ABSTRACT

THE CAREER PATH OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN TO SENIOR-LEVEL LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN FOUR-YEAR PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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There are a limited number of African American women in senior executive-level leadership positions within four-year predominantly White institutions of higher education. According to the 2016 IPEDS, there are an increasing number of Black females who are enrolling and graduating from colleges and universities with higher education credentials. Yet, even with more African American women obtaining their credentials and having experience, the number of Black women who obtain senior executive-level positions is still small. This study investigated the career path of those African American women who acquired positions of dean, vice chancellor, vice president and president. I explored the topic to see how their faith or spirituality influenced their self-determination in progressing to senior executive-level leadership positions.

This qualitative research study used a phenomenological approach to understand the phenomenon of senior-level leadership for African American women. Using snowball sampling, I analyzed in-depth semi-structured interviews of 14 African American women who are in senior-level positions. Participants were from four-year predominantly White institutions of higher education across the United States. Through the theoretical framework of Black Feminist Thought, Womanist Religious Thought and Self-determination, I examined their career paths of
leadership. Results were interpreted from a Constant Comparative Method which suggested five themes that strongly emerged, (a) authentic pragmatic movement; (b) support; (c) self-determination; (d) spirituality; and (e) meaning/destiny.

Findings revealed that the faith and/or spirituality of African American women did influence their self-determination. The data suggested that, given the long-standing issues of oppression, Black women have a spiritual strength within their soul, a faith passed down from ancestors to persevere. Many of the participants would unequivocally and enthusiastically, without hesitation, affirmatively acknowledge their faith and success. Others would say it quietly, and some would say there was something in them that kept them going towards these positions. The findings have implications for changes in organizational leadership practices and HR professionals to have additional knowledge and training on how the spirituality of African American women has influence concerning personal motivation and within a workplace setting.