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# BREAKING THE GLASS BAMBOO CEILING: VOICES OF WOMEN OF COLOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE CEOs

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## **Breaking the Glass/Bamboo Ceiling: Voices of Women of Color Community College CEOs**

### **Synopsis:**

Using a critical race and glass ceiling theory lens, research has identified a clear underrepresentation of race and gender in the community college presidency that does not reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the student demographics of the institutions they serve.

The narrative regarding women college presidents at two- and four-year institutions has mainly focused on increases in representation. While this assessment indicates advancement, an analytical review of the narrative shows that women of color fall short of their White female counterparts.

Although there has been progress in efforts to advance minorities and women to the American higher education presidency, the numbers do not show significant gains relative to the community college presidency.

Understanding community college representativeness of women of color CEOs can serve as a guidepost to informing practice.

## Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to explore minority presidents' perceptions of the underrepresentation of minorities serving in presidential roles in community colleges.

**Methodology:** Phenomenological inquiry, using semi-structured interview questions derived from a Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Glass Ceiling Theory (GCT) framework was the methodology employed for the study. Thirty-four CEOs were interviewed —12 of the CEO participants reflect Women representing diverse ethnicities, including African American, Asian Pacific Islander and Latino/Hispanic, and spanning every region of the U.S. In semi-structured interviews, the CEOs described their perceptions of the underrepresentation of minorities among the ranks of community college presidents, their ascension to the presidency, and the leadership preparation necessary for attaining the community colleges presidency. **Results:** Analysis of the respondents' comments revealed participants saw an underrepresentation of minorities among the ranks of the community college presidency including evidence of a glass, described as bamboo ceiling. **Findings** respective to the Women's group include a lack of transparent reporting of data on the number of men and women community college presidents of color, gendered biased stereotypes, evidence of a glass/bamboo ceiling and structural barriers within institutional culture that impact the pipeline to the presidency. **Contributions:** This study of community college CEOs of color informs practice.

**Keywords:** Women of Color, glass ceiling, gender bias, stereotypes, tokenism, structural barriers, institutional culture.

*“Using a critical race and glass ceiling theory lens, research has identified a clear underrepresentation of race and gender in the community college presidency that does not reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the student demographics of the institutions they serve. Understanding community college representativeness of women of color CEOs can serve as a guidepost to informing practice.”*

## **Breaking the Glass, Bamboo Ceiling: Voices of Women of Color Community College CEOs**

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Community colleges, created by historical precedent and state legislation, are the cornerstone of the American education system. For many, these colleges serve as the gateway to higher education. These colleges, with open-door access missions, serve a diverse body of students, benefiting the academically underprepared, economically disadvantaged, first-generation college students and minorities. They’ve been described as the access and gateway to higher education, particularly for persons who would not otherwise benefit due to lack of preparation and family, geographical, employment, financial and other constraints. The need for a diverse college presidency at higher education institutions in the United States has been an area of concern for researchers, scholars, and practitioners for decades.

Early research predicted a need to increase the numbers of qualified candidates in the leadership pipeline because the profile of the community college presidency in America was changing (Shults, 2001; Weisman & Vaughan, 2002). However, recent studies indicate the leading demographic profile of college presidents by racial composition is stagnant, revealing an

underrepresentation of race and gender in the community college pipeline and presidency for persons of color (ACE, 2013; Gagliardi et al., 2017). Despite efforts to turn the tide for community college leadership, studies indicate diversification continues to proceed slowly.

### *A Call for Representation in the Community College Presidency*

Throughout the literature, many researchers have pointed out the need to diversify the presidency. In *Leadership Context for the Twenty-First Century*, Boggs (2003), encouraged by findings of Weisman and Vaughan (2002), observed changes on the horizon for community colleges presented “a window of opportunity to bring greater diversity, new energy, and new ideas to community college faculty and leadership” (p. 16). Nationally, the low numbers regarding racial and gender diversity in the community college presidency reveal an underrepresentation of race and gender in the leadership pipeline toward the community college presidency. Findings from the American Council on Education’s (ACE) 2017 American College President Study (ACPS), which surveyed colleges and universities, indicated the demographic profile of America’s college and university presidents remains largely the same as in 1986: an older White male (as cited in Gagliardi et al., 2017).

Research has identified a clear underrepresentation of race and gender diversity in the community college presidency (Espinosa et al., 2019; Gagliardi et al., 2017). An analytical review of the research shows scant progress and a multiplicity of factors attributed to the underrepresentation of minorities among the ranks of community college presidents. Moreover, racial and gender disparities are exacerbated. A report by the Aspen Institute and Achieving the Dream (2013) cited major gaps in the recruitment of presidents and the criteria used for evaluation by boards of trustees, the funnel that directly influences the hiring of community

college presidents. These key issues have created a need to understand the pipeline to the presidency, as well as other factors that prevent increased numbers of minority women and men from becoming community college presidents.

### *Underrepresentation in the Community College Presidency*

Studies indicate a critical need to create opportunities for underrepresented groups to enter the presidential candidacy pool and diversify senior leadership roles. Boggs (2003) stated, “[C]ommunity colleges have not been as effective as they need to be in diversifying their leadership by ethnicity” (p. 16). Duree and Ebbers (2012), in a review of studies on the community college presidency, concluded similarly that “even more striking in the survey data is the lack of significant increase in the number of presidents of color” (p. 43). In examining African American women in higher education, Zamani (2003) stated, “[A]lthough gender is salient in shaping identity and defining various facets of women’s educational experiences, race also has an influence that often differentiates experiences and opportunities” (p. 7). Diversity, as defined by race and ethnicity, within the ranks of the community college presidency is a topic that continues to warrant attention.

### *Women in Community College Leadership*

Community college culture continues to be dominated by male-oriented leadership styles, working relationships, and expectations as a result of its long tradition of male leadership (Amey, 2006; Cohen et al., 2014). In *The Community College Presidency at the Millennium*, a review of studies by Vaughan and Weisman (1998), data revealed that women were advancing in greater numbers, yet the data were less encouraging for minorities pursuing the presidency. The narrative regarding women college presidents at two- and four-year institutions has mainly focused on

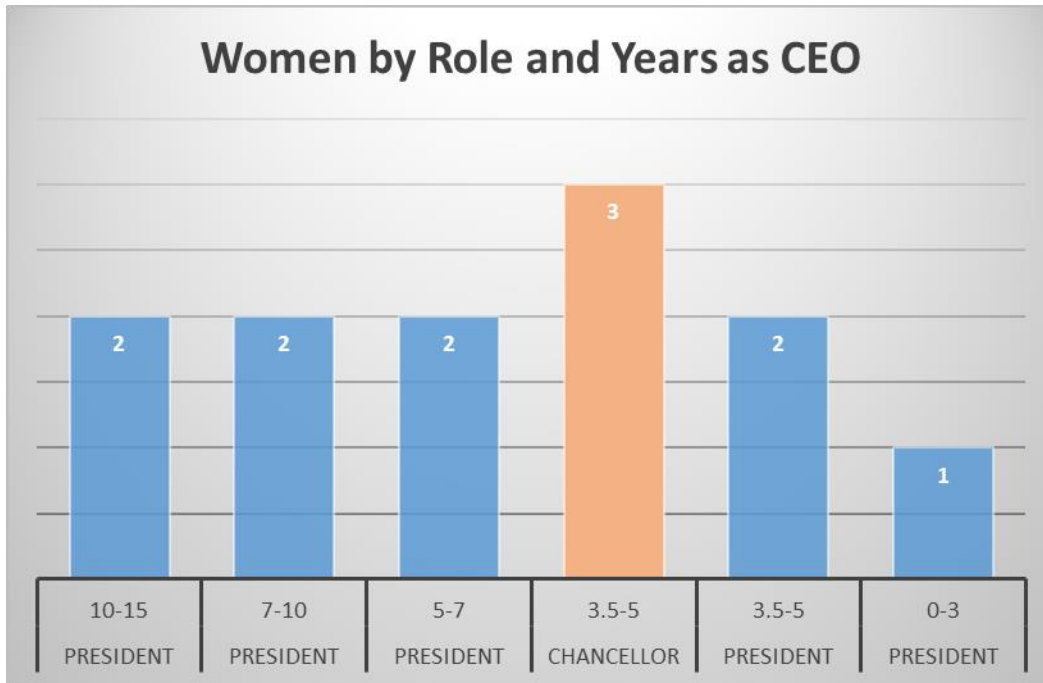
increases in representation from 9% in 1986 to 30% in 2016 (Gagliardi et al., 2017). While this assessment indicates advancement, an analytical review of the narrative shows that women of color fall short of their White female counterparts (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Although there has been progress in efforts to advance minorities and women to the American higher education presidency, the numbers do not show significant gains relative to the community college presidency specifically, indicating the presidential pipeline for higher education continues to be slow to change (Aspen, 2017; Gagliardi et al., 2017).

A study by Hines (2021) titled *Minority community college CEOs' perceptions of underrepresentation, preparation and ascension to the presidency* identified an underrepresentation of race and gender in the community college presidency for persons of color. Thirty-four CEOs were interviewed —12 of the CEO participants reflect Women representing diverse ethnicities, including African American, Asian Pacific Islander and Latino/Hispanic.

#### *Characteristics of the Women's Group*

Thirty-four CEOs were interviewed —12 of the CEO participants reflect Women representing diverse ethnicities, including African American, Asian Pacific Islander and Latino/Hispanic and are the focus of this study. Table 1 reflects the 12 participants as Women CEOs categorized by their leadership position of chancellor/president and years of service as CEO. Two of the Chancellors reflect the youngest and least-explored generation of leadership development style classified as Generation X (Hines, DIHE, 2021).

**Table 1.** *Women as Community College CEOs by Role and Years*



*Note:* The Women’s gender group represents diverse ethnicities, with each of the 3 Chancellors identifying as African American, Asian Pacific Islander and Latino/Hispanic, each serving 3.5-5 years in the role and 2 Chancellors as Generation X leaders.

Study findings by the Women’s gender group provide the following insights:

- A Lack of Transparent Reporting Data:** Participants, in describing their experience and understanding of racial, and gender disparities effecting the underrepresentation of minorities in the community college presidency were confounded by the disparity given the number of community colleges and perceived opportunities available. Some subscribed transparent reporting of data on the number of persons of color serving as community college presidents would augment understanding leakage points in the pipeline to the presidency. One leader observed, “We have 1100 community colleges in this country, give or take, there are fewer positions and there is a lot of chuckholes to get to those position” (African American CEO). Another leader stated, “When you look at the proportion of CEOs in community colleges, presidents or chancellors who are



Hispanic that proportion has gone down” (Latino/Hispanic CEO). Others argue for more transparency to better understand the phenomena. A Gen X leader argued “a lack of data from organizations, would make the truth of it a reality that they don't want to address” (African American President). Dominant findings in the data reported by the Women’s group include structural barriers within institutional culture that impact the pipeline to the presidency.

- ***Gendered Biases, Stereotypes and Prejudices:*** Gender biased descriptors in the data were described. On the subject of youthful appearance a leader from the Pacific Southwest stated, “They just felt like I was too youthful and didn’t fit the prototype of a CEO” (African American Female). Many identifiers in the hiring process, including mobility were noted as a structural impediment contributing to gender bias used in the hiring process. A leader observed, “She has small kids, what is her ability to accept the role? What they really are doing is forming a bias on woman’s ability to lead by placing doubt.” (African American Female President). Perceptions of a woman’s *Mobility* in the selection process was a finding by the Women. Biases and perceptions of persons of color are informed from a lack of cultural competency and limited experiences and interactions with persons from diverse ethnic and gender groups and were described as engrained. *Engrained*; “persons, they don't see it, but I saw it, as the recipient of some of that. Deep, ingrained biases and perceptions about who we are, what we can do and our level of competence” (Latino/Hispanic CEO). One leader observed, “Whether a person recognizes their own bias, it's a tradition that ends up having a negative impact on people of color” (African American President). Gender bias has many forms.
- ***A Bamboo/Glass Ceiling Exists:*** a Glass Ceiling, also referred to as a bamboo ceiling or plexiglas ceiling, was a structural barrier and theme by the Women. Structural barriers related to institutional policies and practices that impede progress for persons of color was described as a challenge to navigate. One leader observed, “Absolutely, there is a glass ceiling! I think that we're [women] still viewed as less than. Of course, there will be exceptions, but I think as a whole, I don't think we have actually broken any glass ceilings yet” (Latino/Hispanic CEO). In addressing the complex properties of the *glass*

*ceiling* a participant described, “There's definitely a bamboo ceiling or a glass ceiling to take on more leadership roles. Other [research on Asian American Pacific Islander women in higher education] even described it as a plexiglas. A lot of minorities, you think you get there, and then you're bounced back” (Asian Pacific Islander CEO). Some speak to the plexiglas nature of the more than metaphorical ceiling describing it as an intentional barrier with most identifying it as an impediment to overcome to crack and penetrate. A leader stated, “It's a broken ceiling. It's still a ceiling, it's cracked and broken in places, but it's still a ceiling” (African American President).

- ***Structural Barriers Persists within Institutional Culture:*** In describing the role the culture of an institutional plays, a leader stated, “From the institutional side, the history of the institution. And the culture of the institution, I think plays a large part in the placement and the success of the president” (Asian Pacific Islander President). The culture within higher education and the academy was described as an unfamiliar and elite hierarchy for persons of color to navigate and transcend. Another leader described, “Community colleges are still built under the higher educational culture. They're still an academic hierarchy, shared governance, etc. Though we're supposed to be open access, we still have processes in place put people in boxes that do not recognize what they bring to the table. All the bureaucracy and the systemic racism or systemic-ism that is built within higher education. One example of a structural barrier is having to penetrate formal networks other than that by history, which was built for white power” (Asian Pacific Islander CEO). Structural barriers and processes in the form of institutional culture exist and are impediments to the presidency.
- ***Tokenism;*** the policy or practice of making a symbolic effort to be inclusive of, or give advantages to members of minority groups thereby postulating the appearance of racial and gender equality was described. Women from each ethnic group described instances where “I was told I was a token” (African American President), or “I was told, I was their token and they didn't need two of us”. Another was asked, “How do I mind being used as a token?” when serving on a selection committee for diversity. The CEO described, “Yes, I was a token because in that selection committee, I'm still invisible in that process”

(Asian Pacific Islander CEO). Others concluded that when you are a trailblazer as a woman and a woman of color, you will always navigate prisms of bias and tokenism.

- ***Camouflaging the Data: Categorization of Gender Labeling of Women:*** Another finding by the Women was the perception that affirmative action policy favorably impacts women of color. The contrary was a finding. By categorizing women as one minority group, it inherently divides women into two categories of white women and others. A leader stated, “So when a white woman applies, they feel as if they can check two boxes because the definition of a minority now also includes a white woman. But the minority is not a white woman. Because affirmative action was not founded for black people, it was founded for white women who could not get jobs” (African American Gen X President). The category of non-white women is a large group of women of color who are disproportionately masked under the label of gender. The Women refer to data in longitudinal studies regarding gains for women in the community college presidency which camouflages the disproportionate number of Latino/Hispanic, Asian Pacific Islander and African America women in comparison to white women as one group.

All agree one cannot decouple their race, ethnicity nor identity from who they truly are as CEOs of color and women.

### ***Moving Forward***

For community colleges to evolve into relevant and transformative 21st century institutions, institutional culture and the leadership that informs it must drive that change. As calls for accountability in higher education and for diversity among presidents persist, the time is ripe to reevaluate the racial and gender representativeness in leadership in community colleges. Building diversity in the presidency and leading diverse student bodies to success requires more than leadership preparation and race and gender equality. Steps include “taking a hard look at institutional culture and values and weaving goals for improvement into the strategic plan”

(Troutman, 2018, p. 12). Diversity, as defined by race and ethnicity, within the ranks of the community college presidency is a topic that continues to warrant attention. Understanding factors that preclude greater numbers of minorities and women from ascending toward the community college presidency is paramount to understanding how to increase representation and narrow the gap.

### **Epilogue: The Supremes**

The researcher created pseudonyms based on popular Motown singing groups for the all-participant composite group and gender groups. The women's group was named "The Supremes". I am in awe of the twelve phenomenal women, three chancellors and nine presidents, who graced my study. They are trailblazers, represent historic firsts, including first-generation immigrants (Latino/Hispanic), the first by ethnicity and gender as both chancellor and college president (African American), as a second generation immigrant leader from a non-traditional pathway of workforce and industry (Asian Pacific Islander) and the first female college president from a non-traditionally white male-dominated field (African American). Two are first-generation immigrants; three are first time in any college (FITIAC), and first-generation college graduates. Phenomenal women identifying as African American, Filipino, biracial, African American/Black, Asian Indian/Black, and bi-cultural. As unique and powerful as these women are, they recognize, as one Latino/Hispanic CEO observed, that "It's still a men's world."

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