

Navigating the Labyrinth of Leadership: The Experience of Female Presidents in
Arkansas Community Colleges

by

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Navigating the Labyrinth of Leadership: The Experience of Female Presidents in

Arkansas Community Colleges

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The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of female presidents in Arkansas community colleges. This was accomplished by collecting data through one-on-one interviews to examine how these women have navigated the labyrinth of leadership to reach the presidency of a community college. Using the conceptual framework of the labyrinth, as purported by Eagly and Carli (2007), this study focused on these lived experiences of these women and examined the life choices made, career paths, educational background, and obstacles these women have faced in navigating the labyrinth of leadership to reach the presidency. Through an inductive and deductive analysis of the data collected, the researcher was able to determine that the labyrinth concept is overwhelmingly applicable to the female community college president experience. The balance of family and employment was central to the journey of these women. Reoccurring instances of building social capital and blending agency with communion were also present in the journeys of these women. However, despite a close adherence to the labyrinth, the women in this study did not overwhelmingly face prejudices and resistance, a central idea of the labyrinth concept.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughter, Charlotte. You were the spark that lit the fire to finish this work. You inspire me every day to be a better mother, wife, professional, and woman. You are what makes my life worth living and what makes everything worth working for. My hope is to serve as an example to you of what it means to be a strong, hard working woman dedicated to leaving this world a little better than when she arrived. I love you more than anything in this world and will love you forever.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1 – Introduction	1
Conceptual Framework	3
Research Questions	7
Data Gathering Methodology	7
Assumptions.....	9
Delimitations/Limitations	9
Definitions.....	10
Significance/Summary	12
Chapter 2 – Review of the Literature	14
Women’s Representation as Presidents in Higher Education.....	15
Navigating the Labyrinth to the Presidency in Community Colleges	19
Community College Presidential Leadership Pipeline: Faculty as the Beginning.....	21
Community College Presidential Leadership Pipeline: Female Administrators.....	23
The Labyrinth.....	30
Application of the Labyrinth Concept Outside of Education	35
Application of the Labyrinth Concept within Education.....	38
Literature Summary	45
Chapter 3 – Research Methods	47
Restatement of the Purpose.....	47
Methodology Rationale	48
Research Questions.....	49

Role of the Researcher	50
Research Population.....	52
Recruitment of Participants.....	53
Procedures and Data Collection.....	54
Participant Information	57
Alice.....	57
Betty.....	57
Cathy.....	58
Dorothy	58
Emily.....	59
Francis.....	59
Instrumentation	60
Context of Study	61
Data Analysis.....	62
Validation.....	63
Data Reporting.....	64
Chapter 4 – Results	65
Introduction.....	65
Participants and Their College.....	65
Deductive Analysis: Analysis Using the Principles of the Labyrinth.....	66
Blending Agency with Communion	67
Alice.....	67

	viii
Betty	68
Cathy	69
Dorothy	70
Emily	71
Francis	71
Themes	72
Building Social Capital	72
Alice	73
Betty	74
Cathy	76
Dorothy	77
Emily	77
Francis	78
Themes	79
Balancing Family and Employment	79
Alice	79
Betty	81
Cathy	82
Dorothy	83
Emily	84
Francis	85
Themes	85

	ix
Facing Prejudices and Resistance	86
Inductive Analysis: Themes Outside of the Labyrinth Principals	89
Being Prepared when Opportunity Knocks	89
Problem Solving as a Skill	91
Unplanned to Become President	91
Having Confidence in Yourself	93
Listening Skills	94
Love of Teaching	94
Summary	95
Chapter 5 – Discussion	97
Introduction	97
Main Findings	98
Blending Agency with Communion	98
Building Social Capital	101
Balancing Family and Employment	104
Facing Prejudices and Resistance	106
Career Path	107
Problem Solving and Listening Skills	108
Unplanned to Become President	109
Need to Relocate	109
Limitations of the Study	110
Implications of the Study	111

Recommendations for Future Research	114
Researcher Reflections.....	116
References	118
Appendices.....	129

PREVIEW

List of Tables

Table 1	Women Presidents by School Type	16
Table 2	Presidents' Previous Position by Gender	18
Table 3	Immediate Past Positions of Presidents	21
Table 4	Research Questions and Interview Questions Correlation.....	62
Table 5	Themes Related to Blending Agency with Communion	72
Table 6	Themes Related to Building Social Capital	79
Table 7	Themes Related to Balancing Family with Employment	86
Table 8	Summary Table of Common Themes Related to Each Principle	89

List of Appendices

Appendix A	In-Person Interview Guide.....	129
Appendix B	Phone Follow-up Interview.....	133
Appendix C	IRB Exemption Form.....	135
Appendix D	Signed Consent Document.....	137
Appendix E	Recruitment Email	139
Appendix F	Labyrinth Information Provided to Participants	141

Chapter 1

Introduction

During the past 25 years there has been a substantial increase in the number of women participating in postsecondary education and undergraduate enrollment is now majority female. According to the US Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences (IES), female enrollment in higher education increased 52% since 1990, in comparison to a 43% increase in male enrollment (2014, May). The IES report shows that in fall 2012, there were 10 million female undergraduate students versus 7.7 million male undergraduate students. Future enrollment estimates indicate that gender disparity will increase as female undergraduate enrollment is projected to increase by 18% through 2023, while male undergraduate enrollment is projected to increase by only 8%. Within community colleges, female students have made up more than half of the total student body since 1985 (AACC, 2015b). The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) reports in 2015 that women currently stand at 57% of the total community college population, showing the steady and increasing enrollment of women over the last 30 years (2015a).

There also has been a substantial increase in the number of women faculty members in the community college. Townsend (2009) found that women made up about 36% of the full- and part-time faculty in higher education as a whole and when the data was disaggregated, women comprised between 48 and 52% of the total community college faculty in the United States (p. 734). Previous research indicates that women community college administrators make up over 50% of the Chief Academic Officer

positions and over 60% of the Senior Student Affairs Officer positions (Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002, p. 4). A 2013 report released by the AACCC indicates that females hold more than the majority (56%) of leadership roles in community colleges when executive, administrative, and managerial positions are combined (AACCC, 2013).

Although increases in representation among the faculty and administration are documented, female representation in the community college presidency has not increased substantially. However, greater numbers of females hold the community college presidency in comparison to other institutional types. Moltz (2011) reported that only 23% of all college presidencies in the United States were held by females. Obviously, the number of female presidents in US colleges is disproportionate to the number of female college students. Moltz's data shows that more females hold the presidency in community colleges in comparison to all other types of postsecondary institutions, with 29% of public community colleges reporting a woman holding the highest executive position. As the institutional type with the greatest number of females in student, faculty, administrative and leadership roles, community colleges emerge as an important institutional setting to study females in the presidential leadership position.

Although community colleges have greater numbers of females in leadership positions, representation is not equal across the United States. In the state of Arkansas, the percentage of women holding the presidency in public community colleges is similar to the national average of 29% (Moltz, 2011). When this study commenced in June of 2015, women made up 27% (6 out of 22) of the community college presidential positions within the state. Since submitting approval for the study, women now make up 32% as

one more woman has been appointed to the presidency at an Arkansas community college making a total of 7 colleges out of 22 community colleges. The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of female presidents in Arkansas community colleges to examine how these women have navigated the labyrinth of leadership to reach the presidency. This study is focused on these lived experiences of these women and examine the life choices made, career paths, educational background, and obstacles these women have faced in navigating the labyrinth of leadership to reach the presidency.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is drawn from the work of A.H. Eagly and L.L. Carli (2007). In their book, *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth about How Women Become Leaders*, Eagly and Carli broadly examine the leadership roles of women in a variety of workplace settings, including business, industry, and government. Their work first examined the idea of the glass ceiling and point out that this concept is no longer valid. Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986) first introduced the concept of the glass ceiling in their 1986 article in the *Wall Street Journal* and stated that women who were able to rise through the ranks would inevitably hit an invisible barrier that kept executive roles outside of their reach. Eagly and Carli (2007) showed that the concept gives the impression that the glass ceiling is impossible to permeate by women who strive to become leaders. As women are becoming leaders in various sectors, this image no longer accurately describes the experience of women (p. 1). The glass ceiling “fails to recognize the diverse strategies that women devise to become leaders . . . precludes the possibility

that women can overcome barriers and become leaders” and “fails to suggest that thoughtful problem solving can facilitate women’s path to leadership” (p. 7). Women have broken through the barrier, and Eagly and Carli introduce the idea of the labyrinth. This metaphor is more appropriate to describe the experiences of women as it implies that although women can reach leadership levels, the path is not direct. According to Eagly and Carli, this image “captures the varied challenges confronting women as they travel, often on indirect paths, sometime through alien territory, on their way to leadership” (p. 1). The concept of a labyrinth suggests a maze that women must navigate through, but recognizes that an individual can find a way through that enables the realization of her aspirations. Women do eventually reach high executive levels within organizations but must navigate through their career advancement in a more meticulous and often tedious manner than do their male counterparts. The metaphor infers that women can indeed reach high levels within organizations, but only by working their way through labyrinth type maze instead of taking a more direct path. Eagly and Carli discussed in depth how some manage to navigate the labyrinth and name a number of principles that women who have navigated the labyrinth have followed. These principles include blending agency with communion, building social capital, and balancing employment and family (pp. 163-175). Blending agency with communion is a phrase used by Eagly and Carli in the discussion of the principles of how women successfully navigate the labyrinth. This phrase is defined as women’s ability to “direct others while also being verbally supportive and expressing warmth nonverbally” (p. 165). It also encapsulates establishing oneself as competent, especially in male-dominated settings, while also

learning to negotiate effectively amongst subordinate groups (pp. 167-169). This can further be defined as showing oneself capable and assertive enough to make difficult decisions and manage difficult circumstances while still working to create a harmonious environment within their organization and amongst their subordinates. Building social capital is also one of the principles discussed by Eagly and Carli use this phrase in the discussion of the principles of how women successfully navigate the labyrinth. This involves creating good relationships with colleagues, joining and participating in networks, and establishing mentor relationships (p. 173). This can further be defined as fostering relationships with others for the benefit of oneself or their organization. This can be accomplished by working with others within and outside the organization collectively, by serving as a mentor or by seeking out opportunities to mentor. This can also be accomplished by joining professional organizations and using these resources for organizational improvement, career advancement, etc. Mastering these principles in addition to learning to balance family and employment are key in understanding how to navigate the labyrinth of leadership, this maze that women must master in order to reach executive roles. For purposes of this study, it is hypothesized that the lived experiences of women in community college presidential roles show navigation of the labyrinth by mastering and demonstrating these principles in order to reach this role.

This framework of the labyrinth provides a new metaphor showing that women can ascend to senior level positions and focuses on the strategies women employ to reach these levels. The labyrinth as a framework has been applied to studies of female leaders in business and industry as well as female leaders in P-12 and higher education settings.

In the P-12 setting, researchers have examined the labyrinth in the journey of female superintendents in the Southwestern United States (Hanson, 2011). Within higher education, the labyrinth concept has been utilized in studies of female leaders in primarily four-year universities and in one instance of a community college setting. Several researchers have applied this framework in the four year setting, including a study by Cselenszky (2012) who examined women in vice presidential, dean, director, and provost roles within four year universities. Additionally, Byford (2011) utilized the labyrinth framework when examining female executive administrators at land grant doctoral institutions. The labyrinth concept has also been used when researching women within Christian education. Lafreniere (2008) applied this idea by examining the perceptions of leadership traits by various faculty and administrative leaders within Christian higher education institutions. Starzyk (2013) used the labyrinth concept to explore mid-career student affairs administrators within Catholic higher education. This conceptual framework was also applied by Byerly (2014) in a study of female vice presidents within four year institutions. In the sole study found on community colleges and the labyrinth, Ligeikis (2010) used the labyrinth in an examination of female vice presidents in New York state community colleges. Despite the many studies relying on the labyrinth concept, a review of the available literature did not reveal any studies of female community college presidents. In this study, the concept of the labyrinth is used to examine the lived experiences of female presidents in community colleges. The principles of successfully navigating the labyrinth and the degree to which each participant in the study exhibits these principles are likewise examined.

Research Questions

The guiding question for this study is: how have females navigated the labyrinth to the presidency in community colleges? The lived experiences of female public community college presidents in the state of Arkansas were examined. Sub questions guiding the study were based on the principles Eagly and Carli identified as key factors in successfully navigating the labyrinth. These sub questions include:

- How do these women describe their educational attainment and career path?
- How do female presidents or chancellors at public community colleges build agency and blend communion?
- How do female presidents or chancellors at public community colleges build social capital?
- Do these women feel they encountered any prejudice as a female leader or resistance to the idea of their leadership?
- How do these women describe the process of successfully obtaining an appointment as president at their community college?
- What obstacles were perceived in navigating the labyrinth? How did these women overcome obstacles in their career path?

Data Gathering Methodology

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) explore the concept of qualitative research, stating that “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). Creswell (2007) further defines qualitative research stating that “qualitative research begins with

assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning the individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 37). Merriam (2009) states that “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5). This study took place in the participants’ natural setting of their campus and attempted to discover how these women interpret their journey navigating the labyrinth to reach the role of president or chancellor their respective community college.

Phenomenology is defined as “a study of people’s conscious experience of their life-world” (Merriam, 2009, p. 25) and that it “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). This study is a phenomenological study in which the researcher examined the lived experiences of female community college presidents. The researcher recognizes that nationally, women are in the minority as presidents of community colleges as the current national average is 29% for female community college presidents within the United States (Moltz, 2011). Using the theoretical lens of the labyrinth of leadership, the researcher will operate under the assumption that females no longer face a glass ceiling, but instead an indirect path, or the labyrinth, to reach leadership roles within their respective careers. The researcher attempted to find meaning, commonalities, and differences in the lived experiences of participants in Arkansas as they navigated this labyrinth.

Creswell (2007) stated that qualitative research is often needed because a problem or an issue needs to be explored or silenced voices need to be heard (pp. 39-40). In terms of the national average of female community college presidents, Arkansas is statically similar and in fact higher than the national average. However, female presidents are still in the minority in comparison to other higher education institutions. This form of research allows the minority voice of women in these roles to be heard and shared with the broader educational community. The experiences Arkansas female community college presidents may also be relevant to the experiences of other female community college presidents in other states and offer a chance for reflection and exploration for career growth.

Assumptions

This study assumes that the participants surveyed are:

1. on career paths and have experiences that apply directly to navigating the labyrinth of leadership in public community colleges only.
2. truthful and have experiences to share about navigating the labyrinth of leadership.
3. accurate in their recollections about their lived experiences.

Delimitations/Limitations

The following delimitations apply to this study:

1. This study examines female community college presidents in Arkansas in order to identify aspects of the labyrinth found in the journeys of female community college presidents in each state.

2. The study does not encapsulate the experiences of other female administrators on a community college campus besides those in presidential/chancellor positions. There may be other aspects of the labyrinth not shown at a community college.
3. At the onset of the study, there were six female community college presidents serving in Arkansas and there has since been another female assume the role of community college president in the state, making the total seven. The data comes only from the experiences of the original six females identified women in Arkansas at the onset of the study.

The following limitations apply to this study:

1. The experiences of female community college presidents may vary and may have elicited very different responses and not be applicable to the female community college presidential experience as a whole.
2. Through qualitative research, the researcher relied exclusively on the beliefs and recollections of the participants to answer the research questions and sub-questions. As there are other valid ways to answer the same research questions, this method of research provided a limitation.

Definitions

The following concepts and definitions are relevant to understanding the context of this study:

Blend agency with communion – Eagly and Carli (2007) use this phrase in the discussion of the principles of how women successfully navigate the labyrinth. This is

defined as women's ability to "direct others while also being verbally supportive and expressing warmth nonverbally" (p. 165). It also encapsulates establishing oneself as competent, especially in male-dominated settings, while also learning to negotiate effectively amongst subordinate groups (pp. 167-169). This can further be defined as showing oneself capable and assertive enough to make difficult decisions and manage difficult circumstances while still working to create a harmonious environment within their organization and amongst their subordinates.

Build Social Capital - Eagly and Carli (2007) use this phrase in the discussion of the principles of how women successfully navigate the labyrinth. This involves creating good relationships with colleagues, joining and participating in networks, and establishing mentor relationships (p. 173). This can further be defined as fostering relationships with others for the benefit of oneself or their organization. This can be accomplished by working with others within and outside the organization collectively, by serving as a mentor or by seeking out opportunities to mentor. This can also be accomplished by joining professional organizations and using these resources for organizational improvement, career advancement, etc.

Community college – Cohen and Brawer (2008) defined a community college "as any institution regionally accredited to award the associate in arts or the associate in science as its highest degree" (p. 5). This includes the comprehensive community college and many technical institutes (p. 5).