woman in this role, a lot of the things I think I'm doing like my mannerisms, I wonder if it comes off as rude or aggressive . . . or if I'm coming across as intimidating or maybe I should smile more . . . When I voice my opinions, I get worried that it's being interpreted as angry.

Sarah described this struggle with navigating feelings and being worried about being understood as "I could never ever, ever get too emotional and too angry, because then I'm an angry Black woman."

For these women, navigating their feelings first involved becoming hyper aware of how their feelings were or may be perceived by others. Then, each of these women intentionally focused on expressing their emotions and feelings in a way that they believed would be perceived better including garnering more respect or being taken more seriously in their role as student government president.

Finding Their Voice

Five of the women attributed their identity to the challenges they faced with being heard or being silenced when it came to communication. In an environment where these women continually felt silenced and struggled to find their voice, these women had to be intentional in what language was used as well as "precise" with the language used when communicating to others. For Sarah, the intentional language involved her word choice

when discussing diversity. When describing this communication process with peers, Sarah said:

> I couldn't say diversity anymore. I had to say representation. For me, a Black woman to say diversity, it was dangerous . . . every day and every move I made, I had to watch how I spoke, what I said, I have to be very filtered which is kind of exhausting but if I wanted to be effective at my job, I had to do those things.

And with administration, Sarah's communication efforts were similar:

> I had to make sure when I went in there to advocate, that I have every single number, every single fact just because I'm a woman and Black. I'm not sure which one is more impactful in that, but I had to make sure that I had myself together, and I had to speak and be very articulate.

Olivia felt that she needed to be prepared when communicating to others; with every situation, she needed to be ready to share her ideas. When describing this experience as a senator, Olivia said, "It got to the point where every single time there was something new on the floor, my senate president knew I was going to say something." Olivia wanted others on the senate floor to know who she was and she used her voice to do that.

Hanna struggled with communication when it came to managing conflict with others. When describing an experience with a male senator, Hanna said:

> I thought I was the only person having issues with him, but it was other female leaders within SGA that were also having issues with him . . . and I thought it was because I wasn't communicating effectively, and I think it was just because of who the communication was coming from.

As Hanna was reflecting back on the challenges she faced with making progress in all areas of her platform, she contributed her personal failures to this struggle to finding her voice in an environment of "mostly White men." Speaking about these communication challenges, Hanna said, "I felt like a lot of times when I was saying things from like one perspective . . . they were falling on deaf ears. It's kind of like they didn't want to hear it."

Both Hanna and Grace shared experiences with being interrupted or talked over by men in the room. Hanna described these interruptions as not "intentional," but they did make her feel devalued. Explaining how the interruptions made her feel, Hanna said:

> It's frustrating and I feel disrespected. [I know] what I am saying is important, no matter what. And I should be given the same respect that I'm providing to other people and I feel like so often that just didn't happen for me.

Grace mentioned having "multiple encounters with men cutting her off," but was not sure if that could be attributed to her age, gender, or the fact that she was blonde. To Grace this challenge took a toll on her confidence wondering if "what [she] had to say isn't quite worth someone's time to listen to or maybe what [she's] saying is so stupid they feel the need to stop [her]." Grace found her voice and navigated this challenge by "asserting her dominance more" which included "talk[ing] louder when they talk[ed] over me."

For Hanna and Sarah, their identities as Black women led to more specific challenges with communication. Sarah specifically mentioned that for some students that she worked with, the interaction with a Black female leader was new. Recounting a conversation she had with another member of her executive team regarding a few

members of the cabinet who would not look at her when they were talking to her, she said they told her, "Listen they have never had interactions with Black people, let alone a Black woman as their boss. So it's just weird. It's not like they dislike you or anything it's just so different." Hanna had similar experiences where when trying to include her in conversation, White men would either "overcompensate" or "erase" her identities all together. When describing these experiences in more detail, Hanna said:

> [In] conversations I felt like either I was the token in the room or people would erase my identity so that the conversations would go more smoothly . . . People either tip-toe around me on what they need to say, or they blanketly just delete all the identities that I have so they're more comfortable having the conversation.

Hanna struggled with finding a balance and being able to be her true self when it came to how she communicated to others. For some of these women, they were able to figure out a way to navigate communication in relation to the dynamics their identity played in conversation by ensuring they had all the information on the topic or by taking on more masculine communication traits. However, for the women who were able to find their voice as student government president, they struggled with staying true to their self during this process.

Struggling with Self-Efficacy

Fox and Lawless (2011) focused their research on the challenges women face in terms of their self-efficacy. In their "Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study," Fox and Lawless (2011) revealed that, despite comparable credentials, women were less likely than men to perceive themselves as qualified to seek high political office. All seven women struggled with feeling confident and developing self-efficacy. For these women,

feeling like they did not belong or feeling like an imposter in their role as student government president impacted their experiences in this role.

Grace named her challenges with self-efficacy as a concern with imposter syndrome. Before she served as president, she struggled with not feeling capable and wondering if she "was worthy at that point." These thoughts continued after she became president. Grace, when discussing her initial thoughts right after she was selected as president, said:

> I didn't feel like I did anything to earn or deserve the position . . . I came into this role, I think, with low self-esteem. I really low-balled myself. I told so many of my friends and family members, "I don't think I can do this" . . . [it] felt like I had to be like them or better than them, so I really hindered myself by comparing myself to past leaders.

Olivia also struggled early on with self-efficacy. She felt that she "had only been a senator," therefore questioned whether she deserved this position, asking herself "do I deserve it all or does someone who's been involved [more] deserve it?" After winning the election, Olivia thought "maybe this really wasn't a good idea . . . all these thoughts were going through [her] head of why [she] didn't deserve it."

For Chloe it was not until spring semester that she felt like a student government president. When describing this timeline, Chloe said, "I think I was expecting to be sworn in and feel like this all put together . . . I wasn't expecting how long it would take me to actually feel like SGA president." She was even uncomfortable using the word leader to describe herself, saying, "the word leader is such a confident word and I almost see myself as learning too much all the time to consider myself a full leader."

For others, developing self-efficacy involved coming to terms with the fact that they were supposed to be there and be "at the table." Esther described this as:

> Sometimes as student body president [I felt like] where you're in a space that you totally deserve to be in, but you feel like you're not supposed to be there . . . people don't necessarily give you a reason . . . they'll just be like "you don't look the part, or you don't have this. You don't have that."

Hanna shared similar experiences:

> There are so many times as I tried to have these conversations with senate or similar conversations with administrators that I felt like I just shouldn't be in the spaces that I was in. I don't deserve to be in the spaces that I'm in and being in the spaces that I'm in isn't helping anybody.

Sarah had these inner dialogues of not feeling like she "belongs in the room, even as president." For Sarah over the course of the year, she developed her self-efficacy. Sarah knew obstacles existed specifically mentioning "systems sometimes aren't always set up for you to succeed." However, overcoming her struggles with self-efficacy was the "biggest obstacle" during her year as president. She went on to say:

> I had to push past the "I don't belong here feeling" and put myself out there and give it all that I had and realize that, you know, I was the biggest obstacle. It wasn't that people didn't want me.

When discussing this obstacle with self-efficacy in broader terms of advice Sarah had for other women, she said:

> I mean even if the world wants to put limits on you, don't put limits on yourself. I think our biggest obstacle is, "Oh, I can't do this because I'm a woman," or "I

> can't do this because I'm Black," or "I can't do this because I'm a Black woman." And I think it's just sad that we do that to ourselves. So, don't even do that to yourself. You have enough obstacles to face without creating an obstacle for yourself.

Struggling with self-efficacy for many of these women was a continue battle.

Navigating the Pressure

Pew Research Center (2008) stated that one of the challenges women faced involved the need to work "twice as hard." Six of the participants described this additional pressure during their term as president. For these six participants, they felt the pressure to prove their capabilities as a charismatic leader to others.

After Chloe was elected as president, she received doubt from her peers that she would be successful in this role due to her age, her status in a sorority, and her gender. Chloe knew she was going to have to prove herself and this was evident in how she was "very, very, aware" of how she was presenting herself and how others perceived her, continuously ensuring she was "on" when she was interacting with others.

For Hanna it was also the pressure to "be on." She focused on the need to have the energy as leader. When describing this pressure, Hanna said, "I became hyper aware of the ways that I appeared on campus . . . I smiled more and I felt like I had to be ten times more happy . . . the need to be on was exhausting." Esther also saw this additional pressure as a way that women showcase how much they cared which then created a personal lack of self-care. When describing this pressure, Esther said:

> I don't think it's a Black woman thing, I think it's a woman thing in general where you care so much . . . you just neglect yourself . . . I was put in positions

> where I had to choose between my self-care or feeding people and I chose to feed people all year.

For Madison, it was her identity as both a female and married that left her at times feeling like she had something to prove. Describing this pressure, Madison said:

> I know that my performance in this role is not a reflection on, or a standard for . . . I don't need to be setting the standard for what it means to be a woman in this role, or a married woman in this role. But, there is a perceived pressure of doing my gender and being a strong woman in leadership and the additional pressure of not and almost sometimes feeling as though you can't mess up, or at least not publicly and that people can't find out that you've messed up in ways that I think about if I were from the role looking in, or I was on the outside looking in it would seem natural and seem appropriate . . . I would think it makes sense that people make these mistakes, but being in the role, there have been moments where I felt extra pressure because I didn't want to disappoint women . . . [I would ask myself questions like] "Do I need to stay extra than other people would to prove the point?"

For Madison the pressure seemed to fade as the year progressed, "more is being accomplished than has been in past administrations, that's been helpful in helping to alleviate" the pressure.

While Grace did not feel like she had to prove herself frequently, she did believe women in general "have to work a little bit harder to be respected and taken seriously." For the few times she was in a meeting with administrators, alumni, or peers and felt like she did need to navigate the pressure, she focused on being intentional in her word choice

as well as asserting herself physically by taking up more space in meetings. Describing an experience at a university function, she mentioned that men would assume her significant other was the president and she was the "arm candy." Experiences like this one were when she felt like she needed to "prove something to someone or society that just because [she's] a woman doesn't mean that [she's] arm candy."

Sarah felt the pressure as well as she was the first Black woman student government president. She described this pressure as "this automatic pressure that nobody told you about to be the best president there ever was, you have to have the biggest programs. You have to have the best Earth-shattering change making policy implemented." Throughout the course of the year as president, Sarah learned that this pressure was not needed, and she decided "to let go of that pressure…and just do a good job every day."

Overall Experiences on a Spectrum

While all seven women faced challenges, which they perceived were in relation to their identities during their year as president, they felt like their experience overall was positive. Their student government presidential experiences were not black and white, or all love or all hate. The seven women believed the learning experiences and the personal growth that came out of completing the year in the role was something to celebrate. Grace when reflecting on the overall experience said:

> Of course I've had days where the tears are running down my face, but at the same time, I think I've really found who I am as a person and as a leader, and I've found what I'm passionate about, and I've found what I'm pretty good at, through trial and error.

While the hardships they experienced in their year as president could have been overwhelming, these women made meaning of their experiences by choosing to see the learning and personal growth as their reality. As Baxter Magolda (2008) described in her ideas around "self-authorship," these women took responsibility for how they interpreted their reality and how they reacted to it. Hanna took the challenges with stride and compared her year as president to a season with memories on either end of the spectrum:

> I can look back on this season with either fond memories or some not so fond memories but it's okay because I was able to finish it because there were so many times I didn't think I'd be able to make it to the end of being student body president. I'm proud of myself that I was able to.

Sarah had some initial expectations that her experience would be hard work and when reflecting back on the year said, "I think I just came[into it] knowing that I would have to work hard, that there would be tough days and rewarding days, and I just came into it with that mindset. I was right, but it's been great." These women knew that challenges and hardships would be inevitable, but hoped their experiences would still be positive and rewarding. When Esther described her year as "particularly difficult" as she balanced being a minority woman in the presidential role, she used a metaphor of something that could go from great to suffocating in a matter of seconds. Esther said, "I feel like my experience in student government has been a really great hug that's now a little too tight and uncomfortable, but nevertheless, it's still a great hug."

Summary

Each of the seven female student government presidents shared their unique experiences both prior to their presidency and during their one-year term as student

government president. While each participant had a unique perspective and story to share, there were also similarities found through the analysis of the narratives. This analysis looked at the implicit language, "the words between the nouns and verbs," to make-meaning of their stories and find the underlying themes and sub-themes in the narratives (Daiute, 2014, p.154). A closer look at the implicit language and with the conceptual framework as a lens that brings critical race theory, feminism, and womanism together, themes emerged.

The impact of both their pre-college and pre-presidency experiences was significant in how they defined success, leadership, purpose, and drive. The way each participant personally defined success, leadership, purpose, and drive influenced how they would each make meaning of their experiences as their institution's student government president. These experiences also played a role in how some of these women felt a responsibility to run for president.

The role of traditions in terms of elections, transitions, organizational culture, and the inherent bias others placed on them created a "chilly climate" for the seven female presidents. These seven women found ways to combat this chilly climate through finding community from the relationships they built with other women or people of color, their peers, and their advisors. These relationships either helped these women combat the "chilly climate," or if the relationships were difficult, they added to the stresses and obstacles.

Another common theme for the seven participants was the way they navigated their gender and for some their race during their year as president. For the women, the additional dynamics of their gender and their race led to how they navigated their

experiences and made meaning of these experiences. All participants faced challenges, some with learning how to navigate their feelings, some with finding their voice, some with overcoming imposter syndrome and developing self-efficacy, and some with navigating the additional pressures they personally felt their gender, and for some also their race, played in their experiences as student government president.

When each participant reflected on their year as student government president, each woman believed the learning and personal growth that took place was rewarding. Each participant knew the year as student government president would have challenges and hardships, but each female president agreed that the learning and growth experiences overshadowed the more challenging experiences.

Chapter VI

DISCUSSION

This research is timely. While this study was in progress, the 116th Congress convened with 23.4% women at serving in Congress, which was the highest percentage of women serving in Congress to date (Pew Research Center, 2018). Women in politics and women taking a role in the democratic process is on the rise (Pew Research Center, 2018). In a recent study, O'Leary and Shames (2013) found that over 40% of women who currently serve in the U.S. Congress served in student government in their youth. In the data O'Leary and Shames (2013) collected, they also revealed that many females who served in student government in high school did not get involved in student government at the college level. These women entered college with concerns of self-efficacy in terms of their ability to lead; therefore, running for an elected position was a risk they did not want to explore (Fox & Lawless, 2011; O'Leary & Shames, 2013).

Exploring the idea of risk aversion from the experiences of women who took this risk provided the opportunity to learn from those women who were successful in winning their election in addition to finding the confidence to run in the first place. Shuman (2005) saw narratives as a way to provide inspiration and new frames of reference and these women's personal narratives provided inspiration to other female college students leaders as well as frames of reference for student affairs professionals who may advise female student leaders. As more women are taking on leadership roles, understanding

how women make meaning of their experiences as female student government presidents can help create positive leadership experiences where growth and learning take place.

Summary of Study

This study examined the experiences of seven female student government presidents at large public research institutions in the Southeast. The seven participants provided their personal story of their experiences prior to running for student government president as well as real-time sharing of their experiences as a student government president for the 2018-2019 academic year. This study examined the experiences of the seven participants as well as provided time for the women to reflect back on their one-year term and make meaning of these shared experiences. Their narratives embodied a feminist perspective as each narrative focused on each woman's perspective of their own experience (Lather, 1992). The participants were diverse as three identified as White and four identified as women of color.

This study was approached using qualitative methods, specifically a narrative inquiry approach. Although research existed on female student government presidents' experiences (Damell, 2013; Miles 2010; Miller & Kraus, 2004; Spencer, 2004), only two studies focused on women currently serving as student government presidents and none of the studies focused on the specific southeast region. This study provides an additional layer to the research with these women sharing their current experiences serving as student government presidents at large public research institutions in the Southeast. The approach of narrative inquiry was appropriate as I sought to share the lived experiences of these women using their stories. The sharing of their experiences through narratives allowed for understanding of each woman's experiences. In addition, the narrative

approach allowed for each woman to define their perspectives within the social construct of their underrepresented voices (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000: Harding, 1988; Kim, 2016).

The study utilized critical theory as an overarching framework as this theory focused on the relationship of oppression with either power, knowledge, or identity (Butin, 2010). With critical theory as the foundation of the conceptual framework, subset theories within critical theory that focus specifically on women, Black women, and the intersectionality of these identities have also been utilized. With these lenses as the conceptual framework and narrative inquiry as the approach to this study, the women participants of this study were able to authentically express their experiences, memories, and feelings as they relate to serving as the student government president at their institution.

Student narratives provided the context and in-depth perspectives into their meaning making of their experiences leading up to their year as student government president as well as their personal experiences during their one-year president term. For the 2018-2019 academic year, there were 15 women student government presidents at large public research institutions in the Southeast. All student leaders who met the criteria were initially contacted; however, seven female student government presidents agreed to participate in the study.

Interviews took place over the one-year presidential term with one taking place around September 2018, the second interview around December 2018, and the final interview taking place towards the end of their one-year term around March 2019 (see Table 1). In between each set of interviews, the data was transcribed, and initial coding

of the data took place. This approach allowed for follow-up questions to be added to the interviews, and therefore, rich data was acquired from the participants.

All the interviews were conducted one-on-one via a phone call. The research plan, outlined in Chapter III of this dissertation, was followed. All interviews were conducted in a professional and confidential manner. Prior to the start of each interview, the participants were informed that the interviews were recorded, and pseudonyms would be used for the final study. All narratives, quotes, and references to the participants were associated with their pseudonym only. To provide a comfortable and relaxed interview environment for participants, the three interviews were semi-structured as recommended by Seidman (2006).

Restatement of the Problem and Research Question

As more females attend higher education institutions, there is a need to focus on understanding college women's leadership experiences. With this change in demographics and the fact that this gender gap in attending college will continue to widen over the next 10 years, more women may try to lead in these higher student leadership roles, such as that of the student government president (United States Department of Education, 2016). With more women attending college, the underrepresentation of women in this elected student leadership role creates missed opportunities to serve as the voice of the gender majority (Miles, 2010). These women are also missing out on professional development and learning opportunities that come from serving as a student government president (Miles, 2010; Schaper, 2009).

The research that focuses on women college student leaders recommends further research to include an emphasis on women leaders and their experiences leading male-

dominated settings such as in student government (Kezar & Moriarty, 2000; Montgomery & Newman, 2010; Schaper, 2009). While some research on women as student government presidents exist (Erwin, 2005; Montgomery & Newman, 2010), there is a gap in looking at student government presidents at public research institutions in the Southeast.

In order to address the gaps listed above, this study explored the following research questions with participants:

RQ1: What are the experiences of female college student leaders prior to being elected to serve as their student government association president?

RQ2: What are the experiences of female college student leaders who serve as student government association presidents?

These research questions provided a broad context to discussing the experiences of women student government presidents that allowed for each participant to guide the meaning making that took place.

Summary of Methods

Storytelling through a narrative inquiry approach to the research was appropriate for the study as the primary purpose of the study was to understand the actions and experiences of women student government presidents. The use of narrative inquiry as an approach to understanding experiences leads to meaning making through the sharing of ideas, memories, experiences, and feelings of a group of people in relation to their social context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016). For the purpose of this study, the group of people were women student government presidents and their social context was

male-dominated student government organization environments at large public research institutions in the Southeast.

Semi-structured interviews using Seidman's (2006) in-depth three interview series were the primary form of data collection. The semi-structured interview guide allowed for participants to organically flow from experience to experience. This authentic approach helped participants explore their personal perspectives of their experiences allowing them the ability to focus on experiences that were most salient to them. When each participant focused their experiences on what was significant to them, meaning making in terms of the why behind these experiences took place. The narrative became personal as their shared experiences linked directly to their personal narrative.

The data collected through the series of interviews of each participant was formed into an individual narrative focusing on context and meaning making based on each participant's shared experiences. Using the six elements of the Labovian model, the structure of each narrative was created (Saldaña, 2016). To analyze the narratives, a closer look at the specific language using a technique described by Daiute (2014) as evaluative language helped deepen the understanding of the meaning making established in the narratives. In addition to the evaluative language technique, thematic charts were used to help code the findings.

Findings

Student Leaders Pre-College and Pre-Presidency Experiences

All seven women's pre-college experiences impacted their desire to be involved in student government at the collegiate level. While their experiences were vastly different, similarities were found in the way these experiences impacted their desire to be

involved in student government once they began their college career. Three of the women's pre-college involvement were in non-positional roles where they were recognized by their peers as leaders and gained confidence that would help them decide to pursue high impact leadership roles once they started college. Madison described the moment when her peers from the softball team recognized her leadership ability as the point when she "felt confident in [her] own leadership."

The other four women with positional leadership roles in their pre-college experiences described the impact of these experiences as a catalyst for continuing their involvement in college in organizations where they could impact positive change in their environment. Hanna described her pre-college involvement as a state representative for DECA as a moment of significant discovery where she "discovered [her] passion for working with other students and making sure their needs are accommodated." Two of the participants, Esther and Grace, referred to additional family responsibilities as an older sibling as part of their leadership journey that impacted their involvement in other pre-college experiences.

These pre-college leadership experiences impacted all seven women. Three of the women mentioned personal motivation to pursue leadership involvement in college; their pre-college experiences aided them in finding their passion. Olivia discovered that she had the ability to inspire "people to take on initiatives that they never thought they would take on." According to Olivia, getting involved in student government aligned with her passions to "make an impact." For Hanna, Sarah, and Esther, their personal definition as a servant leader played a large role in their desire to continue involvement in college in organizations where they could serve other students and other members of their

institution. For example, Sarah described her leadership style as "more about serving and setting an example" and when she started college she was excited about the opportunity to join student government as she felt it was a large organization that made an impact on the campus environment and had a large focus of helping students. For two of the women these pre-college experiences helped them gain the confidence to become involved in a large organization once they started college. Chloe's early student government experience started her student government journey that led to her involvement in student government at the collegiate level. All her years of student government experience gave her the confidence to quickly step into senate leadership at the collegiate level within her first semester in college. Grace's pre-college experiences were vital to building her confidence to take on student leadership roles within student government at the college level. Grace described the significance of these pre-college experiences saying, "if it weren't for those fundamental years in high school of taking on those leadership roles and getting comfortable and pushing myself, I would never have pursued a leadership role in a student government association."

Once in college all seven women were involved in leadership roles in student government at their institutions. These leadership experiences included serving as senators, committee chairs, or executive branch members. Five of participants were involved in student government at their institutions early, much like the findings shared in Spencer's (2004) study of 16 women student government presidents. The knowledge gained through these experiences became a noteworthy influence that facilitated their decision to run for student government president. Each woman had experience in student government that made them competitive in an election process, but for most of the

women choosing to run for student government president was more of a multifaceted decision process.

In a similar study, Damell (2013) found that the main motivation the 14 women in her study had for running for student government president focused on their passion to connect with students. In this study, however, while some of the seven participants briefly mentioned this passion, the main reason behind their decision to run was focused more on what they were hoping to accomplish during their presidency. For four of the women, the purpose of creating an inclusive student government environment played a large role in their decision to run, and three women felt an undeniable responsibility to run for student government president.

Chloe, Olivia, and Esther knew a culture shift needed to occur in their respective student government organizations; therefore, they focused their campaign message on leading the charge on creating more inclusive organizations. These women saw that in order to build a more welcoming and inclusive student government environment, the leadership needed to physically look different than previous leadership. Olivia knew that if she could be elected then other women would possibly take on leadership roles in the organization. She said, "When you see someone that looks like you in a position, you go for it." Similarly, Esther knew that in order to make this big change in becoming a more inclusive organization, leadership needed to look different. To her "diverse leadership leads to more diverse membership."

Sarah's defining purpose and the reason behind her decision to run involved her desire to charter the path for others. She described this purpose behind her running for

student government president as, “I really wanted all students to know that there are no ceilings to your possibilities because of where you come from or what you look like.”

The responsibility to run was also a factor for some of the women to run for student government president. Madison was not planning on running, but when she found that only one president and vice president team was running, she decided she needed to run as if the current pair were elected, it “wouldn’t be good for the hope of the organization.” Similar to Madison, Olivia felt a sense of responsibility to run as she believed the only way to change the culture would be from within.

The pre-college and college student leadership and student government involvement experiences served as a foundation from which the seven participants gained skills, knowledge, and confidence as well as developing passions, purpose, and drive. All which became the vital factors that led to these women running for student government president at their university.

The Effects of the Student Government Environment

For all seven women, the student government traditions and the foundational organization culture which one participant Chloe described as a “boys’ club” led to this environment being a “chilly climate” to move through. According to the research, the “chilly climate” for women in the political realm can be described as less tolerance to making mistakes, an inherent bias against women, more questions from others concerning their credibility, and having to work harder than men to be taken seriously by their colleagues and potential voters (Fox & Lawless, 2004; Pew Research Center, 2008; Pew Research Center, 2015; Swers, 2013). Similar to this research on the “chilly climate,” these seven women described this climate in terms of the overall organizational

culture, the presence of inherent bias against women, and the challenges with both the election and transition process.

For Esther and Hanna, the traditional male White culture of student government and the administration at times felt hostile because they both were so different than the norm. Both women trying to evolve the organizational culture felt at times that their female and minority voices were not welcome. Hanna described how when she was trying to share to other members of student government leadership, specifically White men how the environment was hostile to these groups that "because of the identities of the people . . . they didn't want to hear it."

For Chloe it was her experience on executive cabinet when she was able to choose who she worked with in terms of other members of the cabinet that she initially experienced the toxic organizational culture. Chloe reported the toxic culture to the student government advisor, but that only made working with the executive members more difficult. The executive members found other ways to "make it hard to work with them" and this hatred she felt from one specific leader within the executive cabinet set a tone that "before I [Chloe] walked into the exec board of discouraging women, disliking women, discrediting anything I [she] could say."

For all seven women their identities were outside the norm of leadership within student government and overcoming this "chilly climate" created from being different than the norm for four of the women was felt through inherent bias against women or women of color. Hanna, a woman of color, knew that just "being in this space [was] causing a conversation." She had to work hard to get her ideas taken seriously and get her voice heard in conversations with peers in the organization and leadership. Esther

felt the inherent bias when she decided to run for president as she felt her peers did not want her to run because she did not "look the part."

For Madison and Sarah, the inherent bias found in members of the organization came through small regular occurrences where they felt that had to prove their worth. As a married woman, Madison was questioned if she could perform the role as president well and "build a family at the same time." Therefore, she spent her term as president at times feeling like she needed to prove these biases were incorrect assumptions. Sarah found all the smaller occurrences "exhausting and hurtful" and believed her race and gender not only reflected how others treated her but also how "hard [she] had to work."

The traditional election and transition processes are the beginning steps to becoming and serving as student government president. Kanthak and Woon's (2015) research focused on the role campaigns and elections played in women choosing not to run. Similar to the findings in Kanthak and Woon (2015), five of the women in this study, the demands and unfavorable circumstances during the election or transition process set the tone as chilly. Chloe, Sarah, and Madison faced additional campaign stresses due to the rigor of the election process. Chloe and Sarah reported campaign violations though the other candidates did not face any consequences. Both women felt that the process would not have been the same if they had campaign violations reported against them. Then, for Olivia and Grace the lack of a transition process due to the outgoing president not wanting them to serve in the role created challenges in terms of starting their term not feeling prepared.

Combatting the Chilly Climate

With the challenges of the "chilly climate" for the seven female student government presidents, the complexities and numerous barriers they encountered is a labyrinth, showcasing the implication this illustration, developed by Eagly and Carli (2007), plays out in leadership positions for college students. All seven women did find ways to cope and overcome the challenges related to the "chilly climate" of the organization.

From the research, the shift in confidence and the ability to work successfully in a "chilly climate" can be attributed to women feeling valued by strong relationships from their peers which led to developing a supportive environment to lead (Devnew et al., 2017). For all seven women, they turned to building and finding a supportive community who served as a resource and an encourager throughout their one-year term. For the women, the supportive community included finding support through family, peers, mentors, advisors, or administrators. For Chloe, Hanna, and Grace, this supportive environment included their advisor and faculty. The advisors and faculty helped lift these women with encouragement as well as lift their voices if they were not being heard in meeting.

All seven women mentioned the relationships with other women as significant to their success with combatting the "chilly climate." Olivia, Esther, and Madison ensured their running mates shared similar gender and racial identities, thus creating that supportive community within their executive cabinet. Chloe, Grace, and Hanna found the female support in their relationships with their advisors who were also female. Sarah

turned to mentors in the community who shared her identities and experiences to help her combat the culture and environment of student government.

While all seven women mentioned building a supportive community was necessary to combatting the climate and challenges, Esther, Hanna, and Madison found additional frustrations with administration adding to the obstacles and challenges that shaped their experiences as student government president. Madison specifically compared the relationships with her peers and administration. She said her the relationships with her peers were supportive and "exceeded expectations" while she saw the relationships with administrators as the exact opposite.

Six of the women also made sure that while success of their term could be defined by others, they redefined their success in their role to combat the chilly climate of the organization. Similar to a study by Dyke and Murphy (2006) focusing on the differences between how women and men define success, six of the women in my study chose to redefine success in their own terms. While others in student government defined success in terms of notoriety in the role and prestige, these women found these predetermined ideas of success difficult to navigate in the chilly climate.

Grace, Madison, and Olivia defined their success by completing their campaign platform promises whether the effort was an individual effort or a group. To Grace, Madison, and Olivia the individual effort or the team effort were some of their most successful moments in their term. The focus on their campaign platform all term allowed them to stay motivated and positive even when they faced challenges within the traditions and culture of the organization. Esther and Hanna defined their success by completing the term; with all the turmoil these two women faced during the year, finishing the term

and not quitting early was how they saw success. Chloe saw success as not related to completing tasks, but as personal growth and the ability to remain authentic throughout the process.

The Influence of Gender and Race

Gender and race were brought up by the participants organically when discussing their experiences during their term as president. All seven women mentioned the role gender played in their experiences as well as other significant parts of their identity. While Domingue's (2015) study focused primarily on Black women leaders, she found that the challenges these women faced created an environment that sharpened their awareness to their racial and gender identities. These identity descriptors played roles in how they moved through experiences and worked within the student government environment as well as how they made meaning of their experiences.

For some of the participants in this study, navigating feelings and navigating the communication process made them feel confident as female leaders while other participants found navigating these two things challenging. Similar to the findings in Domingue's (2015) qualitative research on Black student leaders at predominately White college campuses, four of the women shared experiences where they were worried their emotions and feelings would be misinterpreted. For these women, they were worried their emotions and feelings would be seen by others as "soft," and "fragile," or on the other end of the spectrum as "angry," "aggressive," and "rude." These four women were hyper aware of how others may perceive their feelings; therefore, struggled to communicate their feelings effectively. For Olivia, Sarah, Hanna, and Madison,

expressing their feelings needed to be an intentional process and could not be more of a natural process for fear of being misinterpreted by others.

When navigating communication for these women, the similar strategy of communication being an intentional process was shared. However, new strategies related to working through being interrupted or talked over by men in the room were also shared. Five women shared experiences where they had to find strategies to overcome the barriers related to how others perceived their communication style or the message.

After being interrupted became more of a common occurrence in meetings with administrators, Grace navigated this by "asserting her dominance more." Sarah and Olivia both were intentional in their word choice when communicating with peers and administrators; these women also spent extra time prepping for these conversations to the point that felt overprepared.

All seven women struggled with elements of feeling confident and developing self-efficacy and the additional pressure either felt by others or put on by themselves due to their gender or race. Initially this may look like one was placing blame on these women, however, similar to the findings from the research of Fox and Lawless (2011) concerning self-efficacy, these struggles with self-efficacy were seen an additional barrier these women have to overcome. The uphill battle these women faced due to not being embraced in this chilly climate created this additional barrier (Fox & Lawless, 2011; Sandler, et al., 1996).

Grace, Olivia, and Chloe struggled with questioning whether they were "worthy" or "deserving" of this leadership position. To these three women specifically, developing

self-efficacy became almost a year-long process before they felt confident in being selected and serving as student government president.

For others, specifically Esther and Hanna, developing self-efficacy involved coming to terms with the fact that they are supposed to be "at the table." Throughout their one-year term, both of these women of color continually struggled with the "I don't belong here feeling." However, Hanna shared her experience with overcoming this obstacle by finally realizing it "wasn't that people didn't want me," but that "[she] was the biggest obstacle."

As all the woman were outside the norm in terms of their identities as student government presidents, six of the women specifically described the additional pressure they felt to prove their capabilities as a charismatic leader to others. The need to work "twice as hard" is added pressure for women due to the higher visibility surrounding the theory of tokenism (Cook & Glass, 2014; Kanter, 1977).

Hanna, Chloe, and Esther described this additional pressure to be "on" as they were all hyper aware of the ways they appeared to others on campus. Madison and Sarah felt they were personally responsible for setting the standard of what it meant to be student government president with their specific identities. Madison's identity as both a female and married played a role in her feeling like she had something to prove. When describing this pressure, she said, "There is a perceived pressure of doing my gender and being a strong woman in leadership and the additional pressure of not and almost feeling as though you can't mess up." Sarah, as the first Black woman student government president, believed there was this "automatic pressure that nobody told you to be the best president there ever was."

For these six women, this additional pressure or need to prove themselves was exhausting at times. For these women combatting this pressure involved two steps: (1) being aware of how it affected their stress levels, and (2) when the pressure became overwhelming stepping back "letting go of the pressure . . . and just do[ing] a good job every day."

Their gender and race also had a positive influence on the organization. For these women, their ability to be approachable to other women and minority groups helped in building a more inclusive student government organization. These women believed their identities encouraged other minority groups or women to be involved in the organization. In addition, some of the women felt progress on initiatives like adding a gender inclusion statement on all syllabi or allowing leftover meal dollars to be donated to the on-campus food pantry may have been more challenging initiatives to push through than if they were a White male. Once these women were able to navigate the challenges that were influenced by their gender or race, their gender or race became the influencer to making progress on some initiatives.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

This study provided perspective on how female student government presidents made meaning of their prior experiences, which led to their decision to run for student government president at their university. Additionally, the study found how they made meaning of their experiences during their one-year term as president. After conducting the interviews, developing the narratives, and analyzing the data, I have determined implications for both current practice and future research.

Implications for Student Affairs Professionals

As noted, all seven women were involved as student leaders both in pre-college and early in college. These engagement and initial leadership experiences set the foundation for future involvement in organizations that focus on making a large impact and helping others. While their specific pre-college student organization involvement was vastly different, these women's involvements focused on serving others and advocating for others. Student government associations were originally established as a tool to create change as well as ensure students concerns were expressed (Cohen, 1998; Klopf, 1960). With a similar focus, student government associations can become the organization for women to join who are looking for similar experiences from what they had prior to college. Student affairs professionals, specifically advisors for student government associations, can capitalize on this by ensuring this mission is a clear message to incoming students looking for ways to be engaged on campus.

All seven women who participated in this study became involved in student government at their institution within the first year. Five of these women started their student government involvement within the first semester at their institution. Advisors for student government should focus their recruiting process of new members on first-year students or new transfer students earlier. Recruiting women early for involvement in student government has a larger impact on these women taking on higher leadership roles within the organization. Getting women involved early is the first step in creating an environment that cultivates future female student government presidents.

Once these women are involved in student government, the organizational culture and the traditions can become barriers for advancement to leadership roles within the

organization. Student affairs professionals need to be cognizant of the organizational culture and traditions to ensure that they do not become barriers for advancement. Using the illustration coined by Eagly and Carli (2007), "the labyrinth" describes the complexities and numerous barriers women encounter as they work their way up to leadership positions. According to the seven women, they faced barriers and complexities at all levels of advancement within student government. Instead of only focusing on the possible barriers these leaders may face in the presidential role, student government advisors need to work with students in the organization to limit these barriers that may occur during each advancement opportunity.

Some of the possible processes that are traditional to student government such as the election and transition process, need to be explored with a labyrinth in mind. Five of the women shared experiences where these processes created additional challenges that in turn affected how they made meaning of their experience as student government president. The gender-based challenges that the research had explored in terms of local, state, and national elections were similar to the gender-based challenges the women faced when running for student government president (Chin, 2011; Fox & Lawless, 2011; Kaufman & Grace, 2011; Paxton & Kunovich, 2003). The challenges research described with self-efficacy, societal expectations of work and family life balance, biases associated with feminine leadership, and sex discrimination, were all also mentioned in the shared experiences of the women in this study (American Association of University Women, 2016; Wilson, 2004).

Knowing these barriers exist with the election process, student government advisors need to evaluate their current process to ensure these barriers are limited. In

addition, student government advisors need to hold student leaders accountable when some of these barriers become evident in the pre-election debates or are evident in the current student government culture. The transition process is the first steps in building the confidence of the future student government president. For women who are already coming into their presidency experiencing issues with self-efficacy, the transition process is even more crucial to how they make meaning of the experiences that unfold during their term as president. Student government advisors should review their transition process and ensure that the process is providing the newly elected president with the foundation, and in turn the confidence, to start their term as president. Student government advisors should specifically review the transition process if students are taking the lead to ensure inherent bias does not come into play. This will help safeguard the transition process so all presidents receive a similar transition not only newly elected student leaders who are on good terms with the student, but also student leaders who may not be liked by the student leading the transition process.

A supportive community built on a variety of strong relationships with peers, administrators, mentors, and advisors was a vital component to the seven women's experiences as student government president. Similar to the research, a lack of effective networking and mentors create additional challenges for women leaders specifically for women leaders in the political realm (American Association of University Women, 2016: Wilson, 2004).

For the women who had a strong supportive community, their one-year term left a more positive impression on how they would describe the experience. For the women who continued to feel defeated or struggled through their term as president, the lack of

support in terms of the relationships around them played a large role in how they made meaning of the challenging experiences. Student government advisors have a large role in building relationships with members of the organization. Building these supportive relationships should not wait until the students are in high leadership roles; student government advisors should work to build these relationships with members of the organization at all levels. At the higher levels, these relationships are significant to helping these students face challenges that may come with the higher leadership role. However, building relationships with members who are in lower levels of involvement within the organization can help these students feel empowered and motivated to pursue higher positions within the organization.

Building this supportive community for student government presidents involves more than just the student government advisor; other administrators and faculty play an important role as well. For these seven women, the supportive community needed to be made up of many different on-campus and off-campus partners. Another important implication in relation to the who should make up these supportive communities for these students involves the need to have relationships with others who share identities.

Many of the participants in this study worked to establish relationships or create communities where other women or other women of color were present. Similar to the research, the need to have mentors that looked like them as either women or women of color had a positive influence on women student government leaders (Onorato & Musoba, 2015; Salas, 2010). This has a large implication for not only student government advisors, but also higher education administrators. The need to diversify leadership in higher education directly relates to having women and women of color

present in administrative roles on campus; in this case, particularly higher leadership roles that work with student government leaders. For these female student government leaders to build relationships with other female leaders, they need to be able to find them; therefore, females must be present in these positions.

While student government advisors need to focus on processes including recruitment, election, and transition, higher education administrators who focus on training student leaders have some implications to their practice based on this research. Changes in leadership training do not need to only focus on creating leadership training materials for women and women of color, but also need to focus on overall student leadership trainings where inherent bias can be reviewed. The seven women faced challenges as female leaders, navigating their feelings, finding their voice, developing self-efficacy, and fighting the pressure were related to how they made meaning of their interactions with others and the chilly climate. While leadership training should exist to help women and women of color develop strategies to help them through these challenges, higher education administrators can also develop leadership training that works towards creating an environment where these challenges do not exist.

Implications for Future Research

The study of experiences of female student government association presidents at public research institutions in the Southeast has the potential to inform future studies on women college student leaders and women student government leaders as well as specifically women of color college student leaders and women of color student government leaders. The findings from this study could also inform studies on

intersectionality between gender, race, and leadership in addition to women or women of color in local, state, and national political leadership.

As a result of the data gathered in the interviews, major themes were created related to the impact of prior leadership experiences, the role and impact of a "chilly climate" and the role and impact gender and race play in the way women make meaning of their experiences, and the importance of a supportive community that include people who share your identity. Each of these themes, as well as subthemes that emerged, could provide a lens and perspective through which further research is conducted.

Additionally, this research was limited to seven female student government presidents in the Southeast. Other research however, specifically focused on female student government presidents in the midwest region; further studies with women in the Southeast as well as other regions of the United States would add to the research base. The participants in this study were diverse with four identifying as women of color and three as White women however, they all served as president at predominately white institutions. Therefore, further studies either examining female student government presidents identifying as Asian or Latina or from more diverse institutions not classified as predominantly White will add to the literature. This additional research may help determine how to increase women of color in leadership roles like student government president as well as how to better serve them during their term as student government president.

This study focuses only on the experiences of women student government presidents at large research institutions. Expanding research to include women student government presidents' experiences at community colleges, private colleges, or smaller

institutions could add depth to the research on women student government presidents' experiences and how they make meaning of these experiences.

Further research on why women student leaders choose to be involved in student government as well as why women student leaders choose to run could also help determine best practices for recruitment and the election process. This current study only scratched the surface in determining the reasons women become involved in student government as well as decided to take on leadership within the organization. Further research could also take the approach of looking at why women choose not to be involved in student government as well as choosing not to run for student government president. Research on both groups of students, those who chose to be involved and those who chose not to be involved, could determine future best practices for student government.

A comparison research study on the experiences of women in local, state, and national political leadership positions and the experiences at the collegiate level and high school level could explore the similarities and differences of these women's political leadership experiences adding to best practices at many different levels of women leader political involvement. Further research on the political involvement of women student government presidents after college graduation could add to the research in terms of the impact of serving as a student government president. This study provided a solid understanding of the experiences of female student government presidents at public research institutions in the Southeast as well as how these females made meaning of their experiences. It left me curious about the experiences of other groups of female student

government presidents as well as their experience at different points of their political involvement.

Conclusion

Female student government presidents each experience their term with their personal lens and perspective at the forefront. The way these women make meaning of their experiences during their term relate to how they have experienced their identities playing out in their environment. While each woman had their own experiences, many of these women had similar experiences that affected the way they made meaning their term as president. Each participant developed strategies to navigate the challenges, found ways to use their strengths, and worked to build a more inclusive organization. This research topic began with a desire to explore these women's experiences as leaders, the project examined the way their gender, race, or other identity descriptors impacted not only their experiences, but how they made meaning of these experiences.

A narrative telling the personal story of each female student government president was created giving power to each individual female student government president to define their perspectives within the social construct of their underrepresented voice (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Harding, 1988). While the social construct was not presented by the researcher during the interview process, each female student government president established a social construct for their environment as well as saw themselves as an underrepresented voice. From the narratives, themes emerged as they related to their individual meaning making of their shared experiences leading up to serving as student government president and their experiences during their one-year term.

The study provided rich data and insight into a specific population where research was limited. The goal of the research was to understand the experiences of female student government presidents as well as understand the role their pre-presidency experiences impacted their leadership journey. It was my hope that this research would provide some insight into this group of underrepresented leaders as well as give a voice to their personal narratives. Although there is ample opportunity for further examination of this population, this study provided insight on female student government presidents' experiences as well as how they made meaning of these experiences.

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APPENDIX A:

List of Institutions

Name of Institution	State
Appalachian State University	North Carolina
Auburn University	Alabama
Citadel Military College of South Carolina	South Carolina
Clayton State University	Georgia
Clemson University	South Carolina
East Carolina University	North Carolina
Elizabeth City State University	North Carolina
Florida Gulf Coast University	Florida
Florida State University	Florida
Georgia College and State University	Georgia
Georgia Institute of Technology	Georgia
Georgia State University	Georgia
Jackson State University	Mississippi
Kennesaw State University	Georgia
Middle Tennessee State University	Tennessee
Mississippi State University	Mississippi
North Carolina A&T State University	North Carolina
North Carolina Central University	North Carolina
North Carolina State University at Raleigh	North Carolina
Tennessee State University	Tennessee
The University of Alabama	Alabama

Name of Institution	State
The University of Tennessee-Knoxville	Tennessee
The University of Tennessee-Martin	Tennessee
The University of West Florida	Florida
University of Alabama at Birmingham	Alabama
University of Central Florida	Florida
University of Georgia	Georgia
University of Memphis	Tennessee
The University of Tennessee-Knoxville	Tennessee
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	North Carolina
University of North Carolina at Charlotte	North Carolina
University of North Carolina at Greensboro	North Carolina
University of North Carolina at Pembroke	North Carolina
University of North Carolina at Wilmington	North Carolina
University of North Florida	Florida
University of South Carolina	South Carolina
University of South Florida-Main Campus	Florida
University of South Florida- St. Petersburg	Florida
University of Southern Mississippi	Mississippi
Valdosta State University	Georgia
Western Carolina University	North Carolina
Winthrop University	South Carolina

APPENDIX B:

Institutional Review Board Approval

Institutional Review Board (IRB)
For the Protection of Human Research Participants
PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

PROTOCOL NUMBER:	**03640-2018**	**INVESTIGATOR:**	**Ms. Teresa Weimann**
		SUPERVISING FACULTY:	**Dr. Jamie Workman**
PROJECT TITLE:	***The experiences of female student government association presidents at public research institutions in the southeast.***		

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **Exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under Exemption **Category 2**. Your research study may begin immediately. If the nature of the research project changes such that exemption criteria may no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *Upon completion of this research study all compiled data (transcripts, data lists, email address list, etc.) must be securely maintained (locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years.*
- *In an effort to maintain confidentiality of participants the pseudonym list must be kept in a separate file from the associated name list.*
- *The researcher must read aloud the Research Statement of Consent at the start of SKYPE interview recording. The transcript must document the reading of the statement and participant agreeance to participate.*
- *Audio recorded interviews are not to be stored and/or shared. The recordings must be deleted **immediately** upon creation of **each** interview transcript.*

☒ ***If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at irb@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.***

Elizabeth W. Olphie *06.07.2018*
Elizabeth W. Olphie, IRB Administrator Date

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.
Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-253-2947.

Revised: 06.02.16

APPENDIX C:

Consent Form

VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY

Consent to Participate in Research

You are being asked to participate in a research project entitled "The experiences of female student government association presidents at public research institutions in the Southeast." This research project is being conducted by Teresa Weimann, a student in the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program at Valdosta State University. The researcher has explained to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask the researcher any questions you have to help you understand this project and your possible participation in it. A basic explanation of the research is given below. Please read this carefully and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have. The University asks that you give your signed agreement if you wish to participate in this research project.

Purpose of the Research: This study involves qualitative research. The purpose of the study is to understand the experiences of female student government presidents at public research institutions in the Southeast.

Procedures: Data collection will be achieved through three semi-structured interviews over the course of your year as president at your institution as well as a few reflective journal entries. Each interview will be approximately 90 minutes. Interview location may be chosen by participant and if interviews are not in-person, interviews will be conducted via Skype. You will be asked to keep a reflective journal about your experiences as SGA president, writing in the journal at least once a month during fall semester.

Possible Risks or Discomfort: You will be sharing your personal story of your leadership journey up to and including your experience as SGA president, possible discomfort or risks that the participant might experience include minor issues of embarrassment or uneasiness in dealing with sensitive issues. By agreeing to participate in this research project, you are not waiving any rights that you may have against Valdosta State University for injury resulting from negligence of the University or its researchers.

Potential Benefits: Although you [may/will] not benefit directly from this research, your participation will help the researcher gain additional understanding of female student government presidents and their experiences. Knowledge gained may contribute to developing best practices for supporting female student government presidents through their year in service to their institution.

Costs and Compensation: There are no costs to you and there is no compensation (no money, gifts, or services) for your participation in this research project.

Assurance of Confidentiality: Valdosta State University and the researcher will keep your information confidential to the extent allowed by law. Members of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), a university committee charged with reviewing research to ensure the rights and welfare of research participants, may be given access to your confidential information. Participants will receive pseudonyms and information from the interviews will be kept confidential and saved on a password protected computer protecting the information from unauthorized access

Voluntary Participation: Your decision to participate in this research project is entirely voluntary. If you agree now to participate and change your mind later, you are free to leave the study. Your decision not to participate at all or to stop participating at any time in the future will not have any effect on any rights you have or any services you are otherwise entitled to from Valdosta State University. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer during the interviews.

Information Contacts: Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Teresa Weimann at 770.827.7953or taweimann@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-333-7837 or irb@valdosta.edu.

APPENDIX D:

Letter of Cooperation

Hello [Insert Name],

Per our previous discussions, I am a student in the Education Leadership Doctoral Program at Valdosta State University. I will be conducting a qualitative study to better understand the experiences of female student government presidents. Data collection will be achieved through three semi-structured interviews over the course of your year as president at your institution as well as a few reflective journal entries.

The proposed time frame for data collection will be during August 2018 through March 2019. Please let me know if you have any questions or need additional information. Thank you and I look forward to working with you on my study.

Sincerely,

Teresa Weimann

APPENDIX E:

Consent Script

You are being asked to participate in an interview as part of a research study entitled "The Experiences of Female Student Government Association Presidents at Public Research Institutions in the Southeast: A Narrative Inquiry Approach," which is being conducted by Teresa Weimann, a student at Valdosta State University. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of female student government presidents at public research institutions in the Southeast. The interviews will be audio taped in order to accurately capture your concerns, opinions, and ideas. Once the recordings have been transcribed, the tapes will be destroyed. No one, including the researcher, will be able to associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your participation in the interview will serve as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 years of age or older.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Teresa Weimann at taweimann@valdosta.edu. This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

APPENDIX F:

Research Question Matrix

Research Question	Data Source	Interview Questions
1. What are the experiences of these female student leaders prior to being elected to serve as their student government association president at their public research institution in the Southeast?	Seidman's Interview Series: Interview 1: Focused Life History	Tell me about the time you first realized you were a leader. How do you think that experience set the foundation for your role as a leader? Going as far back as you can remember, tell me about some of your experiences as a leader. What did that tell you about how you lead and what values are important to you? Let's pretend you have a "leadership roadmap" tell me about some significant points in your personal leadership journey. Why do you believe these points were significant? Tell me about some of your leadership role models? What have you learned about leadership through your experiences (or knowledge) of these leadership role models? How did your participation in Student Government come about? Describe to me the history of your experience with SGA? What experience(s) led to your decision to run for SGA president? Walk me through the details of the campaign process. What were your goals during the campaign process? Describe your success of the campaign process? Why do you classify those experiences as success? Were there any worries/challenges/setbacks during the campaign process? Please describe those experiences. Tell me about your experiences and feelings on election day.

Research Question	Data Source	Interview Questions
2. What are the experiences of female college student leaders who serve as student government association presidents at public research institutions in the Southeast?	Seidman's Interview Series: Interview 2: The Details of the Experience	How would you describe your leadership philosophy? Describe to me the steps involved in the transition process. How would you describe the organizational culture of SGA? Can you give an example of those words in action? Reconstruct a day in the life of your role as SGA president from the moment you wake up to the moment you go to bed. How have you seen your leadership philosophy play out with your role in SGA? Describe to me some of the personal satisfaction you have received to date in your role as SGA president? Tell me about some of your favorite experiences in your role as SGA president? In any leadership role, there are some challenges, what are some of the challenges you face or are facing in your role as SGA president? Have your experiences to date met your expectations? Why or why not? Looking back at the platform you were elected on, have you been able to meet the campaign promises? Are there other goals you would like to accomplish before the end of your term? What is holding you back from these goals? Reconstruct an SGA cabinet member meeting. How would you describe a senate member meeting? What happens? What are some if any differences you have noticed in these different SGA meetings? What are some of the differences you have noticed in these different types of SGA meetings? How would you define the role of the vice president? How would you describe the relationship between you and your VP? Describe your interactions with alum, administration, staff, and faculty. How do you define the role of the advisor?

Research Question	Data Source	Interview Questions
		How would you describe the relationship between you and your advisor? What is something that you have learned about yourself so far in your term as SGA president? What are somethings that you have learned about your approach to leadership from serving as SGA president? As of right now, what would you say is the legacy you are hoping to leave behind after your term as SGA president? How might you think your role as a woman affects you serving as SGA president? Can you describe your experiences that provide evidence?

Appendix F: Research Question Matrix, p. 3

Research Question	Data Source	Interview Questions
2. What are the experiences of female college student leaders who serve as student government association presidents at public research institutions in the Southeast?	Seidman's Interview Series: Interview 3: Reflection on the Meaning	Where do you see yourself in the future? What are your career aspirations? How do you think this role as SGA president will help you in your future goals outside of this position? Do you think your role as SGA president has had any influence in how you constructed relationships with others? If yes, then how? How do you understand leadership in your life? How would you answer the question, who am I? Do you believe your experiences have led to more self-discovery? How have your experiences as SGA president led to more of an understanding about who you are? Or how have they not? If you could describe one person that you could not live without through this past year as president, who would that be and why? What role if any do you think your gender plays in how you present yourself as a leader to others? Can you describe some examples of experiences that showcase this? What other aspects if any do you think play in to how you present yourself as a leader to others? What role if any do you think your gender plays in how you choose to lead others? What other aspects if any do you think play into how you choose to lead others? How do you believe your leadership journey has played a role in your leadership style? If you could back in time and give your newly elected self-advice for the year as SGA president, what would you share? Do you think your advice to the next SGA president is different? If so, what advice do you have for the next SGA president? What advice do you have for women leaders? What are some life lessons you have learned over the course of your experiences to date?

Research Question	Data Source	Interview Questions
		Specifically, what are some leadership lessons you have learned over the course of your experience as SGA president? As you reflect on your leadership experiences and journey, what are some unanswered questions that you hope to discover the answers to?

Appendix F: Research Question Matrix. p. 5

APPENDIX G:

Six-Part Labovian Model Example: “Hanna”

How did you start participating in student government, what is the history of your experience with SGA? (1)	1. Abstract Story is about her student government experience
HANNA: My second semester, my freshmen year (2)	2. Orientation When? Second semester, freshmen year
I wasn't like completely dedicated to any student organizations (3) and it kind of bothered me (4).	3. Complicating Action What happened? Not dedicated
I felt like I was kind of just going to class, going to the dining halls, doing my homework and going home (3). I didn't feel like I was a part of campus in a way that I thought I should be. (4)	4. Evaluation So what? It bothered her 3. Complicating Action What happened? Just doing the classroom and meal thing
So, I tried to look for a few student orgs that would fit, things that interested me. I learned that soon the Student Government Association was having vacancies, and at the time they had a vacancy based on my academic college. So, I filled out a vacancy application, just a few questions just to gauge where your interest is on campus. And you have also to get 50 student signatures along with that, because it wasn't during the regular election season. My application got approved and I went through an interview process (5).	4. Evaluation So what? Didn't feel part of the campus 5. Result: What finally happened? Applied for student government position
And then I got confirmed by a then student senate. (6)	6. Coda: Sign-off. Then I got confirmed.

APPENDIX H:

Thematic Chart Example: Interview One

Code/Theme	Sarah	Grace	Olivia
Culture and/or Family Background	From a small town First Generation College Student Single-Parent Home beginning in High School One little sister African-American Pell Grant Eligible—lower socio-economic status "My identity isn't just that I'm a black woman, I'm a first generation college student, I'm Pell eligible. I'm not a rich young lady at all. I didn't come from this perfect cookie cutter family." (p.17)	Family Background: Parents retired air force colonels (p.2) Military Brat—moved around a lot (p.2) Two Younger Siblings Attended a small private Catholic HS (p.2)	Family Background: Single Parent, one brother, small town (p. 2) "I didn't come from the nicest of homes, but I rose above that." (p.6) While it is not related to her culture/background—I think this speaks to how she sees one's background does not have to define them." literally got to work with kids who were less fortunate, and had anger issues and were abused and neglected and it was great to be able to work with them and show them, *you can still be a great person no matter where you come from*." (p.5)

Code/Theme	Sarah	Grace	Olivia
Feelings Expressed	Fear of leading Student Government, *horrified*: "Can I run a campaign? Can I be a good president? I don't know if I can do it? (doubt) (p.11) "I could not put into words how horrified I was. I cried. It was intense. But, I decided to go for it." (p.12) "I would be doing nobody a service by not running out of fear." (p.12) *Fear of failing*: "It's scary. You're putting yourself out there. If you lose you feel like that's going to be embarrassing… it's intimidating." (p.12) *Excitement*: "because I wanted the job." (p.13). *Frustrated, disgusting*. It was hurtful—"maybe I don't even need to run and be a part of this organization anymore." (p.14)	*Intimidated*: did not feel capable or worthy of a leadership role in SGA (committee chair) (p.4) *Discouragement*: With newspaper article that "SGA President goes unopposed" not feeling worthy, credibility questioned (p.10)	*Not feeling confident*—feeling like she is failing: "I'm literally a senator and I just got back from DC. I don't even know the first thing about student government, I'm failing right now" (p.7) *Shocking* – Confidence Issues: (p.8) " I just never really thought of myself as that big of a leader, as someone that was that inspirational or that people looked up to. I never thought of myself that way. I have my own self confidence issues, but I think the experiences I had it was all leading up to, you are that person. You take your own initiatives and you're a shining star in your own chapter, so why wouldn't the rest of the student body see you as that way?" (p.8)

Code/Theme	Sarah	Grace	Olivia
SGA Culture	Senate Room—it's tough, strong opinions, cliques SGA Diversity: "the people in that room were mostly white and Greek." (p.6) [the senate room] "that's a room where even as President I automatically feel ostracized…it's a little more representative of the campus now...but still." (p. 20) Student government is powerful, it has access to administrators, advocates on the frontline and have a real voice when it comes to students and things that are affecting students. (p.10) Drama: "the student government drama is so annoying and I just didn't want it." (p.12) Race/Gender Divide (implied):"setting the precedent that certain people can do whatever they want" (p.21) Example: "two young men on my team…they've said some not very nice, not very respectful things in the past." (p.22)	SGA Culture: Of respect for each other (p.6) This organization contributes to the community for example, writes legislation (p.8) Competitive & Prestigious Organization—getting involved—you have to be elected or appointed (p.8) Culture Shift: Moving to allow for more students to get involved- taking away the competition (p.9)	The two-party system in terms of viewpoints: "That was really hard because our election that year was very ... It's actually interesting, it was very much tied to the election of 2016, so Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. The heightness of it, like how one party was perceived as republican or conservative, and the other party was perceived as liberal or democratic. (p.6) But the same part has been in control for 10 years (p.8) Previous president resigned: SGA is going downhill, we really need someone that can inspire our students (p.7) Needing to shift to more empathetic community—not so scary for students (p.8) The need for SGA to be more diverse—evolving by getting more women involved (p.11)

Appendix H: Thematic Chart Example Interview One. p. 3