THE CAREER EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN SUPPORT STAFF IN HIGHER EDUCATION WITH ADVANCED DEGREES

A dissertation submitted to the
Kent State University College
of Education, Health, and Human Services
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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October 2022

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MAHER, ASHLEY N., OCTOBER 2022 Higher Education Administration

THE CAREER EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN SUPPORT STAFF IN HIGHER EDUCATION WITH ADVANCED DEGREES (251 pp.)

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Guided by the three-dimensional narrative inquiry framework, this study explored the career experiences of women support staff with advanced degrees who work at higher education institutions. The researcher interviewed eight participants for this study. The participants also completed a written reflection detailing their career journeys. Two feminist organizational frameworks guided the data collection and data analysis procedures: Kanter's (1977) structural empowerment theory and Acker's (1990) gendered organizations theory, as well as Acker's (2006) notion of inequality regimes. The researcher found 11 themes across the participants' career experiences: (1) the challenge and reward of support staff work, (2) the disrespect and invisibility of support staff work, (3) uncertain career goals inside higher education, (4) openness to career goals outside higher education, (5) perceiving opportunity, (6) navigating absence of opportunity, (7) the value of networking, (8) the benefit of an advanced degree, (9) the benefit of woman identity, (10) the hindrance of woman identity, and (11) the influence of identities beyond gender. To assist in the career advancement of women support staff, the researcher recommends supervisor support, formalized institutional opportunity structures, and addressing the inequality regimes of higher education. Further inquiry is needed to explore career experience influences beyond women's gender identity. The findings are valuable to higher education administrators concerned with employee retention and support staff advancement.

INDEX WORDS: Higher Education, Support Staff, Women, Career Advancement, Advanced Degrees, Narrative Inquiry

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and most importantly, to the women support staff whose career experiences comprise this narrative inquiry: Your stories confirmed why I am so passionate about this unique group of educators. I am incredibly thankful that you let me into your experiences and shared the highs and lows of your careers. In some cases, our conversations were emotionally challenging. I have not taken the privilege of hearing and sharing your experiences lightly. I am in awe of how far you have come, and I am excited about all you have done and will do. It is no exaggeration that this research would not exist without your contributions. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

To Dr. Christa Porter: What a gift it has been to have you as my advisor throughout my Ph.D. journey. In my first doctoral course, Status of Women in Higher Education, you paid attention to the support staff career experience. As someone who began my career as support staff, I felt seen and valued. You fostered this research from my very first course, and I am so incredibly thankful for your kindness, guidance, and expertise. Thank you for so many things, but especially for reminding me to celebrate along the way.

To Dr. Tara Hudson: Your insight was critical to the development of this study. Our Dissertation Prep course helped me lay the foundation for this study, of which I am so proud. You always ask the right (and *the tough*) questions. I am eternally grateful for how you have balanced challenge and support throughout this process.

To Dr. Eboni Pringle: You are the first leader I met at Kent State, and your passion and drive to improve student outcomes has always inspired me. Your focus on students first has helped me develop a support staff centered study that addresses why this research is vital for the entire institution. Thank you for joining this committee and for providing such valuable insight.

To Dr. Amy Damrow: Thank you for joining this committee as the Graduate Faculty Representative. I appreciate you granting your expertise and time to this endeavor.

To all the brilliant feminist scholars cited throughout this dissertation: Thank you. Your labor has made this study possible.

To Kent State University, Notre Dame College, and all other organizations that provide tuition benefits to their employees: These benefits help so many first-generation college students, so many support staff, and so many members of marginalized communities pursue goals that benefit the entire institution and their communities. Thank you.

To Dr. Mark Kretovics and the executors of the Robert E. Prusok Memorial Fund: Thank you for providing funding to further support this narrative inquiry.

To our supportive, cathartic, and sometimes cynical writing group: How lonely this process would have been without a sounding board of brilliant people alongside me. Thank you for balancing the intensity of dissertating with frequent laughter. Our sessions are the main reason I actually finished this. A shout out to the regular crew: Ann Conrad, Lisa Cornelius, Amanda Fronek, C.V. Garcia, Shari Snyder Pollack, and Patty Robinson. You are all so inspiring to me. To all current and future dissertators: Form a writing group. You will not regret it.

To my colleagues and friends at Kent State University: Thank you for making our workplace a genuinely great place to work and for rarely asking, “When do you graduate?”

To Angel James: Thank you for your continued support and for always making me feel like a real-life Leslie Knope.

To Joanna Liedel, who embodies all the research on exceptional supervisors I have pored over: Thank you for everything. You have helped this along so much more than you will ever know. I promise to get a hobby after this.

Thank you to my dad for fostering my love of learning and nurturing my imagination at the DeWitt Community Library long ago. Your love and creativity made me the person I am today.

Thank you to my mom and sister, who have never hesitated to express their pride. You have shown me what it means to love hard and work hard.

To Troy, Connor, Emma, and my godson, Nolan: I am so proud of who you are. Pursue goals that make your heart happy. I am forever cheering you on.

To my sweet Roxie: Thank you for being my silent writing partner night after night, letting out a long sigh when it was time for both of us to go to bed. To any humans who happen to read this: Adopt a shelter pet, preferably one labeled “pit bull,” and end breed-specific legislation.

Finally, to my best friend in this wildly lucky life, Travis: It is a particular challenge to write this, as any expressions of gratitude feel like a complete understatement. Without your relentless support and encouragement, I am not entirely sure I would have reached this goal. You were always there cheering me on, reminding me of my strengths, and listening to me intently when I needed to read a paragraph aloud just one more time. You are quite simply the best, and I am so thankful to have had you by my side through this journey.

To have been given the opportunity to explore a topic close to my heart has been a dream. I am infinitely grateful. Thank you for reading.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the women and non-binary people whose authenticity, autonomy, and courage makes oppressors uncomfortable:

Take care of yourselves and *keep going.*

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the past, I worked among women support staff in a small group of cubicles. The cubicle walls were low enough so we could converse with one another, overhear coworkers and supervisors who had stopped by our desks, and share goals for the future over coffee. Each of us, representing different departments, had earned advanced degrees while working in higher education. Each of us intended to advance our careers beyond the role of support staff. While many of us were already working beyond the support staff job description, our formal job descriptions constrained us in unique ways. Some of my colleagues contemplated how to increase the responsibilities of their current role to improve their career opportunities, while others considered leaving higher education altogether to utilize their skills in a more challenging role. With low wages and monotonous work, the extended population of women support staff with advanced degrees may encounter similar predicaments.

I was influenced by my personal experience among support staff as well as the recommendations of Ash (2017) when I conducted an unpublished pilot study to explore the extent to which support staff identify as educators in a holistic learning environment in spring 2020. Ash recommended further inquiry to examine how support staff perceive their contributions to student learning and development. While the pilot study suggested some support staff identify as educators, a separate area of inquiry informally arose out of this study. In a standard interview format, I concluded the interviews by asking the three participants if there were any additional insights they would like to provide about support staff contributions as educators. When I embarked upon the pilot study, I did not anticipate all participants would use this time to express varied feelings about their career experiences. Some participants expressed a longing to work beyond their limiting job descriptions. Other participants said they were already

working beyond their job descriptions and were concerned about compensation and recognition. Coincidentally, all pilot study participants had earned advanced degrees, and many of them expressed their advanced degrees made them overqualified for their current positions. Furthermore, all pilot study participants identified as women. While some of the participants sought career advancement opportunities, they alluded to barriers that challenged their advancement. Inspired by the participants in this pilot study, I turned my attention to the career experiences of women support staff in higher education with advanced degrees.

Support staff are a fixture in the higher education workplace. While their primary functions may be clerical, support staff are increasingly taking on roles beyond their job descriptions, planning programs, leading projects, and counseling students, faculty, and staff in various ways. Although support staff serve important roles, their workplaces rarely recognize their contributions (Allan, 2011; Ash, 2013; Austin, 1983; Costello, 2012; Iverson, 2009; Long, 1998). With support staff positions continuing to be near the top of occupations with the most significant job declines (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020), support staff workloads continue to grow with higher expectations and few career mobility opportunities. The reality of this work is complicated by the distinct bureaucratic structure which governs higher education institutions (Martin, 2016). Although one can attribute the consistent advancement of higher education to the structure and rules that guide institutional processes and progress, the systems of power which interact within colleges and universities often disenfranchise those who work at the lowest levels of our institutions.

When researching support staff, it is essential to note this population is uniquely gendered (Ash, 2017; Costello, 2012; Iverson, 2009; Niemi, 2021). As 83% of those in office and administrative support roles identified as ‘female’ (U.S. Department of Education, 2020), it is

essential to move beyond biological sex and explore the nuances of gender in relation to career opportunity. This percentage has remained approximately the same since the U.S. Department of Education began collecting this data in 2013 (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Research reveals women in higher education often encounter barriers to workplace advancement; however, this body of inquiry primarily focuses on women faculty and administrators (Biddix et al., 2012; Dahlvig & Longman, 2021; Jarmon, 2014; Johnson, 2017; Kezar & Acuña, 2021; Park & Park-Ozee, 2021). Austin (1983) was among the earliest to identify, while "much research has focused on the nature of work and the job satisfaction of administrators and faculty, virtually no investigators have examined the work experience of clerical and support staff in higher education" (p. 27). In the forty years since Austin's argument, there has been a continued scarcity of research on the higher education support staff population. While a few studies have investigated the support staff career trajectory (Costello, 2012; Iverson, 2009), none have proactively and specifically centered support staff who have earned advanced degrees.

As support staff responsibilities continue to increase across the higher education landscape, researchers and institutional leaders must begin to understand their career journeys and individual stories. Through this understanding, higher education leaders can foster greater career opportunity for women in support staff positions, which further promotes an equitable higher education workplace. Through this study, I explored the career experiences of women support staff with advanced degrees who work at higher education institutions. This research contributes to the literature surrounding women support staff, revealing the often-invisible stories of their professional pasts, presents, and futures.

Statement of the Problem

Those unfamiliar with the complexities of the support staff role may question why this population of higher education employees are deserving of empirical inquiry. To understand the reasons why studying this population is important, researchers must assess the overall landscape of higher education and the ways in which women support staff career journeys overlap with other areas of higher education.

First, while there is an overwhelming majority of women in lower hierarchical roles in higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2020), there is a distinct lack of women in leadership roles (Johnson, 2017). To disrupt the underrepresentation of women at the highest levels of higher education administration, researchers must investigate the populations in which a significant number of women are represented, which includes the support staff population. While research has documented the internal and external barriers presented for women who seek career advancement in higher education (Allen et al., 2021), this focus has been primarily on faculty and administrators rather than those in support staff roles. By gaining a greater understanding of the career experiences of women support staff, researchers can also understand how to address gender equity issues that hinder women's career advancement in higher education.

Second, inquiry into the occupational realities of women support staff provides greater context for conversations around the gendered realities of all higher education employees. While not all support staff in higher education identify as women, the support staff role is inherently gendered as 'women's work' (Acker, 1990). Furthermore, as articulated by Bessette (2018), "the majority of the support staff at universities are women and people of color, who are expected to undertake the affective (but heavily undervalued) work of caring" (para. 15). Women in support staff positions support individuals of all genders in various roles throughout higher education

institutions. Given the number of office and administrative support personnel across degree-granting postsecondary institutions has decreased by over 20% between 2013 and 2020 (U.S. Department of Education, 2013; 2020), it is imperative to discuss the significance for other staff and faculty. Bartel (2018) suggested when the number of higher education support staff decreases, the professional staff and faculty who bear the burden of this absence are often women:

> … much of the service work still needs to be done, and women faculty and administrators often find themselves falling in line with gender-role stereotypes, creating tasks that are traditionally undertaken by secretaries and administrative assistants. Whether conscious or not, these assumptions of female academic leaders unfairly affect their workload and subtly undermine their authority. (para. 8)

The rigid hierarchies that uphold higher education institutions enforce a stratified division between support staff, professional staff, faculty, and administrators (Florenthal & Tolstikov-Mast, 2012). Speaking from an adjunct faculty perspective, Bessette (2018) argued, "by remaining loyal to this divide, we lose the ability to form solidarity, to forge connections to best help students and ourselves" (para. 15). Thus, the discussion of women support staff in higher education is related to the advancement of women support staff themselves as well as the well-being of other staff, students, and faculty. Exploring the career experiences of women support staff provides more evidence of their contributions and furthers the need for their advancement potential. Accordingly, the study of this population is beneficial for the work lives of all women in higher education.

Third, it is important to consider institutional competitiveness. Women support staff accumulate rich experience understanding various aspects of higher education institutions, from

the highest levels of leadership offices to direct student support services. With experience and job knowledge unique to the institution, women support staff are often prepared to advance within the institution, and they are more academically prepared when they have earned an advanced degree. However, as illustrated throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, women are more likely than men to voluntarily leave the workforce due to caregiving responsibilities (Kashen et al., 2020). Furthermore, the lowest-paid staff in higher education saw the highest job losses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of those staff, administrative support personnel "suffered the largest and most consistent job losses" (Douglas-Gabriel & Fowers, 2020, para. 6). When institutions lose these individuals, either through employees voluntarily exiting the profession or through position elimination, institutions are losing valuable members of the workforce who can bring their experience, job knowledge, and education with them as they advance. Conversely, institutional leaders who foster the career development of their women support staff may encourage more employees to stay within the institution and move to higher roles with more responsibility. Therefore, understanding and fostering women support staff career trajectories, and specifically encouraging advancement into more secure roles, can help institutions increase their human resource capital and better contribute to the overall success of the institution (Allen, 2008).

Finally, the study of women support staff is important for student learning and development. While some support staff work behind the scenes of higher education offices, others work directly with the student population. Bessette (2018) recognized:

> Members of the staff literally keep the lights on, the e-mail up and running, the students fed and housed and safe and financed—not to mention successful in their courses. They

> are the first and last people that students (and parents) deal with at the university, from registration to graduation. (para. 18)

Many support staff also supervise student employees and develop informal mentoring relationships with students. Yet, regardless of support staff contributions to the mission, students witness the obvious gender segregation of higher education employment. In their everyday college practices (e.g., work-study employment and office interactions), students see more men in leadership positions and more women in lower, clerical positions (Johnson, 2017). Our students are future leaders across all industries, and they will go on to work in environments where they will reproduce or dismantle traditional stereotypes. As such, institutional leaders should model equitable employment practices for their students.

This inquiry of the women support staff career experience allows institutional leaders to better understand these realities and model behaviors that promote the career journeys of women support staff. Furthermore, higher education is experiencing a shift in how educators are recognized in the college environment. Whereas college educators were historically seen as faculty at the front of the classroom, those in higher education are continuing to adopt the belief that "all people who work on campus have the capacity to be effective educators" (McNair et al., 2016, p. 35). Support staff contribute to student learning and development in various ways (Ash, 2013, 2017). McNair et al. (2016) concluded while all staff have the capacity to understand the ways in which they contribute to student learning and development, "they need to be invited to regard themselves in this way" (p. 39). This inquiry of the women support staff career experience provides a greater opportunity for the participants themselves, as well as other women support staff who may read this inquiry, to recognize their own contributions and career goals in the higher education workplace.

As previously stated, research surrounding women's advancement in the higher education workplace has largely omitted support staff voices. However, in this scarcely researched area of inquiry, scholars have determined common career challenges among the support staff population. First, research has revealed support staff often face individual and institutional barriers as they aspire to higher-level positions in higher education (Iverson, 2009). These barriers result in both real and perceived boundaries women must cross to advance their careers, especially if women aim to advance within their institutions. Second, women often encounter barriers resulting from their employment in an inherently gendered occupation. Their gendered status, paired with a lack of professional development and mentorship, often results in low perception of advancement opportunity (Costello, 2012, 2015). Third, support staff are usually not considered contributors to higher education missions (Ash, 2013, 2017; Ryttberg & Geschwind, 2017). Without clear evidence of their contributions, women support staff may struggle to justify their qualifications to advance in the higher education workplace. While these studies have continued to further the conversation surrounding support staff career experiences, alone they are not enough to understand and adequately support the career trajectories of women support staff in higher education with advanced degrees.

These studies affirm that while there has been some inquiry into support staff career experiences, there is still a significant area left unexplored. Research has suggested educational opportunity is necessary for employees' career advancement (Dougherty & Woodland, 2009; Fitzgerald, 2006; Sicherman & Galor, 1990; Vanness, 2009). However, existing literature has not considered advanced degree attainment in relation to support staff opportunity. While researchers have discussed the importance of degree attainment and the barriers presented to support staff who have not earned advanced degrees (Ash, 2013; Costello, 2012, 2015; Iverson, 2009), these

studies do not explore the experiences of women with advanced degrees currently employed in support staff positions. Therefore, the women support staff career experience has not been sufficiently studied through existing literature, particularly when advancement does not occur in accordance with the pursuit of an advanced degree. Since advanced degree pursuit and attainment is an essential aspect of the women support staff career experience, it is deserving of empirical inquiry.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the career experiences of women support staff with advanced degrees who work at higher education institutions. I chose to focus on women support staff because women comprise the majority of this marginalized profession. One central research question guided my study: How do women support staff with advanced degrees describe their career experiences and opportunities in the higher education workplace?

To facilitate this inquiry, I apportioned this central research question among five research sub-questions:

1. How do women support staff reflect on their career experiences?
2. How do women support staff describe their career goals?
3. How do women support staff perceive their career opportunity?
4. How do women support staff perceive the influence of advanced degree attainment on their career experiences and opportunities?
5. How do women support staff perceive the influence of gender on their career experiences and opportunities?

Significance of the Study

As previously discussed, much existing inquiry centers the experiences of women who directly educate students and women who lead at the highest levels of higher education administration. While all examinations of women's progress in higher education are valuable, academia often omits the voices of those who serve at the lowest levels of colleges and universities. Therefore, this research contributes to the literature surrounding women support staff, an under-researched subset of the higher education employee population. Beyond this notable gap in the literature, this study significantly impacts practice, scholarship, and theory.

Significance for Practice

Women who seek advancement in higher education are subject to both sticky floors and glass ceilings, as the higher education workplace is not immune from the patriarchal systems that continue to influence "issues of access and equity in all spheres of life" (Dahlvig & Longman, 2021, p. 29). While some attribute the lack of women in senior roles to a 'leaky pipeline,' researchers have disproven this phenomenon (Johnson, 2017). There are women available for advancement opportunities and they are often more academically prepared for these roles than their male counterparts (Johnson, 2017). Women in support staff positions who have earned advanced degrees should not be exempt from this conversation, yet their entrance to this narrative is complicated by the short career ladder that differentiates support staff roles (Gutek, 1988). Positions in professional staff and leadership roles should be attainable for this population of employees, especially when they have earned the academic qualifications needed for these roles; however, the gendered occupation phenomenon can present significant barriers to career advancement (Acker, 1990). Through the findings of this study, I have identified how institutions of higher education can better promote the career trajectories of women support staff with

advanced degrees. Much of the literature surrounding higher education support staff cites lack of educational attainment as a barrier for career advancement (Ash, 2013; Bauer, 2000; Costello, 2012, 2015; Iverson, 2009). However, there is no literature that specifically centers women support staff who are pursuing or have earned advanced degrees and continue to face career advancement obstacles. By proactively considering this element of the women support staff career experience, I identify how institutions can encourage women support staff career trajectories, leading to a more equitable higher education workplace.

Significance for Scholarship and Theory

While there has been some inquiry into support staff career experiences, there is still a significant area left unexplored. Researchers have queried support staff contributions (Ash, 2013, 2017; Bauer, 2000; Ryttberg & Geschwind, 2017); support staff well-being (Field & Buitendach, 2011; van Straaten & du Plessis, 2016); and the barriers to support staff career progression (Costello, 2012, 2015; Iverson, 2009; Renkema et al., 2008); yet no existing literature explores the career experiences of women support staff who are pursuing or have earned advanced degrees. As women continue to earn most college degrees (Johnson, 2017) and employees continue to use tuition benefit programs (St. Amour, 2020), inquirers must critically consider the women support staff career experience in higher education. This inquiry is essential when women support staff seek and struggle to advance within the organization after they have earned advanced degrees.

Allan (2011) stated feminist theories present "a set of lenses that have been refined over decades for the purpose of analyzing oppression and for the promotion of equity in a range of contexts, including education" (p. 35). To structure and guide the findings of this study, I used Kanter's (1977; 1993) structural empowerment theory and Acker's (1990) gendered

organizations theory. Through structural empowerment theory, Kanter (1977) identified three variables of structural empowerment: opportunity, power, and the social composition of peer clusters. For this research, I was guided heavily by Kanter's structure of opportunity. Through this structure, Kanter contended a high probability of advancement, a short period of time between advances, and increasing challenge results in higher aspiration and commitment among employees. Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations, which arose as a critique of Kanter's (1977) theory, explains how organizations are structured through obvious and covert gendering processes. The construction of divisions along lines of gender is particularly applicable to the inquiry of women support staff. I explore the foundations and evolution of these theories in chapter two. Researchers have utilized these complimentary feminist organizational theories to investigate higher education support staff career experiences (Ash, 2013; Costello, 2015). However, these theories have not yet been applied to the women support staff population while proactively and specifically considering advanced degree attainment. Through this inquiry, I add to the continual evolution of these theories by exploring the specific career experiences of women support staff in higher education with advanced degrees. Furthermore, future research may use the findings from this inquiry to consider new approaches to this uniquely gendered occupation.

Women support staff voices have been overwhelmingly absent from conversation surrounding advancement within the higher education workplace. As a feminist researcher, I sought to center these voices within this narrative, the voices of the majority population in a marginalized profession. The above elucidates how this inquiry benefits the entire institution as well as scholarship surrounding gender influences in higher education institutions.

Terminology

As previously stated, although there is an abundance of empirical research on women faculty and staff, there are only a handful of studies that have explored the experiences of women support staff. The terminology used in these studies varies based on the context and purpose of the study. Therefore, before exploring this inquiry, it is crucial to define key terms used throughout the proposal.

Support Staff

The support staff role is particularly ambiguous when compared to other employment classifications. Much like the terminology itself, the duties of those in support staff positions vary by internal and external context. Some individuals in support staff roles are classified employees, meaning they are compensated hourly, while others are non-classified. In the handful of studies dedicated to support staff roles, researchers have not explicitly defined the term support staff. Rather researchers have primarily relied on staff classification to determine populations of inquiry (Costello, 2012, 2015; Iverson, 2009). However, those who serve in support staff roles may not qualify as classified staff (Ash, 2013). The term support staff can encompass several titles throughout higher education, including administrative assistant, office clerk, receptionist, and secretary, among others. In this study, I defined support staff as employees whose main functions primarily support professional staff, faculty, and leadership personnel in higher education. I provided potential participants with this definition and allowed them to self-identify their position as support staff.

Women

Because the purpose of this study specified participants identify as women, it is essential to define this terminology. Participants' identities as women are of particular importance in this

narrative study; therefore, this study was open to any participant who identified as a woman, including cisgender and trans* women. While gender is a social construct (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), stereotypically gendered roles are present among college and university employees. Accordingly, women employees are the dominant population in the marginalized support staff profession. In this study, I defined women support staff as those who self-identify and express the identity of 'woman.' I recognize gender-identity occurs on a spectrum and gender-identity differs from culture to culture. However, regardless of the fluidity of gender-identity, "higher education institutions are saturated with consequences for whether one is male or female, masculine or feminine, cisgender or transgender or gender nonconforming" (Weaver-Hightower & Niemi, 2021, p. 2). I acknowledged these differences throughout this study. Furthermore, I acknowledge the difference between gender and sex: gender is a core internalized identity and is not solely determined by one's sex assignment at birth (Mazure, 2021). However, many previous studies surrounding women and gender in higher education have utilized the terms 'woman' and 'female' interchangeably. Moreover, the U.S. Department of Education (2013, 2020) does not provide gender-based employee statistics, only sex-based employee statistics. Accordingly, I only use the term 'female' when referencing a particular study or data set that has used that term, or when directly quoting a participant who has used that term.

Summary

I began this chapter by sharing a brief insight into my experience among women support staff in higher education. I also explained how the findings of my unpublished pilot study influenced the foundations of this study. Then, I stated the problem at hand - often working in the background underrecognized, women support staff represent a critical facet of the higher education employee population. While women's career experiences in higher education

constitute a growing area of study, academia consistently excludes support staff from empirical research. Consequently, I provided the purpose of this study, which was to explore the career experiences of women support staff with advanced degrees who work at higher education institutions. Next, I considered the significance this study has on practice, scholarship, and theory. Finally, I provided definitions of terminology I used throughout this study. In the following chapter, I review the existing literature and provide a context to situate this inquiry.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I provide the context for exploring the career experiences of women support staff with advanced degrees. While this study is focused on women support staff in higher education, I determined a survey of literature from inside and outside the higher education sector was necessary due to the small concentration of research on support staff specific to the higher education sector. First, I present a history of the support staff role. Next, I offer an overview of the research on higher education support staff experiences inside and outside the United States. Then, in support of the phenomenon of study, I describe occupational segregation and mobility. To further support the phenomenon under inquiry, I provide an overview of tuition benefit programs and advanced degree attainment. Finally, I review the theoretical frameworks through which I will situate this study.

A History of Support Staff

Support staff have been a fixture of the American workplace since the 19th century. While men initially dominated the profession, the Civil War brought about men's absence from the workplace, causing a rise of women filling support staff positions (Davies, 1982). Business leaders began to prefer hiring women for these roles, as women were "doing more and better work" than the men to whom they would pay double the salary (p. 51). Simultaneously, the hierarchical structure began to grow due to the expansion of American capitalism. Davies (1982) explained that the expanding bureaucratic hierarchy, which delineated power and responsibility, placed clerical workers at the bottom of the ladder. It is critical to note that when men filled most support staff roles, these positions "were viewed as the first rung on the hierarchical ladder that potentially culminated at the top, the presidency of the company" (Gutek, 1988, p. 230).

However, upon the monumental gender shift of the support staff population, said career ladders seemingly collapsed.

The advent of the typewriter had a profound impact on the number of women in support staff roles. The prevailing narrative was "women's nimble fingers made them better typists than men" (Institute for Career Research, 2017, p. 2). Although the claim had no factual basis, it contributed to the increasing feminization of clerical positions. Women welcomed the influx of support staff career options, as these positions paid better than most jobs open to women and provided more prestigious status within the working class. By 1920, half of all clerical workers, including stenographers, typists, secretaries, shipping and receiving clerks, and office machine operators, were women (Institute for Career Research, 2017). Most women who benefited from expanded clerical employment opportunities were White, single, native-born, and middle-class. At this time, industry relegated Black, immigrant, and poor White women from rural areas to domestic, manufacturing, and agricultural work (Davies, 1982). Anderson (1988) explained these inequitable opportunities "developed more complex patterns of stratification based on race and ethnicity" (p. 34). The underrepresentation of women of Color continues to be prevalent in the office and administrative employee population in higher education, as 64% of women in this field identify as White (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

A historically prevalent stereotype of support staff is their hierarchical position equates to superfluous status. Once women overwhelmingly populated support staff roles, critics ridiculed the profession as one for preening, frivolous women who did not do any actual work (Davies, 1982). Around the early 20th century, the *Ladies' Home Journal* warned women participating in the clerical workforce would result in a loss of 'womanly dignity' and strongly advised against it (Bok, 1901). Almost a century later, Epstein (1999) exposed the misconception women were

overrepresented in clerical roles because they "are regarded as able to endure monotony because of the repetitious tasks they perform in the home and because of their docility" (p. 56). While evidence of sexist stereotypes still exists, it is far less outrightly prevalent.

As previously discussed, the titles of support staff can vary greatly by institution and role. While the term "secretary" has been used historically, the term has declined in popularity, in favor of titles like administrative assistant or clerical specialist (Martin, 2012). It is important to note, even when the term "secretary" was often used to title support staff, men who held the same duties were rarely given the same title. Pringle (1988) explained:

> Men are rarely called secretaries. They are described as a personal or research assistant, sometimes simply assistant, a computer operator, or a trainee of some kind. What [men in these positions] have in common is that they are never intending to stay in these jobs for very long; they are using them to gain experience… Men can and do type, though they often decline to do so at work, for fear of losing their status or their masculinity. (p. 172)

The duties of support staff vary by the workplace as well. The idea of traditional support staff (i.e., a secretary who only answers phones and schedules appointments) is outdated in most workplaces. The current support staff role has seen vast increases in responsibility over recent decades. Advances in technology have helped propel the profession into a more flexible position tailored to the workplace's needs. In addition to clerical tasks like editing and coordinating calendars, support staff often oversee budgets, handle purchases, troubleshoot technology issues, train new employees, maintain websites, and conduct research on behalf of their supervisors, among other various duties (Institute for Career Research, 2017). A 2015 survey revealed how support staff strive to serve in multiple capacities outside their job descriptions. These functions included event planning, hiring other staff, contributing to social responsibility initiatives,

managing finances, and utilizing new technology and social media for the workplace (International Association of Administrative Professionals & OfficeTeam, 2015). The extent to which those in support staff positions can serve in capacities beyond their job descriptions depends on their workplace and direct supervisor.

Although nearly every industry employs support staff, the second highest concentration can be found in state, local, and private educational services, where 15% of all support staff are employed (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022). More than 375,000 people are employed in office and administrative support positions in degree-granting postsecondary institutions across the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Of office and administrative employees in higher education, 83% have been identified as 'female' by the U.S. Department of Education (2020). Of these employees, 62% identify as White, 15% as Black, 13% as Hispanic, 4% as Asian, 2% as two or more races, 1% as American Indian/Alaska Native, and under 1% as Pacific Islander, revealing the underrepresentation of women of Color in this profession (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). The next section of this review will focus on the higher education support staff population.

Support Staff in Higher Education

To support the continuously evolving needs of a diverse population of students, colleges and universities have sought to employ a more robust staff (Thornton & Curtis, 2012). These staff members often work in offices that promote student recruitment, retention, and completion through administrative, social, and academic venues. Higher education costs have echoed this shift, as wage and salary expenditures were the fastest-growing expense in most higher education institutions between 2002 and 2012 (Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014). While the total number of employees has increased across degree-granting postsecondary institutions, the number of office

and administrative support personnel has consistently and drastically decreased since 2013 (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Accordingly, the traditional responsibilities of support staff have reformed to serve the needs of this changing landscape. Those in support staff roles are more often "serving as advisors, institutional navigators, and program planners" (Ash, 2017, p. 139). Whereas support staff of the past worked primarily in clerical duties, the evolving support staff role holds more varied responsibilities now than ever before.

Often under-recognized, college and university staff may be considered a "largely invisible parallel structure," facilitating processes that support student learning and development (Bessette, 2020a, para. 8). Support staff are uniquely vulnerable to higher education employment hierarchy, as their positions are "not socially coded as valuable within academic prestige culture" (Perry, 2020a, para. 15). Correspondingly, researchers have conducted studies to explore the career experiences of women who directly educate students and women who lead at the highest administrative levels while omitting the support staff experience entirely (Biddix et al., 2012; Dahlvig & Longman, 2021; Jarmon, 2014; Johnson, 2017; Kezar & Acuña, 2021; Park & Park-Ozee, 2021). While Austin (1983) was among the first to assert little scholarly inquiry had been devoted to the support staff population in higher education, this area of scholarship has been underdeveloped in the almost 40 years since that assertion.

Although most research has concentrated on faculty, administrators, and professional staff within the context of higher education inquiry, a handful of studies have centered on support staff. Bauer (2000) led this effort by emphasizing support staff contributions to the experience of current students, prospective students, parents, and those in leadership. Recognizing support staff well-being benefits the entire campus community, Bauer recommended rewards and recognition, work-life balance, advancement opportunities, and

training and development options to increase support staff satisfaction. Bauer claimed these measures promote a positive workplace, as "employees who feel valued by their institution will most likely be more satisfied and may be more loyal and productive" (p. 97).

Iverson (2009) was among the first to explore how women in clerical positions cross boundaries as they advance into professional positions within higher education institutions. She revealed the significance of (1) individual factors that served as barriers, such as work-life balance; (2) supportive individuals who "gently pushed support staff to grow" (p. 152); (3) organizational processes that served as barriers, such as challenges in advancing one's educational attainment; and (4) the influence of identifying as a woman on the career journey. Iverson recommended designing mentoring programs that disrupt traditional mentoring relationships (i.e., superior to subordinate) to improve the support staff career trajectory. Iverson posited peer-to-peer and bottom-up mentoring relationships facilitate creative tensions and empowering conversations among diverse groups. This study was the first to illuminate how "sociopolitical-cultural contexts surrounding 'classified' and 'professional' statuses produce constraining categories and demarcate real and perceived boundaries that women must cross" (p. 160). Iverson's study was the first to provide rich, narrative accounts of support staff career experiences in higher education and provided the foundation for further inquiry.

Costello (2012) also illuminated the professional experiences of classified staff in higher education by exploring the impact of gendered organizations on female classified staff and staff perceptions of climate and culture on advancement opportunities. This study revealed the immense barriers presented by gender and position classification concerning advancement opportunity, "as women at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy… believed they had no opportunity for advancement, particularly for advancement from a classified to a professional

position" (p. 105). Costello recommended institutions provide more support to classified staff in the form of education, professional development, mentoring, and networking opportunities. In a separate study, Costello (2015) examined the intersection of organizational structure and gender on staff advancement in higher education. Similarly, Costello identified gender, position, and education level served as barriers to professional advancement:

> These themes intersect to show that structure of an organization including position location on the hierarchy, access to professional development, advancement opportunities and information, and the embedded gender bias within these structures have a significant impact on the advancement opportunities for women, especially when they occupy positions at the lowest levels. (p. 155)

Costello advocated for higher education employees to have access to a career center or human resources officer dedicated to employee advancement. Since students have access to this support in the form of career services offices, Costello argued higher education staff deserved this access as well.

Ash (2013) investigated support staff contributions to institutional mission within the division of student affairs. Ash explained while support staff are crucial to student support services, support staff themselves are “often not associated with student learning and development or the creation and maintenance of holistic learning environments” (p. iv). This study revealed student affairs support staff often work beyond their job description parameters while building meaningful relationships with students that support student learning and development. Since this unseen work of support staff is rarely recognized, Ash recommended support staff engage in performance reviews to shed light on their contributions and assist in their career development. In later work, Ash (2017) also recommended support staff develop

communities of practice. Through these communities, support staff can share their experiences, identify their contributions, increase their knowledge, and "give voice to the gendered nature of their role and how it impacts agency" (p. 153).

Higher Education Support Staff Outside the United States

Researchers outside the United States have also examined the career experiences of higher education support staff. Field and Buitendach (2011) sought to determine whether happiness and work engagement predicted organizational commitment in South Africa. The authors found work engagement and well-being were positively correlated with organizational commitment, leading to a desire to make a more significant effort on behalf of the institution and remain employed by the institution. In a later study in South Africa, van Straaten and du Plessis (2016) concluded good compensation and benefits, job security, and a supportive work environment all contribute to support staff well-being in higher education. The authors also cited institutions could increase the physical, psychological, social, emotional, and financial well-being of support staff by creating promotion opportunities, as a short career ladder traditionally confines the support staff career trajectory.

Ryttberg and Geschwind (2017) sought to determine how support staff conceptualized success in their roles in Swedish higher education institutions. The researchers revealed while the ambiguous role of support staff may provide freedom in shaping one's responsibilities, ambiguity can also pose a challenge for support staff to prove their contribution to the academic mission. Ryttberg and Geschwind (2019) also explored Swedish higher education support staff networks and associations as sense givers. The authors discovered professional networking opportunities are critical for support staff to make sense of their ambiguous roles.

Renkema et al. (2008) explored Netherlandic support staff motivations to participate in professional development. The authors found the support staff preferred to participate in professional development opportunities that enhanced their current job performance more than those that would lead them to a significant career change outside their present workplaces. This discovery supports the need for workplace advancement opportunities for support staff within higher education institutions.

These studies, covering a range of topics surrounding the support staff experience, have formed a foundation for this study. These researchers have recognized the wide-ranging, and often unseen, contributions of support staff that impact all levels of the institution (Ash, 2013, 2017; Bauer, 2000; Ryttberg & Geschwind, 2017). Additionally, these researchers have advocated fair compensation, benefits, job security, and supportive work environments can contribute to support staff well-being (Field & Buitendach, 2011; van Straaten & du Plessis, 2016). Perhaps most influential on this study, researchers have revealed significant barriers to support staff career progression related to position classification as well as gender (Costello, 2012, 2015; Iverson, 2009). While these studies have contributed to an ongoing conversation surrounding the support staff career experience, there has not yet been a coordinated, holistic effort to investigate the career experiences of women support staff with advanced degrees. To build further context around this unique population, I explore the interrelated phenomena of occupational segregation and occupational mobility in the next section.

Occupational Segregation and Mobility

As previously discussed, those identified as ‘female’ by the U.S. Department of Education (2020) make up the majority of support staff in higher education. The gendered role of support staff makes the study of this population an inherently feminist act, which is supported by

my positionality as a woman and a feminist. The term “hidden workforce” has been used to describe the population of support staff in higher education, “as administrators or scholars pay relatively little attention to understanding or improving their work lives” (Allan, 2011, p. 55). Conversations related to career opportunities within the higher education workplace rarely consider women support staff. Accordingly, knowledge of occupational segregation and occupational mobility assists in understanding the barriers presented within the support staff profession.

Occupational Segregation

Occupational segregation refers to the concept that U.S. occupational structure is deeply segregated by gender (Weeden et al., 2018). Support staff roles are highly segregated by gender, not only in higher education but in nearly all employment sectors (England & Boyer, 2009). Those who identify as women are more likely to be employed part-time and work in clerical and service occupations (Pearlman, 2018). Occupations traditionally considered to be women’s work are often considered ‘pink collar’ occupations (Howe, 1978). Gender segregation occurs due to several factors but most notably in unity with systemic sexism that inhabits the workplace. According to Pan (2015), occupational segregation begins when women’s representation in a profession reaches a “tipping point” (p. 365). At this point, fearing the social stigma and wage penalties associated with belonging to feminized occupations, men exit the previously male-dominated profession.

As more women enter a specific employment field, the overall pay tends to decline (Levanon et al., 2009). The inequity of occupational segregation is exacerbated by the fact that most of the economy’s highest-paying occupations are predominantly held by men, while most of the lowest-paying occupations are predominantly held by women (McGrew, 2016). As such,

occupational segregation clearly illustrates the continued "devaluation of women's work" (Ansel, 2017, para. 6). The American Association of University Women (2019) reported women populate about two-thirds of low-wage workers across all sectors, though they comprise approximately 47% of the workforce overall. This inequity most often disenfranchises women of Color, who are overrepresented in low-wage occupations (AAUW, 2019). Shaw et al. (2016) further illuminated the phenomenon of occupational segregation:

> Twenty two occupations have median earnings of less than $15 per hour, employ at least 100,000 women, have a majority (more than 60 percent) female workforce, and are projected to add at least one percent more jobs between 2014 and 2024. These large, growing, low wage, female-dominated occupations employ more than a quarter of all employed women, and 23.5 million workers altogether. (p. 1)

Of these twenty two occupations, office and administrative assistants come in at the top, with five million workers. Over three quarters of the office and administrative assistant population identify as women (Shaw et al., 2016). Harlan and Berheide (1994), who coined the term "sticky floor," explained support staff positions were traditionally well compensated compared to other entry-level positions in factory or service work. However, "the lack of career ladders linking clerical jobs to professional and managerial positions has always 'dead-ended' the upward mobility of millions of women" (Harlan & Berheide, 1994, p. 6). It is also important to consider the nuances related to men's presence in occupations dominated by women. Williams (1992) was among the first to identify the "glass escalator" which contends, primarily White men rise to the top of female-dominated professions through innate structural advantages afforded to them. Thereby, when women seek opportunity to advance within their women-dominated career fields, their male colleagues "glide past them on an invisible escalator, shooting straight to the top"

(Goudreau, 2012 para. 3). This reality further supports that when women support staff seek to improve their occupational status, they often work in resistance to the gender segregated structures which dominate their workplaces.

Occupational Mobility

Occupational mobility is a separate but related concept referring to the extent to which workers can advance inside or outside the workplace. As employees advance in their careers, they typically seek positions with more responsibility and higher compensation. In a study on clerical employees at a university and a state agency, Landau and Hammer (1986) found clerical staff who desire mobility but perceive low career opportunity were less committed to their organizations and reported greater intentions to quit. The authors concluded, “if employees are dissatisfied with their own careers and have been unsuccessfully attempting to transfer to better jobs, they may conclude that their organization prefers to fill positions through the external labor market" (p. 398). These perceptions lead support staff to seek advancement opportunities outside the institution. Fitzgerald (2006) supported this claim, as she posited the modern career trajectory, particularly in the United States, “requires moving repeatedly from one organization to another” (p. 13). This phenomenon adversely impacts institutions. When a support staff member exits their workplace, the institution loses “a member of the community – someone who understands the institutional culture, who knows students by name, who hold important pieces of institutional memory” (Bessette, 2020b, para. 11). The reality of low-wage work results in a depression of women’s wages and a negative impact on family economic security (McGrew, 2016). While support staff may seek occupational mobility, it is evident the higher education workplace may not afford support staff with a discernible career ladder.

Because most support staff in higher education identify as women, there is an even more significant barrier to occupational mobility. Baert et al. (2016) showed evidence for hiring discrimination against women employees when they applied for higher-level positions. The authors asserted applicants who identified as women received fewer invitations for a job interview and fewer positive reactions than their male counterparts. Furthermore, McCollum et al. (2018) emphasized that while being married and having dependent children is positively associated with men's career progression, the same indicators are negatively associated with women's career progression. Similarly, in a study on hiring and promotion practices in colleges of business in the southern United States, Johnson et al. (2014) stated women in higher education "experience fewer advancement opportunities than men, as they are viewed as being both inflexible and unqualified with regards to their abilities to perform at higher levels" (p. 28).

When men populated the support staff population before the Civil War, clerical roles served as the entry point from which one could advance to leadership roles (Davies, 1982). However, Gutek (1988) reported a short career ladder characterizes women's clerical work, indicating support staff hold little opportunity to advance their careers. Glenn and Feldberg (1989) added, "the story of a secretary who rises to become an officer in the company… generates excitement precisely because it is a freak occurrence" (p. 289). Since these positions do not often link to professional career ladders, "many workers may find themselves at the tops of their ladders in a few years, with nowhere to go" (p. 301). This evidence supports the assertion that women support staff face unique challenges when they seek career advancement opportunities.

Few studies have investigated how to address the realities of occupational segregation and occupational mobility. Fitzgerald (2006) suggested the remedy of workforce intermediaries,

which establish connections between employers and education providers. Sicherman (1990) supported this suggestion, as his career mobility theory suggested educated individuals were more likely to move to a higher level of employment. One can speculate the higher education workplace has a built-in workforce intermediary in its tuition-free educational opportunities. Accordingly, I will explore tuition benefit programs in the next section of the literature review.

Tuition Benefit Programs

Since I positioned this research on the population of women support staff in higher education who have sought advanced degrees, an investigation of tuition benefit programs was necessary. Tuition benefit programs, a common benefit available to higher education employees, can take various forms, including tuition remission, which forgives tuition expenses, and tuition reimbursement, which repays employees after they have completed courses. It is also common for employers to offer tuition benefit programs to employee dependents, making higher education employment an attractive opportunity for parents of dependents pursuing higher education. Katzman (1986) asserted tuition is a vital employment benefit; however, tuition benefit programs are only effective when adequately publicized and supported by top-level management.

In addition to improving employees' skills and self-efficacy, tuition benefit programs also benefit the workplace. Cappelli (2004) discovered tuition assistance programs attract better quality employees who have longer retention at the workplace, which can be attributed at least in part to their utilization of tuition benefit. Benson et al. (2004) revealed employers were more likely to retain staff members who participated in reimbursement programs if those same individuals are offered a promotion soon after receiving their degrees. Furthermore, Pattie et al. (2006) found workplaces that provide tuition reimbursement were viewed more favorably by

employees and workplaces were more likely to retain employees who participated in tuition reimbursement if the educational opportunity was directly related to their job responsibilities. Accordingly, the authors suggested, "the match between employees' skills and their job responsibilities may influence the comparative attractiveness of job opportunities when the employees gain new marketable skills" (p. 325). Due to the increasing prevalence of tuition assistance programs, both Genesee (2009) and Quinlan (2017) found having a tuition benefit program does not necessarily attract employees; however, the absence of tuition benefits could drive potential employees away from the institution. Genesee (2009) explained:

> … the use of tuition as a benefit offering should be viewed more as a necessity rather than as an investment that would garner any returns to the organization. In order to maintain a competitive edge in the industry and provide a level of benefits that would attract quality candidates, tuition assistance may be a necessary requisite offering. (p. 93)

Dougherty and Woodland (2009) revealed while employer needs may drive many tuition benefit programs, flexibility should be encouraged since many students seek an education that demonstrates new skillsets and alters their career trajectory. In a study on women university employees who did not have degrees, Vanness (2009) uncovered age norms related to perceived ages for events like marriage, child-rearing, retirement, and college attendance, impacted women's utilization of tuition benefit:

> Typical incentives of obtaining a college education include career advancement, increased salaries and higher status. One must be motivated to achieve these things in order to seek additional educational opportunities. Simply put, the majority of the women are comfortable where they are in their lives. (p. 41)

The availability of a tuition benefit program presents a unique opportunity for those who work in higher education. Employees who may not have had the financial means to pursue an advanced degree are likely to have this opportunity when they work in higher education. Support staff positions in higher education typically require an associate's or bachelor's degree but may require a master's degree depending on the responsibilities of the role. However, individuals can often hold support staff positions without obtaining an advanced degree. As such, pursuing an advanced degree may indicate career ambitions beyond serving in a support staff role.

Advanced Degree Attainment

Although advanced degrees (master's degrees and above) are not typically a requirement for support staff positions, support staff may choose to pursue this educational opportunity. The pursuit of an advanced degree may or may not be related to one's access to tuition benefit programs, as previously discussed. Since I sought to investigate the career experiences of women support staff with advanced degrees, I determined the exploration of literature surrounding advanced degree attainment was beneficial to this study.

While there are many factors that may contribute to women's pursuit of advanced degrees, the likelihood of higher compensation and career advancement are often considered. While women earn more college degrees than men (Perry, 2020b), men continue to earn higher salaries than women (U.S. Department of Labor, 2017). The reality of the gender wage gap is compounded for women of Color, as "Black, Native American and Latina women earn 58 cents, 50 cents and 49 cents for every dollar a white, non-Hispanic man earns, respectively" (Smith, 2022, para. 12). Research has shown women must earn one more degree than their male counterparts to earn the same salary (Carnevale et al., 2018). At every educational level, men earn more than women throughout their lifetimes (Tamborini, et al., 2015). The gender wage gap

among those with the highest level of educational attainment is greater than the average gender wage gap for all workers (U.S. Department of Labor, 2017). Furthermore, women with advanced degrees are more likely to work in jobs through which their skills are underutilized than equally educated male peers (Zhao, 2019). Therefore, the extent to which advanced degrees help an individual earn a higher salary is largely dependent on the gender of the individual.

Although the gender wage gap acts as a significant barrier to women's career progression, women who seek career advancement from support staff positions will likely need to consider earning an advanced degree, depending on their career goals. Sumpter (2010) found women who had reached senior management positions identified the pursuit of an advanced degree as critical to the attainment of their current position. Yet even when women earn advanced degrees, they can still be held back by the previously discussed glass escalator granted to men. This reality, paired with the gender wage gap exacerbated for those who have earned advanced degrees, present significant barriers for women who seek career advancement.

Theoretical Frameworks

This literature review exposes the need for research on the advanced degree-seeking women support staff population in higher education. Marginalized populations access power when they are centered in academic research that "is inclusive of the lives, perspective, and experiences of the least powerful" (Smyth & McInerney, 2013, p. 1). Qualitative pursuits concern themselves "with the political and/or intellectual intent to understand how people come to garner collective agency, resilience, and forms of resistance against oppressive institutions, policies, and practices" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p. 7). Quantitative research methods are insufficient when studying women's work experiences, as they often fail to address the underlying systemic issues perpetuating "barriers, challenges and tensions in such environments"

(Allan, 2011, p. 91). Theory is of importance within this narrative, as theories are vital to the understanding of marginalized populations. Theoretical inquiry, while not absolute, helps explain what researchers are observing while also providing insight and guidance for improving the lives of those under study (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). The lens of theory moves inquiry toward practice, as "viewing problems from multiple angles or through multiple lenses can help illuminate different aspects of the problem and therefore shift or broaden the manner in which we choose to resolve it" (Allan, 2011, p. 16). Additionally, theoretical frameworks acknowledge "the existence of parameters and limitations" while focusing the entire research process (Jaeger et al., 2013, p.15). Theoretical frameworks influence the understanding and action of researchers.

The gendered role of support staff in higher education indicated a review of feminist organizational theories. Since staff positions in higher education are predominantly held by those identifying as 'female' (U.S. Department of Education, 2020), I utilized approaches that seek "social change while also emphasizing women and gender as key analytic categories" (Allan, 2011, p. 18). In this section, I will review the evolution, applications, and critiques of Kanter's (1977) structural empowerment theory, specifically focusing on the structure of opportunity, and Acker's (1990) gendered organizations theory, as well as Acker's (2006) notion of inequality regimes.

Structural Empowerment Theory

Kanter's structural empowerment theory (1977) challenges researchers and practitioners to consider the varied dimensions of the person-organization relationship. In her seminal work, *Men and Women of the Corporation*, Kanter (1977, 1993) identified three variables as explanatory dimensions of structural empowerment: "the structure of opportunity, the structure of power, and the proportional distribution of people of different kinds (the social composition of

peer clusters)" (p. 245). The dimension of power relates primarily to those in supervisory positions, while the dimension of proportion relates to employees' overall representation in the workplace (e.g., gender, race, class, etc.). For this inquiry, the dimension of opportunity is of particular importance in understanding the career experiences of women support staff in higher education. The structure of opportunity contends employers who provide access to information, resources, support, and the opportunity to learn and develop will encourage higher-aspiring and more committed employees. The structure of opportunity is at the core of this inquiry, as it is fundamental to understanding the career experiences of women support staff with advanced degrees. Kanter (1977) problematizes the absence of opportunity in the workforce:

> Whenever people are concentrated in low-opportunity and low-mobility jobs with few prospects for growth in skills or advancement and few open pathways out and up, their full participation in the organization is constrained and their involvement in work is limited. While some jobs offer high mobility prospects to their occupants (a high probability of advancement, a short time-span between advances, the change for increasing challenge, and eventual access to the most rewarded jobs), the other positions systematically block opportunity: promotion rates are low, there is a long time-span between moves, tasks do not change, skill and mastery do not increase, and there is no route out of the job into rewarded positions. (p. 269)

Kanter's description of low opportunity positions resembles the common support staff career experience. Kanter's theory problematizes hierarchical systems, as they often result in opposition and competition within the organization rather than cooperation and unity. Hierarchy sustains inequitable access to opportunity and breeds competitive, blame-based working relationships. Those in higher positions look upon those in lower positions and conclude their struggles to

advance result from self-imposed barriers. This, Kanter argued, is "a characteristically American approach to the problems stemming from inequality, an approach rooted in individual models" (p. 264). Kanter's theory recommends hierarchical structures be examined to determine barriers and that those barriers are dismantled by implementing constructive policies and programs that improve chances for occupational opportunity.

In the second edition of *Men and Women of the Corporation*, Kanter (1993) situated structural empowerment theory within the context of shifting occupational norms. Kanter recognized employees no longer sought advancement opportunities only within their present organizations. In the 16 years since the first edition, employees began to develop weaker attachments to their workplace in favor of stronger ties to their overall profession and personal skills. This shift had a profound impact on women employees, as it made it "possible for women to succeed despite institutional practices and traditions favoring men who resemble those already in power, because it [opened] more forms of opportunity and power outside the corporate hierarchy" (p. 291). Despite these gains, Kanter recognized organizations and societal norms still relegated most women to the clerical profession:

> Although women rapidly entered many occupations previously dominated by men, men did not enter the traditional so-called "women's" occupations in significant numbers. Thus, job categories such as nursing and secretarial work have remained overwhelmingly female. (p. 312)

As previously discussed, employees identifying as 'female' continue to comprise the majority of support staff in higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). In practice, Kanter recommended supervisors add more power to the support staff role. She contended lines between hierarchical levels were "being crossed and blurred" (Kanter, 1993, p. 314). As such, Kanter

believed institutions should provide support staff with more opportunity to increase options for advancement.

Bird (2017) described Kanter's perspective as a "utopian dream" in which organizations can be nonhierarchical, connected, and flexible while providing opportunity for individuals at all levels of the organization (p. 651). While Kanter recognized organizational utopias as unrealistic, she believed there is always more institutions can do to ensure opportunity for all employees, especially those at the lowest levels of the organization. While reflecting on the success of *Men and Women of the Corporation*, Kanter concluded, "if [this work] is thought of in terms of significant economic and social issues, then it can make a contribution to improving the world." (Puffer & Kanter, 2004, p. 98). In recent reflections on her theory, Kanter explained the millennial generation inspires great hope regarding opportunity and future women leaders in light of #MeToo and Time's Up, which refer to movements in the late 2010's that shed light on women's treatment and sexual harassment in the workplace (Langone, 2018). Kanter theorized for structural barriers to be recognized by those in power, women who have faced those barriers must rise to the leadership level. Kanter concluded these women become the voice that inspires "transformational moments" at leadership levels (Ely & Kanter, 2018, para. 23).

Researchers have used Kanter's structural empowerment theory to analyze women's career experiences throughout several fields, but researchers have most prevalently applied the theory in the nursing profession (Chandler, 1991; Doherty & Hunter Revell, 2020; Hayes et al., 2014; Laschinger & Shamian, 1994; Moore & Ward, 2017; Sabiston & Laschinger, 1995; Travers et al., 2020; Wilson & Laschinger, 1994; Yang et al., 2014). Laschinger (1996) attributed the prevalent use of Kanter's theory in this field to the scope of the nurse's role. She concluded, "since nurses who view their work environments as empowering are more likely to

provide high-quality care through more effective work practices, Kanter's model appears to have the potential to guide these changes" (p. 28). Like the career landscape for support staff in higher education, nursing employment's innately hierarchical structure produces barriers for those who seek advancement from the lowest levels. Overall, the findings of nursing-related inquiry validate Kanter's theory of structural empowerment. Nursing researchers found higher levels of structural empowerment were associated with work effectiveness and involvement in organizational decision-making, further supporting the need for Kanter's theory to guide the professional development of women in the nursing profession.

Lewis and Simpson (2012) reframed Kanter's theory through a poststructuralist lens highlighting developments around visibility, invisibility, and power. Their reframing of the theory exposes the unseen gendering processes of organizations often "buried within norms, practices, and values" (p. 142). Although Kanter presented institutions as gender-neutral entities in which women in marginalized professions must seek the opportunity to advance, Lewis and Simpson identified how dominant patriarchy actively excludes women's advancement. The authors stated patriarchal boundaries create "exclusive circles" and a "kinship system," which excludes women from advancement opportunities (p. 148). Thus, the authors recommended questioning the liberal feminist perception of gender-neutral organizational structure in favor of a poststructuralist perspective. Acker (1990) prominently critiqued Kanter's structural empowerment theory, as it presented organizations as gender-neutral. Acker "provided a means to identify and label the taken for granted, ordinary organizing processes and practices that reproduce gender inequality in organizations" (Nkomo & Rodriguez, 2017, p. 1733). I will review this perspective in the next section of this literature review, as Acker's theory of gendered organizations also informs this study.

Colleges and universities are highly bureaucratic institutions with many levels of power separating most support staff from the highest administrators in the institution. Accordingly, support staff positions are often low-opportunity, low-mobility jobs from which employees may struggle to advance. Kanter's theory unveils the deficit professions absent of career opportunity present to the individual employee and the organization as a whole. Kanter (1977) theorized institutions with increased opportunity have "more enthusiasm for innovation and less dysfunctional conservative resistance" (p. 275). Furthermore, institutions empowering individuals through occupational opportunity employ more structural supports that encourage the equitable treatment of women and other marginalized populations. While structural empowerment theory provides a framework for investigating women's advancement opportunities, this research must also consider the extent to which visible and invisible gendering processes control those opportunities. Therefore, the following section introduces Acker's theory of gendered organizations, which seeks to unveil these processes.

Gendered Organizations Theory

Acker's gendered organizations theory (1990) substantially problematized the absence of gender and sexuality in Kanter's theoretical discourse. Rather than reinforcing the "seeming gender neutrality" of organizational structures (p. 143), Acker argued assumptions about gender lie beneath the basic construct of organizational structures. Acker (1992) clarified her critique of Kanter's theory, stating, "what is problematic is the discontinuity, even contradiction, between organizational realities obviously structured around gender and ways of thinking and talking about these same realities as though they were gender neutral" (p. 255). Acker (1990) explained organizations are gendered in at least five separate but interrelated processes: (1) "the construction of divisions along lines of gender" (p. 146); (2) "the construction of symbols and

images that explain, express, reinforce, or sometimes oppose those divisions" (p. 146); (3) the interactions between all gender identities in the workplace, "including all those patterns that enact dominance and submission" (p. 147); (4) the production of "gendered components of individual identity" (p. 147); and (5) the "ongoing processes of creating and conceptualizing social structures" (p. 147). To say that an organization is gendered,

> means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine. Gender… is an integral part of those processes, which cannot be properly understood without an analysis of gender. (Acker, 1990, p. 146)

Acker's description of gendered divisions of labor is notable in its applicability to the inquiry of women support staff career experiences. Although the practices by which organizations are divided by gender are varied, they almost always reinforce men's presence at the highest positions, while women overpopulate the lowest ranks. Acker explained the gendered role of support staff simultaneously suppresses women while sustaining patriarchal hierarchy:

> Men's career opportunities in white-collar work depend on the barriers that deny those opportunities to women. If the mass of female clerical workers were able to compete with men in such work, promotion probabilities for men would be drastically reduced. (p. 154)

The study of gendered organizations is particularly relevant to the higher education workplace. As observed by Costello (2012):

> Women at all levels of the organizational hierarchy experience the impact of gendered organizations, but that impact is particularly realized by women at the bottom. When organizational structure reflects very few women in high-level positions and an

> abundance of women in low-level pigeonholed positions, one sees a gendered organization in practice. (p. 109)

While women's representation in higher education leadership has increased in recent decades, women are still underrepresented in these positions (Johnson, 2017). The overwhelming concentration of women in support staff positions contributes to this gender-segregated reality.

In later work addressing her theory, Acker (2006) suggested inquirers could understand the creation of inequalities in work organizations through the analytic approach of inequality regimes. Through this approach, Acker sought to conceptualize intersectionality within gendered organizations. Initially theorized by Crenshaw (1989) in her study of Black women's racial and gender discrimination, intersectionality describes the interconnectedness of race, class, and gender identities that create overlapping and symbiotic systems of disadvantage. In later discourse, Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022) expanded the concept of intersectionality by stating, "intersectional viewpoints contemporaneously concern themselves with racial domination and gender-based oppression along with other forms of discrimination related to social class, sexuality, disability, language, citizenship status, religion, age, and so on" (p. 4). As researchers seek to understand current inequality regimes in work organizations, they must also extend their perspectives to consider these influences.

Alongside other feminist scholars, Acker recognized most research on gendered organizations had been situated on the experiences of White middle-class women, omitting "the reality that the category gender is fundamentally complicated by class, race/ethnicity, and other differences" (Acker, 2006, p. 442). Within this context, Acker defined inequality regimes as "loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations" (p. 443). Inequality maintaining

practices may manifest in the form of organizing the general requirements of work, organizing class hierarchies, recruitment and hiring practices, wage setting and supervisory practices, and informal interactions while "doing the work" (Acker, 2006, p. 451). The shape and degree of inequality vary by institution. Hierarchical organizations, which account for virtually all institutions of higher education, maintain more inequality regimes than those that are flat and promote shared decision-making authority. However, a team-centric, nonhierarchical organizational structure does not guarantee a reduction of inequality regimes (Acker, 2006).

The inequality regime of organizing class hierarchies is salient when considering the women support staff population. Acker (2006) explained:

> … class hierarchies in organizations, with their embedded gender and racial patterns, are constantly created and renewed through organizing practices. Gender and sometimes race, in the form of restricted opportunities and particular expectations for behavior, are reproduced as different degrees of organizational class hierarchy and are also reproduced in everyday interactions and bureaucratic decision making. (p. 449)

Organizations expect compliance and subordination of those in support staff positions. No matter how skilled and responsible, support staff job duties are undermined due to preexisting and consistently reproduced class hierarchies. Therefore, when women support staff seek career advancement opportunities, they are working in resistance to organized class hierarchies. Acker argued organizations must take an active approach to dismantling inequality regimes to expose and address these barriers.

Another critical aspect of Acker's (1990) work is her concept of the "universal worker" (p. 151). When organizations consider fair policies and practices, they often consider the disembodied, universal worker. That is, organizations seek to see the worker absent of gender

identity. According to Acker, "the concept of a universal worker excludes and marginalizes women who cannot, almost by definition, achieve the qualities of a real worker because to do so is to become like a man" (p. 150). In her later work, Acker referred to this concept as the “ideal worker” (2006). Although the ideal worker regularly takes the form of a White man, it is essential to note the characteristics of an ideal worker change based on the job:

> Although work is organized on the model of the unencumbered (white) man, and both women and men are expected to perform according to this model, men are not necessarily the ideal workers for all jobs. The ideal worker for many jobs is a woman, particularly a woman who, employers believe, is compliant, who will accept orders and low wages… This is often a woman of color; immigrant women are sometimes even more desirable. (p. 450)

The reality of the ideal support staff worker is a woman, not a man, for the reasons Acker discussed above. When women support staff recognize their interest in career advancement, they face the reality of the ideal worker: they must consider how advancement may alter their personal and professional lives, as they may no longer fit the ideal worker expectation.

Acker, cited as “one of the godmothers of the field of gender, work, and organization,” was one of the first researchers to address the intricacies of organizational gender substructure (Benschop & van den Brink, 2019, p. 1770). Acker’s theory served as the foundation for much work related to how gender influences organizational realities. Within the context of this study, it is critical to understand how Acker’s theory of gendered organizations has been used “as a framework for understanding the relationship between gender and organizational processes that limit opportunities” (Nkomo & Rodriguez, 2017). Scholars have applied Acker’s theory to demonstrate the gendering of higher education institutions; however, this work's primary focus

has been the faculty population (Manchester et al., 2013; Treviño et al., 2017; van den Brink & Benschop, 2014). As such, it is critical to review how researchers have utilized Acker's theory to investigate women's career experiences outside higher education.

Through their framework of careerscapes, McKie et al. (2013) explored the career journeys of women who chose to opt in to self-employment. The researchers found that to account for women's needs, organizations would need to redefine work and work relations by following Acker's theory. Additionally, Donnelly (2015) examined the women's career advancement and flexibility in two case study firms. Situating the study through Acker's theory, the author illuminated the advancement barriers presented by macro- and meso-level policies and the absence of flexible work arrangements. Donnelly asserted the "dominance of male interests and power" created and sustained inequalities for women across the organizations (p. 96). Also drawing upon Acker's theory, Pringle et al. (2017) studied how gendering processes impact women's career advancement in Auckland's top law firms. While women at the partner level accepted the hierarchical structure of their law firms, women below the partnership line were frustrated by the law profession's gendered and classist system. Through this study, the authors used Acker's gendering processes "to provide insight into the multi-level complexity of women lawyers' career progression" (p. 446). These studies have further validated Acker's theory and promoted the need for recognizing and addressing gendered organizational processes.

While many researchers have supported Acker's theory of gendered organizations, some inquiry has critiqued its pragmatism and relevance in the 21st century. Britton (2000) critiqued the practicality of the inherently gendered view of bureaucracy, as the remediation of gendering would require "the abolition of bureaucratic organizations and the establishment of radically different collective forms" (p. 421). While recognizing the eradication of bureaucracy as a

commendable goal, Britton cautioned this arbitrary perspective could act as a hindrance against efforts to improve current organizational environments, which would further promote a less bureaucratic and gendered organizational structure. Similarly, Stainback et al. (2016) argued those interested in organizational reform must identify characteristics that "may 'undo' the gendered organization" rather than focus on deconstructing existing organizational structure in favor of a non-hierarchy (p. 130). In a separate critique, Williams et al. (2012) sought to situate and analyze Acker's theory within the context of the new economy. The authors conceived Acker's approach as outdated in a contemporary context, as the modern workplace is more collaborative, less hierarchical, and allows employees to progress in a non-traditional, non-linear path. However, through their inquiry, the authors found evidence of gendered influences on women's career experiences in the new economy:

> To excel at teamwork, individuals must be able to engage in self-promotion, which can be difficult for women in male-dominated environments—even though they are the ones who may need to do it the most. In contexts where supervisors have discretion over careers, gender bias can play a significant role in the allocation of rewards. And networking is gendered in ways that disadvantage women. (p. 16)

Although researchers have criticized gendered organization theory for its ambitiousness, most inquiry supports Acker's theory, even within a contemporary context.

Gendered divisions of labor are well documented in the higher education workplace (Ash, 2017; Lester et al., 2017; Niemi, 2021) and, as previously explored, support staff positions are typically lowly compensated (AAUW, 2019). Furthermore, although the majority of degrees in the United States are earned by women (Johnson, 2017), women who seek higher education leadership roles "continue to find their professional journeys hindered by a variety of internal,

organization, and broader cultural barriers" (Dahlvig & Longman, 2021, p. 30). Niemi (2021) asserted, "higher education will remain gendered at its core unless we begin asking different questions" (p. 327). Through this inquiry, I sought to ask these questions on behalf of the women support staff who continue to populate some of higher education's lowest roles on the hierarchy.

Summary

The literature reviewed in this chapter revealed the lack of empirical study centering the voices of women support staff in higher education. Through this literature review, I provided the context for exploring the career experiences of women support staff with advanced degrees. I began by presenting a brief history of support staff, inside and outside higher education. Then, I provided an overview of the existing literature on higher education support staff experiences inside and outside the United States and I described the phenomena of occupational segregation and mobility. I also provided an overview of tuition benefit programs, as the participants of this study may have had access to this benefit in their pursuit of advanced degrees. Finally, I reviewed the theoretical frameworks through which this study is situated, including structural empowerment theory and gendered organizations theory. In the next chapter, I will illustrate the methodological choices employed in this research.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

As previously discussed, while there has been significant inquiry into women's advancement in higher education, this body of research primarily focuses on faculty and administrators (Biddix et al., 2012; Dahlvig & Longman, 2021; Jarmon, 2014; Johnson, 2017; Kezar & Acuña, 2021; Park & Park-Ozee, 2021). Consequently, there is an immense lack of empirical study centering the voices of women support staff in higher education. Furthermore, while some researchers have investigated the support staff career trajectory (Costello, 2012; Iverson, 2009), none have proactively and specifically centered support staff who have earned advanced degrees.

Through this study, I aimed to contribute to the ongoing conversation about women's career advancement in higher education, with a specific emphasis on the women support staff regularly omitted from this narrative. This study provides insight for scholars to understand the women support staff career experience and address the career advancement obstacles presented for women staff who have earned or are currently pursuing advanced degrees. Furthermore, this focus on women support staff provides greater context for conversations around the gendered realities of all higher education staff, as the support staff role impacts women in roles across the higher education workforce. Additionally, I believe that institutional leaders can better support career advancement and model equitable employment practices for their students when they understand the women support staff career experience.

Considering these anticipated contributions, the purpose of this narrative study was to explore the career experiences of women support staff with advanced degrees who work at higher education institutions. I focused on women support staff because women comprise the

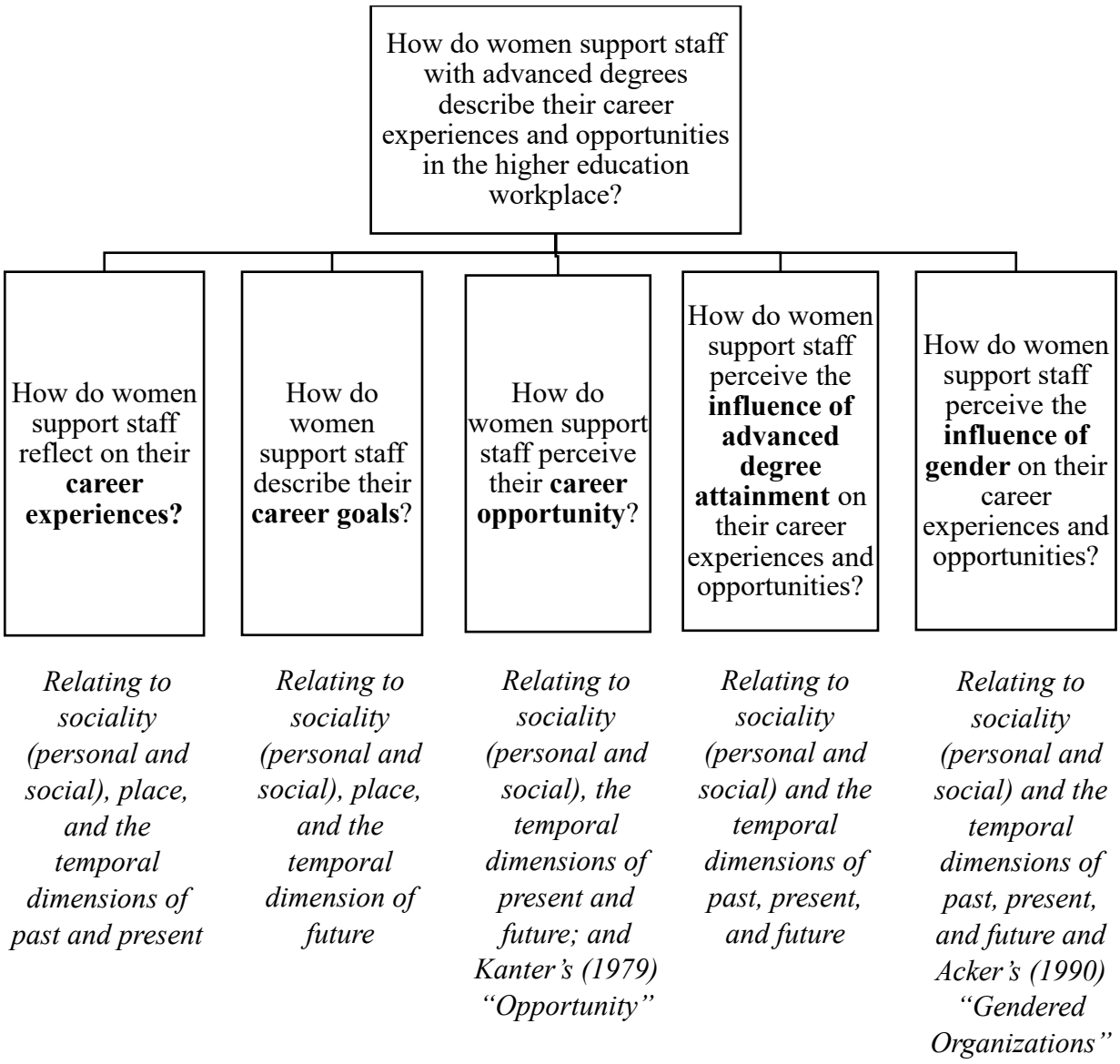
majority of this marginalized profession. I guided this study with one central research question: How do women support staff with advanced degrees describe their career experiences and opportunities in the higher education workplace? I apportioned this central research question among five research sub-questions:

1. How do women support staff reflect on their career experiences?
2. How do women support staff describe their career goals?
3. How do women support staff perceive their career opportunity?
4. How do women support staff perceive the influence of advanced degree attainment on their career experiences and opportunities?
5. How do women support staff perceive the influence of gender on their career experiences and opportunities?

These research questions are strongly informed and shaped by the theoretical frameworks with which I have conceptualized this study as well as the research design I have chosen. Figure 1 illustrates how these methodological choices have influenced the research questions.

Figure 1

Research question alignment to theoretical frameworks and methodology



Individuals reflect on career experiences and consider their career goals through story. They see varied plotlines: those that have already occurred, those of which they are currently in the midst, and those they would like to occur in the future. These plotlines create a story tying together one's career experiences, and story is "the fundamental unit that accounts for human experience" (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 4). The narrative inquiry structure was appropriate for

this study because I sought to explore the career experiences of women support staff with advanced degrees who work at higher education institutions. Story is the inlet through which I was privy to these experiences. The three-dimensional space narrative inquiry framework allows researchers to situate participant stories within the wholeness of their career experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Researchers must consider the multiple and intertwined influences, both internal and external, that shape career stories when studying the women support staff career experience. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) captured the essence of this narrative by explaining they are "not only concerned with life as it is experienced in the here and now but also with life as it is experienced on a continuum – people's lives, institutional lives, lives of things" (p. 19). For the narrative researcher to fully understand one's career experience, they must explore each of these entities.

Through this chapter, I will provide an overview of my research methodology. First, I will review narrative inquiry, emphasizing the three-dimensional space narrative inquiry framework (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Then I address my positionality and subjectivity as a qualitative researcher. I will describe the logistical aspects of my methodology, including Institutional Review Board approval, the research site, and sampling procedures. Then I will review my data collection and data analysis procedures and explain how I upheld trustworthiness in this research. Finally, I will review the limitations and delimitations of this study.

Narrative Inquiry

Gilstein (2020) defined narrative inquiry as "a social science qualitative research methodology that seeks to understand the ways in which people create meaning in their lives through the construction of narratives" (para. 1). The history of narrative inquiry traces back to the broad heading of narratology, where the approach had been used in the humanities and other

fields (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Connelly and Clandinin (2006), the foremost authors of this inquiry's use in the social sciences, explained the nuanced aspects of narrative inquiry:

> Arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story… is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which his or her experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Viewed this way, narrative is the phenomena studied in inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomena. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomena under study. (p. 477)

Polkinghorne (1988) described narrative as "the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful" (p. 1). While story is the portal that reveals lived experiences, Riessman (2008) clarified narratives do not "speak for themselves, offering a window into an 'essential self'" (p. 3). Instead, narrative inquiry requires close interpretation that can take various forms.

When situating narrative inquiry, it is important to consider the history of this approach. Narrative is often synonymized with story. As such, the foundations of narrative have been intertwined with human understanding of experience as long as there have been stories to tell. There are several histories which outline the beginnings of narrative inquiry, and narrative inquirers do not assume unanimity among these accounts (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). However, it is important to highlight the varied social movements of the 1960's resulted in the "Narrative

Turn" which brought narrative to the forefront of academic inquiry (Reissman, 2008, p. 14). Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) explained the four themes in the turn toward narrative inquiry:

> (1) a change in the relationship between the person conducting the research and the person participating as the subject (the relationship between the researcher and the researched), (2) a move from the use of number toward the use of words as data, (3) a change from focus on the general and universal toward the local and specific, and finally (4) a widening in acceptance of alternative epistemologies or ways of knowing. (p. 7)

These themes do not occur in any specific order. Much like narrative inquiry itself, these themes evolve with the context, the researcher, and the participants.

Narrative inquiry has been widely applied to the study of educators, specifically in understanding their perspectives of teaching and learning (Chan, 2012; Chan et al., 2012; Chase, 2003; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Lin et al., 2020; Martinie et al., 2016; Sisson et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2020). Chan (2017) explained narrative inquiry has been a primary vehicle for teacher development because "teachers grow by constructing personal practical knowledge through telling and reflecting on personal stories and narratives" (p. 31). Narrative inquiry has also been commonly applied to the study of nurses and nurse educators (Green, 2013; Ho et al., 2019; Kerr & Macaskill, 2020; Haydon et al., 2018; Lindsay, 2006, 2008; Lindsay et al., 2010; Schwind et al., 2012; Schwind et al., 2014a; Schwind et al., 2014b; Wang & Geale, 2015). Lindsay and Schwind (2016) explained these approaches "illuminate the humanness of care" and show "how identity and knowledge are constructed, both relevant in professional practice and education" (p. 17). As I conducted this review of narrative inquiry, I noted these professions are considered 'pink collar' occupations, meaning they are traditionally considered to be 'women's work' (Howe, 1978). Recognizing my population of inquiry –

women support staff in higher education – falls into the 'pink collar' category as well, I considered the commonality of identifying as a woman within the context of narrative inquiry. Women in higher education work in environments that "privilege masculine perspectives and approaches to organizing and leading that tend to disadvantage women" (Allan, 2011, p. 2). Danzak (2017) asserted, "the method of narrative inquiry allows us to share the stories of those whose voices are often marginalized or ignored" (p. 1235). Narrative inquiry provides an outlet to make meaning of one's experience as part of the dominant population in a marginalized profession. Furthermore, Polletta (2012) argued women tend to be more comfortable supporting claims through narrative than men. Therefore, the career experiences of women support staff can be better understood through narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional space narrative inquiry framework provides a structure within which these narratives can be organized and consequently analyzed and interpreted.

Three-Dimensional Space

As I embarked upon this research, I knew this investigation required focus on the participants' lived experiences. Understanding career experiences necessitates participant storytelling, as "stories lived and told educate the self and others" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxvi). Yet, at the inception of this study, I was challenged by the seemingly singularly past-based narrative format. Storytelling, in my perspective at the time, implied a reflection on events already passed, events in one's history. At the onset of my investigation, I struggled to reconcile this idea with the reality of career experiences. The purpose of this study, to explore the career experiences of women support staff with advanced degrees who work at higher education institutions, implies an emphasis on the past as only one aspect of the career journey. To fully understand the support staff career experience, researchers must explore the past, present, and

future. Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) conception of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, specifically their dimension of temporality, addressed my concerns with a focus on where narrative inquirers find themselves in their research: "backward and forward, inward and outward, and located… in place" (p. 54). As such, the commonplaces of the three-dimensional space are important considerations in this research.

Commonplaces of the Three-Dimensional Space

In their creation of the three-dimensional space, Clandinin and Connelly were strongly influenced by educational philosopher and professor John Dewey. Dewey (1916) posited, "reconstruction or reorganization of experience… adds to the meaning of experience" (p. 89). Specifically, Dewey's concepts of continuity (imagined past, imagined present, and imagined future) and his understanding that experience is both individual (personal) and interactional (social) provided the underpinnings for the commonplaces of the three-dimensional space. The commonplaces which comprise the narrative inquiry framework are temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To adequately utilize the dimensions which comprise the narrative inquiry space, one must hold a nuanced understanding of each element.

Temporality. Temporality refers to placing lived experiences within the context of time. In a narrative approach to inquiry, "any event, or thing, has a past, a present as it appears to us, and an implied future" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 29). When narrative inquirers present people, places, or things through their research, they present them in temporal transition. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) explained, "to give a narrative explanation one needs to know the temporal history; that is, what happened the day before, the day before that, the month before that, and so forth" (p. 480). In practice, this means the narrative researcher must provide thick description of the phenomenon of study (Geertz, 1973).

The temporal nature of lived experience has significant implications for the participants at the center of narrative inquiry. Murphy et al. (2012) explained, "our past experiences, and how we have made sense of them, shape our present experiences, and how we understand them… our biographical histories, our pasts, shape our presents and together they move us into our futures" (p. 65-66). Who we are is built upon who we have been and the experiences we have had. Through the lens of career experiences, one can follow a sequence of events that have led them to their current employment positions.

Sociality. Sociality refers to the influence of personal and social conditions on the phenomena of study. Personal influences include "feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions of the person" while social influences include "existential conditions, the environment, surrounding factors, and people that form the individual's context" (Aguilar, 2011, p. 92). Particularly pertinent to the study of career experiences, narrative inquirers "consider the issues of status and power and hierarchies among people" (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2012, p. 7). As one investigates the participant's lived experience, they must dually consider the power and hierarchical dynamics at play. Another important aspect of this commonplace is the relationship between the participant and the researcher. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) explained this perplexity:

> Narrative inquirers… are in relationship: negotiating purposes, next steps, outcomes, texts, and all manner of things that go into an inquiry relationship… in contrast to the common qualitative strategy of bracketing inquirers out, narrative inquirers bracket themselves in to an inquiry. (p. 480)

I will revisit the specific aspects of my positionality to this research, which are heavily informed by Connelly and Clandinin's concept of social significance later in this chapter.

Place. Clandinin and Connelly (2006) defined the dimension of place as "the specific concrete, physical, and topological boundaries of place where the inquiry and events take place" (pp. 480-481). The place at which an event takes place is influential because "what happens in a given situation is shaped by the context and physical location in which this situation occurs" (Aguilar, 2011, p. 92). Furthermore, "context shapes relationships, actions, and experience" and "different circumstances, organizational structures, cultural norms, policies, and landscapes" may lead to different narrative plotlines (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2012, p. 6). This reality can create tension for the researcher utilizing a narrative inquiry framework. This tension results from the extent to which the research can be applied to numerous contexts. I will address this tension in greater detail later in this chapter through my discussion on transferability.

Simultaneity of the Three-Dimensional Space

While each commonplace could theoretically comprise its own singular inquiry, the simultaneous exploration of temporality, sociality, and place distinguishes the narrative inquiry approach (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). From the narrative perspective, "the three [commonplaces] can never be truly separate from one another. Experience happens with others in contexts" (Murphy et al., 2012, p. 68). These interrelated and interdependent explorations strongly influence the narrative inquirer's meaning-making process. Pinnegar and Hamilton (2012) support this claim:

> … when we come to the act of interpretation, we cannot completely deny our emotions, feelings, and understandings as human beings from our understandings as researchers… when we craft story or select a narrative we do so not only because it exemplifies the understandings we are arriving at but also because it resonates with us. (p. 15)

The personal influence that arises from narrative inquiry can be perplexing, yet this conflict distinguishes the approach. When I collected and analyzed the qualitative data related to this study, I proactively ascribed to all three commonplaces, examining, describing, and specifying how the commonplace features are built into the study (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

Narrative Inquiry of Career Experience

As I explored the career experiences of women support staff with advanced degrees who work at higher education institutions, I aimed to situate participants' individual experiences within the wholeness of their careers. This wholeness includes the commonplace of temporality, wherein I reconciled the pasts, presents, and futures of my participants' career stories. This wholeness also consisted of the commonplace of sociality, wherein I sought to understand the personal and social forces which influence one's career journey. Finally, this wholeness included the dimension of place, which allowed me to situate career experiences within their respective contexts. While I have categorized these commonplaces and their implications on this inquiry, I also contended with the fluidity of these entities. The narrative inquiry space is "always ambiguous and open, allowing for meaning-making to materialize as memories, tensions, constraints – both imagined and real – bump against each other and coalesce as points of insight and understanding" (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2012, p. 4). Narrative inquiry actively disrupts rigid approaches to data collection and analysis. Like many career journeys, narrative inquiry confronts us with unexpected, shifting realities. The three-dimensional space allowed me to navigate this dynamic in unison with participants with the understanding that no inquiry of this kind is ever truly final. Conversely, I intrinsically value the inconclusiveness of this work, as it "keeps us open to new possibilities of alternative perspectives" (Keyes et al., 2012, p. 20).

Researcher Subjectivity and Positionality

In the words of Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022): "It is impossible to separate oneself from one's research. We are embodied researchers who are conducting research in particular historical, political, economic, and social moments. This matters." (p. 26). As I immersed myself in the literature surrounding narrative inquiry at the onset of this study, I continually discovered how important it was to analyze myself within the context of this study. While I understood defining and outlining my presence within this narrative is a fundamental aspect of qualitative research, I initially found narrative inquiry's focus on the researcher to be a source of tension. I attribute this tension to the vulnerability necessary for this form of reflection. Vulnerability is a mutual process integral to building trust (Brown, 2012). While vulnerability is critical to building a study that is sound and trustworthy, I recognize the risk associated with this exposure:

> Researchers who self-disclose are reformulating the researcher's role in a way that maximizes engagement of the self but also increases the researcher's vulnerability to criticism, both for what is revealed and for the very act of self-disclosure. (Reinharz, 1992, p. 34)

By facing and reflecting on my own experiences and worldview, I reconciled these realities within the context of the study and built trust between myself and my participants. Guided by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), I saw why this reflection is essential to narrative:

> This telling of ourselves, this meeting of ourselves in the past through inquiry, makes clear that as inquirers we, too, are part of the parade. We have helped make the world in which we find ourselves… we are complicit in the world we study. Being in this world, we need to remake ourselves as well as offer up research understanding that could lead to a better world. (p. 61)

Saldaña and Omasta (2018) defined subjectivity as "the researcher's personal and unfettered perspective" (p. 420) and positionality as "the researcher's reflexive stance in relationship to participants" (p. 418). Recognizing one's subjectivity and positionality can enhance ethical integrity, data analysis, and data interpretation in qualitative research (Mosselson, 2010). With these understandings, I review my subjectivity and positionality as I explored the career experiences of women support staff in higher education.

Researcher Subjectivity

My identity as a feminist is intertwined with this research. A feminist paradigm tends to influence how I interpret all systems in higher education. As such, I employed a critical, feminist approach to exploring the career experiences of women support staff. Allan (2011) stated the feminist approach to inquiry "seeks social change while also emphasizing women and gender as key analytic categories" (p. 18). Due to the deeply gendered occupation of support staff, a feminist approach is not only innate to my perspective but "provides a mechanism for surfacing areas of intersection, for pointing out sources of power that negatively affect individuals, and for moving issues of gender from the periphery to the center of attention" (Eddy et al., 2017, p. 4). Parson (2021) explained why the feminist worldview is needed in academic inquiry:

> Research is needed that is conducted from the standpoint of women marginalized in the modern higher education framework. Such research is important in order to know how, why, and where to improve the representation and comfort of women in higher education. (p. 516)

However, as previously discussed, feminist research on women in higher education has historically foregrounded the voices of White middle-class women (Parson, 2021). To disrupt this glaring omission, I recruited a participant sample roughly representative of the overall

population without limiting the number of participants who identified as a woman of Color, which is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. I also chose to include Acker's (2006) notion of inequality regimes, as this approach seeks to conceptualize intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) within gendered organizations. However, these actions alone are not enough to ensure I have done all I can to recognize identity differentials in this study.

Although feminism is regularly touted as a movement speaking for the liberation *all* women, it "often centers on those who already have most of their needs met" (Kendall, 2020, p. xiii). As a White woman, my Whiteness shapes how I interpret and analyze qualitative data (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). Accordingly, I entered this research with a recognition of my subjectivity. The participants in this study cited many identities beyond gender which influenced their career experiences and opportunities, including their age, race, ability, and family roles. Johnson (2018) described privilege as "always in *relation* to others. Privilege is always at someone else's expense and always exacts a cost" (p. 8). As a White, cisgender, able-bodied woman, I am afforded unearned privileges often less afforded to those who hold minoritized identities. Zakaria (2021) summarized this reality as it relates to racial privilege:

> … the assumption that women of color and white women all stand at the same disadvantages against men is flawed. All white women enjoy white racial privilege. Women of color are affected not simply by gender inequality but also by racial inequality. A colorblind feminism thus imposes an identity cost on women of color, erasing a central part of their lived experience and their political reality. (p. 10)

Zakaria's assertion can be extended to other privileged and contextually advantageous identities I hold, specifically as they relate to career advancement. Particularly my identities as an able-bodied woman and a woman without children. As a feminist researcher exploring her

participants' stories, I continually revisited and recognized my own identities throughout the course of this study in the form of researcher memos, the process of which I discuss later in this chapter. While I believe it would have been impossible to bracket out my personal influences within this narrative inquiry, I recognized and contended with my privilege in this context, especially as it related to the experiences of participants who did not share my identities.

My feminist worldview also influenced the way in which I collected data. I chose a responsive interview approach (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) because, while I employed a loose outline of interview questions (see Appendix D), the direction of the interview was guided by the participants. Regardless of how much I have personally lived or studied the women support staff career experience, I was unable to anticipate my participants' individual career experiences as women support staff in higher education. In fact, the various contexts and forces felt by my participants, as well as the specific nature of narrative inquiry, works in opposition to this hypothetical prediction. Therefore, their guidance and insight were essential to my understanding of the women support staff career experience. Considering ethical principles, feminist research seeks to minimize researcher control of participants (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011). As a feminist researcher, I aimed to actively recognize and halt any potential attempts to control the participants throughout the course of this study. Consistent practice of reflexivity, including writing researcher memos, allowed me to recognize and address these potential issues. My identity as a woman and as a feminist brought me to this research and it shaped my research as I embarked upon this narrative exploration.

Researcher Positionality

As I employed a three-dimensional narrative framework, I remained alert and aware of this study's context. To some extent, this reflexivity is a foundational aspect of the three-

dimensional narrative framework. The participants of this study were not alone in the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. As a narrative researcher, I joined this space, as my own career experiences informed how I interpreted my participants' career experiences. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explained this phenomenon:

> This confronting of ourselves in our narrative past makes us vulnerable as inquirers because it makes secret stories public. In narrative inquiry, it is impossible (or if not impossible, then deliberately self-deceptive) as researcher to stay silent or to present a kind of perfect, idealized, inquiring, moralizing self. (p. 62)

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) referred to the aforementioned awareness as "wakefulness" (p. 182). I first entered this space as I wrote my own career journey reflection prior to asking participants to do the same. This reflection both reinvigorated my personal investment in this inquiry and provided me with first-hand insight before I requested participants write their own career journey reflections. I continued to revisit my own position in the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space through researcher memos, discussed later in this chapter.

My positionality as having assumed many roles as support staff throughout my career in higher education had the potential to provide some dilemma in my role as researcher. I did not seek to color the data gathered from the participants with my own experiences as support staff. However, I accepted my positionality in this context. My experiences brought me to this topic of inquiry. Had it not been for my years of serving in various support staff roles, I would not have seen the profound need for the career experiences of women support staff in higher education to be told. This part of my identity both informs and potentially biases my research. I documented my internal dialogues in researcher memos throughout the inquiry to contend with this dichotomy.

Institutional Review Board

It would be negligent to conduct this study without "acknowledging that scientists/researchers are capable of causing harm and have, unwittingly or sometimes knowingly, contributed to harm" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p. 40). The National Research Act of 1974 authorized the creation of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (Gay et al., 2012). This commission, addressing several ethically unjustified studies which intentionally put participants at risk of harm (Shavers et al., 2000), developed a code of ethics and guidelines for researchers. Because this research involved the use of human participants, the proposal was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Kent State University before I invited participants and collected data.

The mission of the Human Subjects Protection Program is "to protect the rights, dignity, welfare, and privacy of human subjects in all research conducted in accordance with the principles of the Belmont Report, The Code of Federal Regulations (45CFR46), Food and Drug Administration, University policy, and — when applicable — other laws and regulations" (Kent State University, n.d., para. 2). Ultimately, the purpose of the IRB "is always to ensure the safety and well-being of human participants" (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018, p. 196). I filed an application with the IRB that "contains procedures and information about participants so that the committee can review the extent to which [I] place participants at risk" throughout this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 91). The IRB review associated with this study was approved with a level I application, as this study does not present greater than minimal risk to participants.

Research Sites

I recruited eight women support staff in higher education with advanced degrees to participate in this study. Four participants were employed at four-year private institutions, three participants were employed at four-year public institutions, and one participant was employed at a two-year public institution. Although this study was conducted through Kent State University, I invited participants from institutions across the United States. I selected participants from the three varied institution types to illuminate a wide range of perspectives and experiences. The career experiences of women support staff at differing institutional types can vary widely. Private four-year, public four-year, and public two-year institutions of higher education serve differing missions and student populations (Lowman, 2010). For institutions of higher education, "the policies and procedures that guide staffing decisions create a structure of opportunity for persons within the organization" (Sagaria & Johnsrud, 1992, p. 192). Human resource management procedures often exist, either by design or by default, in accordance with the values of the institution. Furthermore, employment practices are complicated by the institution's status as a public or private entity. Therefore, the career experiences of those employed by higher education institutions can vary based on this context. It is with an appreciation for this context I sought a sample which represents varied institution types.

I solicited participants via email to professional networks from private four-year, public four-year, and public two-year institutions of higher education. In the email to those within my professional networks, I described the purpose of this study and the criteria for participation (see Appendix A). In addition, I solicited potential participants via social media posts (see Appendix B). Within the informational recruitment email and informational recruitment social media post, I included a link to the pre-screening questionnaire (see Appendix C). Upon completion of the

pre-screening questionnaire, participants were directed to the participant consent form. Once I received the questionnaire responses, I conducted sampling procedures. I provided a description of the specific institutions from which the participants have been recruited within each participant narrative, while maintaining each institutions' anonymity.

Sampling Procedures

I sought to solicit a diverse sample of participants in this study to ensure varied viewpoints are present in the data. When compared to quantitative participant selection, qualitative methods necessitate a more nuanced approach. Saldaña and Omasta (2018) explained:

> The methods of each methodology are unique to the paradigm. Furthermore, the sample of participants might evolve over the course of the study as researchers realize they need additional participants to provide new perspectives to confirm or disconfirm developing assertions or theories. (p. 95)

In this narrative study, I employed purposive sampling guided by set criteria. In alignment with the purpose of this study, qualified participants (1) identified as a woman, (2) were currently employed at a private four-year, public four-year, or public two-year institution of higher education, (3) were currently employed in a support staff role whose main functions primarily support professional staff, faculty, and leadership personnel in higher education (e.g., administrative assistant, office clerk, receptionist, secretary, etc.), and (4) were currently holding or pursuing a master's degree, professional degree, or doctorate degree. I allowed the participants to identify if they were support staff via the pre-screening questionnaire. In cases where the role seemed outside the support staff definition identified, I asked for more information about primary functions prior to our virtual introductory meeting.

I initially aimed to recruit approximately three participants from each institutional type, totaling nine participants through purposive sampling. A total of 27 people responded to the pre-screening questionnaire. I determined 13 of the respondents were ineligible to participate, either because their positions were beyond my definition of support staff (e.g., assistant director or director level) or they did not have and were not pursuing an advanced degree. Five respondents did not respond to my follow-up email inviting them to a virtual introductory meeting. One potential participant dropped out of the study prior to her virtual introductory meeting. The remaining eight respondents (three participants from four-year public institutions, four participants from four-year private institutions, and one participant from a two-year public institution) fully participated in the study. Because fewer than three qualified participants from two-year institutions responded to the recruitment email and social media post, I sent follow-up correspondence to my professional networks and social media, which proved unsuccessful in increasing the number of participants from two-year institutions.

I used a purposive sampling approach as it allowed me to select participants who meet the criteria of support staff who have earned or are earning an advanced degree, while ensuring the sample was as inclusive and representative as possible. Of office and administrative employees in higher education, 83% are identified as ‘female’ by the U.S. Department of Education (2020). Of these employees, 62% identify as White, 15% as Black, 13% as Hispanic, 4% as Asian, 2% as two or more races, 1% as American Indian/Alaska Native, and under 1% as Pacific Islander (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). While most women support staff identify as White, the voices of Black, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Multiracial women support staff are in need of inquiry to due the overwhelming emphasis on White voices in feminist research in higher education (Parson, 2021). The total sample size is a limitation of

this narrative study, as I was unable to ensure all races and ethnicities were present for each institutional type. Because I anticipated this limitation, my goal was to ensure the participant demographics roughly represented the demographics of the overall women support staff population, without limiting the number of women of Color participants in this study. As I aimed to interview approximately three participants from each institutional type, I aimed to have at least one participant who did not identify as White from each institutional type. Ultimately, two (50%) of the private four-year participants did not identify as White, one (33%) of the public four-year participants did not identify as White, and one (100%) of the public two-year participants did not identify as White. Because I had eight respondents fully participate, I was not presented with the task of eliminating any willing participants.

Data Collection Procedures

To understand participants' career experiences, I conducted one virtual introductory meeting and one virtual interview with each participant. As this study was planned amid the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual data collection was the best way to ensure the safety and well-being of all involved in this study. Furthermore, the virtual nature of these interviews minimized the time resources needed for travel to participants' locations. There were various considerations in conducting a narrative inquiry over a virtual platform. I conducted my unpublished pilot study on the extent to which support staff identify as educators over the months of March, April, and May 2020, a time when the COVID-19 pandemic had just begun to impact the day-to-day lives of civilians globally. While it is not how I originally sought to collect data, I conducted qualitative interviews over Microsoft Teams for the pilot study. One of the major challenges I encountered was that some participants chose to not turn on their cameras. It was not until this time that I fully appreciated the visual aspects of qualitative interviewing, particularly in the non-

verbal communication and cues provided between the researcher and participant. For this reason, I encouraged my participants to leave their cameras on during the introductory meeting and interview. However, in the essence of minimizing researcher control of participants (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011), this was not a requirement for participation.

A brief pre-screening questionnaire was submitted to potential participants via professional networks and social media (see Appendix C). The purpose of this questionnaire was to obtain demographic information to ensure (1) the interested participants met the eligibility criteria and (2) the sample included at least one woman of Color participant from each institutional type. It is important to note that I used the race and/or ethnicity identified by the participants throughout this study. This decision created some tension when two participants identified as Caucasian. As a feminist researcher, I recognize the importance of using the descriptors indicated by the participants themselves (Ross et al., 2020). I also recognize researchers should not use the term Caucasian, as it "originated as a way of classifying White people as a race to be favorably compared with other races" (American Psychological Association, 2020, p. 143). To reconcile this opposition, I transparently stated each participant self-identified their race/ethnicity within their narrative description.

Once I finalized the participant selection, I scheduled a one-on-one virtual introductory meeting with each participant. For qualitative researchers, it is important to share with the participants "(a) what you hope to gain from the research and (b) what you hope to contribute to society at large, to the participants involved in the study, or to a community under study" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p. 84). Accordingly, the virtual introductory meeting was conducted to further promote the relational aspect of narrative inquiry and to build trust with the participants. The purpose of this meeting was to introduce myself and explain the purpose of my

study in advance of the semi-structured interview. The introductory meetings lasted approximately 15 to 25 minutes. Participants had the opportunity to introduce themselves and ask any questions regarding the inquiry. These meetings promoted much engagement and made the participants eager to participate in the study.

At the conclusion of each introductory meeting, I asked participants to complete a written reflection that outlined their career journey thus far. I explained this reflection could be a journal; however, it could take another form of written prose that outlines their career journey. All participants wrote reflections that most closely resembled narrative journals. The length of the journals varied among the participants, with some journals containing a paragraph and one spanning six pages. I asked each participant to submit their reflection to me electronically a few days prior to the interview. I included only one major guideline for participants: the reflection should address each of the temporal dimensions: past, present, and future. This reflection served as a way for participants to activate their thoughts regarding the phenomenon of study, the career experiences of women support staff. Furthermore, this process allowed me to understand each participant better and consider potential nuances to their virtual interview, prior to the interview itself.

The interviews lasted approximately one hour. Appendix D includes the interview questions designed in alignment with the overarching research questions and the theoretical frameworks employed in this study. It is important to note interviews are a contentious approach to data collection within a narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explained the structured interview is “perhaps the least common form of interview used in narrative inquiry because of its non-relational quality” (p. 94). To promote authentic data collection that honors the three-dimensional space in which I, as the researcher, and my participants reside, the

interviews were conducted through a semi-structured, responsive approach. Responsive interviewing allowed the participants to guide the conversation. Rubin and Rubin (2012) asserted the many benefits of responsive interviewing:

> It emphasizes the importance of building a relationship of trust between the interviewer and interviewee that leads to more give-and-take in the conversation. The tone of questioning is basically friendly and gentle, with little confrontation. The pattern of questioning is flexible; questions evolve in response to what the interviewees have just said, and new questions are designed to tap the experience and knowledge of each interviewee. (p. 36)

Whereas structured interviews employ a traditional, sequenced approach that does not leave room for exploration, semi-structured responsive interviews highlight the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants. As a feminist researcher, it was important I facilitate a conversation guided by my participants, while providing enough structure to satisfy IRB requirements (Parson, 2021). The flexibility of responsive interviewing provided an opportunity for participants to answer questions aligned to the guiding research questions yet lent enough freedom to have detail-invoking conversations necessary for narrative inquiry.

Data Analysis Procedures

Hatch (2002) described data analysis as a "systematic search for meaning" that allows researchers to "see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories" (p. 148). With the qualitative findings of this study, I sought to explore the career experiences of women support staff with advanced degrees who work at higher education institutions. Through data analysis, I aimed to identify common themes present throughout the experiences and stories told by the participants, women

support staff in higher education. After transcribing the semi-structured interviews, I had each participant member check the transcripts for accuracy, which I describe in the credibility section of this chapter. After member checking, I proceeded with coding the qualitative data, which included transcriptions of virtual interviews and participant reflections on their career journeys.

Coding Procedures

Coding refers to the process of organizing qualitative data by "bracketing chunks (or text or image segments) and writing a word representing a category in the margins" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 193). I used Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software package, to code the transcribed interview data and career journey reflections. This allowed me to expedite the coding process, providing more time and resources to be devoted to data collection and development of themes.

As a narrative inquirer, I chose to begin the coding process narratively. Saldaña (2021) stated, "narrative coding is appropriate for exploring intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences, relationships, and actions to understand the human condition through story" (p. 195). The narrative coding method lends itself to the inquiry of career experience, as "jobs and organizations influence and affect the individual's telling of personal tales" (p. 198). For these reasons, I began by narratively coding the transcripts and reflections with an emphasis on the commonplaces of the three-dimensional space: temporality, sociality, and place (see Appendix E). I coded the text segments that alluded to the past, present, and future dimensions of temporality, the social and personal dimensions of sociality, and the dimension of place. Through this lens, I situated my participants' career experiences within the space in which I navigated "backward and forward, inward and outward, and located… in place" (Clandinin & Connelly,

2000, p. 54). I found this process valuable, as it reacquainted me with the holistic lives of the participants, the wholeness of their stories.

However, upon completing the narrative coding process, I knew it was necessary to supplement the narrative coding process by coding inductively (see Appendix F). This action allowed me to ensure I did not omit present themes within the data, themes that would directly address my research questions. Inductive coding occurs when the researcher enters the data analysis with an open aim, meaning that no set of a priori codes have been predetermined (Saldaña, 2021). Miles et al. (2019) explained this openness ensures researchers are not required to "force-fit the data into preexisting codes" (p. 74). Through this supplemental analysis, I aimed to identify any additional codes not presented during the narrative analysis.

Ultimately, I did not glean as much insight from the narrative coding procedure as I did the inductive coding procedure. However, I recognize how valuable the narrative coding process was, as it allowed me to revisit each qualitative data set through the lens of participants' whole career experiences. Utilizing the three-dimensional space narrative inquiry framework to design my study was valuable, as I was able to construct interview questions and approaches that illuminated the "continuum" of lived experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 19). The narrative coding procedure helped me immerse myself in the qualitative data, revisiting each interview and journal entry with an appreciation of the participant's entire career experience. Having taken a narrative coding approach first, I was better able to inductively code the data on my second time through, as I could then see specific events among the continuum of participants' career experiences.

Through the qualitative data analysis process, I identified approximately 95 codes. I organized the codes into five categories, aligning to my research questions: (1) career

experiences, (2) career goals, (3) career opportunity, (4) advanced degree attainment, and (5) gender. I also determined a sixth category, beyond my stated research questions, was necessary: additional influences (see Appendix G). After I created this chart, I analyzed for common themes among these categories. I interpreted the data and found 11 themes. These themes are discussed in chapter four.

Theoretical Frameworks in Data Analysis

As a feminist researcher, I employed two complementary feminist organizational frameworks throughout this study: Kanter's (1977) structural empowerment theory and Acker's (1990) gendered organizations theory, as well as Acker's (2006) notion of inequality regimes. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained qualitative use of theories that center questions related to marginalized groups constructs a transformative lens that "shapes the types of questions asked, informs how data are collected and analyzed, and provides a call for action or change" (p. 62). It is important to recognize the tension around actively employing a theoretical lens in a narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) posited the use of theory brings narrative inquirers to the formalistic boundaries of this work, as active employment of a theoretical lens may distort the collected data, coloring the lived experiences of participants through a lens they did not employ. While the authenticity of participants' career experiences was essential to this inquiry, I simultaneously value and employ the feminist theories which shaped this inquiry. Through member checking, which I will describe later in this chapter, I ensured participants' experiences were accurately captured.

Once I finished the inductive coding process, I analyzed the codes and organize the codes into categories. When I first embarked on this narrative inquiry, I planned to organize the codes into two categories, opportunity and gender. Amid coding, I quickly discovered these two

categories were not specific enough to capture the wholeness of the participants' lived experiences. Therefore, as previously discussed, I organized the codes into five categories, aligning to my research questions: (1) career experiences, (2) career goals, (3) career opportunity, (4) advanced degree attainment, and (5) gender, and an additional category, beyond my stated research questions: (6) additional influences.

Many qualitative researchers seek order when conducting data analysis, yet narrative inquiry encourages a more fluid approach:

> There is no smooth transition, no one gathering in the field texts, sorting them through, and analyzing them. Field texts have a vast and rich research potential. We return to them again and again, bringing our own restoried lives as inquirers, bringing new research puzzles, and re-searching the texts. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 132)

Therefore, the analysis process was ongoing and guided by the research questions, the theoretical framework, and the narrative inquiry. I negotiated and renegotiated with the qualitative data, ultimately leading to a multifaceted understanding of my participants' career experiences.

Trustworthiness Procedures

Those seeking to conduct qualitative studies assume the responsibility of maintaining trustworthiness in their research. Trustworthiness refers to the perceived rigor and true value of qualitative study (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). However, narrative inquirers are often prescribed non-practical ruminations on what constitutes trustworthiness, including Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) emphasis on remaining "thoughtful" (p. 184). Loh (2013) described the questions he encountered as he researched beginning teachers' experiences:

> How can I convince others that narrative inquiry is a useful approach in studying the phenomena of human experiences? If I am not able to ensure that there is quality and

> rigor to such an approach, then potential consumers of this study will not see it as relevant for their knowledge or understanding of a beginning teacher's experiences, and certainly will not see it as useful for any educational change or reform. (p. 2)

In exploring the career experiences of women support staff, I encountered similar questions. Narrative inquiry allows "wondering, tentativeness, and alternative views to exist as part of the research account" (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 25). This subjective nature of qualitative research can pose a challenge for maintaining trustworthiness; thus, researchers must utilize various methods to ensure the findings of their studies are as sound as possible. As such, I proactively considered credibility and transferability as I sought to promote trustworthiness.

Credibility

Credibility, which "refers to the audience's belief that the way a researcher conducted the study and the analytic processes and outcomes of the work have generated findings that make sense and persuade readers that an effective or trustworthy job was done" (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018, p. 272) was ensured by multiple means.

Literature Review

First, through this proposal's creation, I conducted a thorough literature review to assess the existing inquiry of the topic. In the case of women support staff in higher education, little research has been conducted about this critical but often marginalized population of higher education employees. While the existing literature was exhausted, I found the absence of research further emphasized the need for this study. As such, this study contributes to the ongoing conversation about women's advancement in higher education, with a specific emphasis on the support staff who are often omitted from this narrative.

Member Checking

Member checking is of particular importance in studies through which researchers "seek to pursue notions of social justice, empowerment, and equity" (Doyle, 2007, p. 206). Therefore, in a further effort to ensure credibility, member checks were completed. After I transcribed each interview, I emailed the transcripts back to the participants. In the emails, I asked the participants to review the transcript to further establish credibility. I explained this measure was conducted to ensure they had an opportunity to review what they said, add more information if they chose to do so, and edit what they said if necessary. This measure provided participants the opportunity to review the transcript and conclude whether the interview transcript truly exemplified their lived experiences (Birt et al., 2016). Additionally, when I drafted the participant narratives, seen in chapter four, I recognized this centrally compiled information could potentially risk participant anonymity. Accordingly, each participant also member checked their individual participant narrative.

Audit Trail

Throughout the process of this study, I created and maintained an audit trail. White et al. (2012) described an audit trail as a "comprehensive record of the approaches and activities employed in the study, both in data collection and analysis" (p. 247). Through my audit trail, I reviewed my methodological decisions and determined if or when any changes needed to occur in my approach.

Researcher Memos

As referenced in my earlier sections on researcher subjectivity and positionality, I maintained researcher memos throughout the research process. As a narrative inquirer, my personal experiences are bound to shape how I interpret my data. My goal was not to eradicate

this linkage, as this linkage is integral to the reasons why I have pursued the study of women support staff. Rather my goal was to maintain reflexivity to promote the credibility of this study. This reflexivity allowed me to reveal how my "personal tastes, values, and belief system [shaped my] choices of research question[s], theoretical assumptions, research site, relationship with research participants, and interpretation and analysis" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p. 17). Creswell and Creswell (2018) posited "sufficient reflexivity occurs when researchers record notes during the process of research, reflect on their own personal experiences, and consider how their personal experiences may shape their interpretation of results" (p. 184). Through continuous memo writing, I sought to recognize the personal influences which brought me to this study, while minimizing their impact to the extent possible within narrative inquiry.

Transferability

Transferability is attained "when readers feel as though the story of the research overlaps with their own situation and they intuitively transfer the research to their own action" (Tracy, 2010, p. 845). Contending with transferability encourages researchers to explore the extent to which their findings can be applied to other contexts. As previously discussed, narrative inquiry's limited nature poses tension when considering transferability to different contexts (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2012). In order to encourage transferability to some extent I provided thick description of context (Geertz, 1973) within each participant narrative, to the extent I could without compromising confidentiality. However, while I attempted to gather a wide range of perspectives by sampling participants from private four-year institutions, public four-year institutions, and public two-year institutions, it is not realistic to assert this study's findings are widely transferable. Rather, I hope this study may inspire more narrative inquiry to the women support staff population in other contexts.

Limitations and Delimitations

Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) explained "what distinguishes narrative inquirers is their desire to understand rather than control and predict the human world" (p. 30). In seeking to understand, I encountered various realities which complicated and differentiated my study from others. As such, there are several limitations and delimitations with which I contended as I conducted this research.

Limitations

As previously discussed, I conducted this narrative inquiry amid the COVID-19 pandemic. While I would prefer to conduct interviews in person, because virtual data collection is an option for this research, this format was the best way to ensure the safety and well-being of all involved in this study. This format acts as a limitation because there was the potential for non-verbal cues present in the interviews to be missed or omitted in a virtual environment. However, to rectify this issue, I encouraged participants to keep their cameras on if they had them available, though this was not a requirement. Conversely, I did appreciate the option to conduct this study virtually, as it allowed me to access participants across the United States. If I had been relegated to conducting in-person interviews, the costs associated with this research might have prevented the study from occurring at all.

Delimitations

As a doctoral student, my resources to conduct this study were limited. The primary limitation within this context was my time. This limitation, combined with my selection of a narrative approach, supported my delimitation of the number of participants in this study. As previously discussed, I purposively sampled eight participants. Four participants were employed at four-year private institutions, three participants were employed at four-year public institutions,

and one participant was employed at a two-year public institution. While I could further promote trustworthiness in this research by including more participants, my resources were constrained, resulting in this delimitation.

I have also chosen to limit this inquiry to support staff in higher education who identify as women. Those identified as 'female' by the U.S. Department of Education (2020) are the dominant population (83%) in this marginalized profession. Those identified as 'men' account for the remaining 17% of office and administrative staff (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). I recognize the U.S. Department of Education does not currently account for those who identify beyond the gender binary, so there is likely an omission of identities within their statistics. My choice to limit this inquiry to support staff who identify as women can be largely attributed to my positionality as a feminist. As a feminist researcher, I designed this study in consort with feminist organizational frameworks (Acker, 1990; Kanter, 1977). While I encourage future inquiry into the career experiences of support staff who do not identify as women, I conducted this inquiry with emphasis on the shared challenges women face in the patriarchal context of higher education institutions (Allan, 2011).

Summary

In this chapter I explored narrative inquiry as the methodological approach for this study. Specifically, I described the commonplaces of the three-dimensional space narrative inquiry framework: temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I then explained the fluid nature of narrative inquiry, expressing how, at all times, the three dimensions are present simultaneously. Then, I provided my positionality and subjectivity statement related to this inquiry. I also described the Institutional Review Board process, research site, sampling, data collection, and data analysis procedures. Finally, I provided insight as to how I ensured

trustworthiness in this study. In the next chapter, I will provide a narrative description of each participant, as well as a detailed description of the themes found in this study.

CHAPTER IV
RESEARCH FINDINGS

One central research question guided this study: How do women support staff with advanced degrees describe their career experiences and opportunities in the higher education workplace? I apportioned this central research question among five research sub-questions, which were strongly informed and shaped by the theoretical frameworks with which I conceptualized this study as well as the research design I chose:

1. How do women support staff reflect on their career experiences?
2. How do women support staff describe their career goals?
3. How do women support staff perceive their career opportunity?
4. How do women support staff perceive the influence of advanced degree attainment on their career experiences and opportunities?
5. How do women support staff perceive the influence of gender on their career experiences and opportunities?

This chapter comprises two sections. First, I will provide a narrative description of the participants, each of which has been member checked. Second, I will describe the themes emerging from my qualitative data analysis procedures.

Participants

Eight participants contributed to this narrative inquiry. All participants, named by self-chosen pseudonyms, identified as women support staff in higher education. These participants represented two-year public, four-year public, and four-year private institutions across the midwestern, northeastern, and southeastern United States. Table 1 describes the participant demographics, and Table 2 describes the institution characteristics.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant Pseudonym	Institution Pseudonym	Department/Office Area	Institution Region	Employee Classification	Employment Type	Educational Attainment	Self-Identified Race and/or Ethnicity	Approximate Age
Alice	Northeastern City University	Career services	Northeast	Classified	Full-time	Master's (current student)	East Asian	Mid-20's
Bella	Midwestern Arts College	President's office	Midwest	Non-classified	Full-time	Master's	Caucasian	Early 60's
Catalina	Southeastern Public University	Academic department	Southeast	Classified	Full-time	Doctorate	White	Late 30's
Eliza	Southeastern Public University	Academic department	Southeast	Classified	Full-time	Master's (current student)	Caucasian	Mid-40's
Jackie	Southeastern City University	Academic department	Southeast	Classified	Full-time	Master's	African American	Late 30's
Janie	Southeastern Coastal University	Academic department	Southeast	Non-classified	Full-time	Master's	Asian	Early 30's
Renee	Northeastern Ivy League University	Executive offices	Northeast	Classified	Full-time	Master's (current student)	White	Early 30's
Sweet Pea	Midwestern Public Community College	College information office	Midwest	Classified	Full-time	Master's	African American	Early 60's

Table 2

Institution Characteristics

Participant Pseudonym	Institution Pseudonym	Institution Region	Institution of Employment Type	Carnegie Classification	Campus Setting	Approximate Student Population	Approximate Full- and Part-Time Staff Population	Approximate Full- and Part-Time Staff Population Categorized Office and Administrative Support Staff
Alice	Northeastern City University	Northeast	Four-Year Private Institution	Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity	City: Large	50,000	20,000	3,000
Bella	Midwestern Arts College	Midwest	Four-Year Private Institution	Special Focus Four-Year: Arts, Music & Design Schools	City: Large	400	200	15
Catalina	Southeastern Public University	Southeast	Four-Year Public Institution	Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity	City: Midsize	40,000	12,000	1,500
Eliza	Southeastern Public University	Southeast	Four-Year Public Institution	Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity	City: Midsize	40,000	12,000	1,500
Jackie	Southeastern City University	Southeast	Four-Year Private Institution	Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity	City: Large	14,000	13,000	850
Janie	Southeastern Coastal University	Southeast	Four-Year Public Institution	Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity	City: Midsize	35,000	8,000	1,200
Renee	Northeastern Ivy League University	Northeast	Four-Year Private Institution	Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity	City: Small	20,000	10,000	1,500
Sweet Pea	Midwestern Public Community College	Midwest	Two-Year Public Institution	Associate's Colleges: Mixed Transfer/ Vocational & Technical- Mixed Traditional/ Nontraditional	City: Large	20,000	3,000	400

Note. Adapted from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Fall 2020, Human Resources. https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/use-the-data

Narrative Descriptions

In the following section, I provide narrative descriptions of the participants. Illuminating each participant's past, present, and implied future, these narratives address each of the temporal dimensions associated with career experiences.

Alice

Alice is a woman in her mid-20's who identifies as East Asian. She holds a support staff position in career services at a four-year private institution of higher education in the northeastern United States, to which I have assigned the pseudonym Northeastern City University. Located in a large city setting, Northeastern City University is a doctoral university by Carnegie Classification. Northeastern City University enrolls approximately 50,000 students and employs over 20,000 staff members, of which approximately 3,000 are categorized office and administrative support staff. Alice coordinates events and handles various administrative tasks for her department (e.g., budget-related work, coordinating events, and maintaining employment statistics, among other duties). She is a full-time, classified employee. Alice currently holds a bachelor's degree and is using her tuition benefits to pursue a master's degree.

Alice's college experience largely shaped her career path. Her experience working as a career advisor and marketing assistant while a student at her undergraduate institution fueled her interest in career services. Alice's interest in career theory was piqued when she encountered various materials the career services office provided to students. After completing an internship at a mid-sized corporation, Alice decided she did not want to work in a corporation and wanted to work in higher education. Alice contends her older siblings, employees in human resources who have an innate tendency to help others, also influenced her career decisions.

After completing her undergraduate degree, Alice began her career in higher education as an office assistant at a for-profit college. Alice experienced a toxic work environment at this institution. The staff members were overworked, and the institution experienced high staff turnover rates. Alice then applied to the support staff position she currently holds at Northeastern City University.

Alice's support staff role is primarily focused on providing administrative assistance to the career services professionals in her office, leaving her with little direct student interaction. While Alice is grateful she is gaining experience in the field, she would like to have a more active role in career advising. When Alice does interact with students directly, she tries to implement some career advising in her correspondence. Giving tailored advice to students helps Alice gain more experience, but she recognizes the limit to which she can advise students in her current position.

Alice will soon complete a master's degree in higher education and is currently interviewing for career advising positions inside and outside Northeastern City University. Alice is also considering careers outside of student affairs. She reads student affairs social media channels frequently and is aware of the adverse working conditions often experienced by those in student affairs positions. Alice knows her skills are transferrable, and she has not limited her career goals to higher education. Instead, Alice has focused on choosing a career that fulfills her values. Alice does not want to restrict her job search to higher education because she believes her values can be fulfilled in higher education, corporate, or non-profit/government work. Alice is also concerned with her compensation: she has financial goals she would like to achieve within the next five years, and with her current salary, Alice will not accomplish those goals until after she is 30.

Bella

Bella is a woman in her early 60's who identifies as Caucasian. She holds a support staff position in the president's office at a four-year private institution of higher education in the midwestern United States, to which I have assigned the pseudonym Midwestern Arts College. Located in a large city setting, Midwestern Arts College is a special focus four-year by Carnegie Classification. Midwestern Arts College enrolls approximately 400 students and employs approximately 200 staff members, of which approximately 15 are categorized office and administrative support staff. Bella assists and manages the offices of the president and vice president. She also handles all administrative responsibilities pertaining to the Board of Trustees. She is a full-time, non-classified employee. Bella holds a master's degree.

When Bella graduated with her master's degree, she wanted to work in the arts, specifically in music. A major metropolitan opera hired her as an associate artist, and she was promoted to assistant to the directors. Bella has had various music-related jobs (e.g., working with children, working in her church). After years of time-intensive work experience at her church, Bella sought a support staff role to help her maintain a greater balance between motherhood and her career. When a support staff position opened at the institution where she earned her master's degree, Bella applied. Bella has served as support staff in the president's office at Midwestern Arts College for seven years.

Bella describes her role as fulfilling, challenging, and rewarding. She enjoys a positive working relationship with the senior leaders of her institution. As Bella has grown in tenure and expertise, her responsibilities have increased. For example, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, she began serving on the president's cabinet meetings and assisted in more projects to maintain operations during this challenging time. Bella takes her position seriously, recognizing

that her responsibilities in supporting senior leadership allow her to be seen as a leader as well. As such, Bella enjoys mentoring younger staff members, openly sharing her experience and advice with those who look up to her.

In her early 60's, Bella believes this will be her final full-time position and aims to retire from Midwestern Arts College. However, Bella does not see her support staff work coming to an end upon retirement. She derives great joy from navigating the challenges associated with supporting organizational leaders. In the future, Bella would like to continue temporary, part-time employment in the administrative support field.

Catalina

Catalina is a woman in her late 30's who identifies as White. She holds a support staff position in an academic department at a four-year public institution in the southeastern United States, to which I have assigned the pseudonym Southeastern Public University. Located in a midsize city setting, Southeastern Public University is a doctoral university by Carnegie Classification. Southeastern Public University enrolls approximately 40,000 students and employs approximately 12,000 staff members, of which approximately 1,500 are categorized office and administrative support staff. Catalina supports two associate deans in her academic department, conducting administrative and non-administrative tasks. She is a full-time, classified employee. Catalina holds a doctoral degree in the same discipline as her academic department.

As an undergraduate biology major, Catalina planned to become a doctor. However, after a hospital internship, she decided to pursue veterinary science. A job at a local veterinary clinic helped Catalina discover she did not enjoy the realities of veterinary work. A junior year National Science Foundation research program helped Catalina find her passion for ecology. In particular, Catalina enjoyed the fieldwork component. After completing her master's degree,

Catalina took a job with the U.S. Forest Service. While she loved the work, Catalina struggled with being the only woman in the entire district office aside from the office manager. After experiencing a toxic work environment where male counterparts regularly ignored her expertise, Catalina returned to graduate school for a doctoral degree to conduct research.

Catalina enrolled in her doctoral program at the same institution where her then-fiancé was working on his doctoral program. While Catalina was thrilled to be a research assistant in the same city as her partner, she decided not to pursue professorial work as her time in academia progressed. A year and a half into her doctoral program, Catalina's now-husband was selected for an out-of-state postdoc position, so they moved together. After another year, Catalina's husband got a postdoc with a federal agency a couple of hours from her hometown. Catalina continued to work on her doctoral studies and began working at the federal agency.

One day, as Catalina drove home from work, a traumatic car accident put her life in perspective. Catalina attributes this life-changing event to her and her husband's decision to start their family. A difficult pregnancy added a year to her dissertation. Then, working nights while her son slept, Catalina successfully defended her dissertation when her son was 18 months old.

As Catalina's husband concluded his postdoc position, he was offered a permanent position at his research unit. Catalina and her husband were elated to stay in the small city they loved. However, in 2016, one of then-President Trump's first actions was to cancel new federal hiring, leaving Catalina's husband without the job offer. Catalina and her family were devastated. Fortunately, Catalina's husband was offered a competitive tenure-track position across the country, and the family relocated to the city they live in today.

Catalina's expertise is specific to rangeland ecology, and her new location did not have the same ecological composition. Given the intense demands on her husband's time and energy

with his new professorship, Catalina decided she did not want to pursue a career that would further complicate their lives. They did not have family or friends nearby to help with childcare, so Catalina decided to pursue an administrative career that would include regular business hours, low stress, and have some degree of flexibility since her husband's schedule was unpredictable. Catalina was thrilled to be offered a support staff role in an academic department aligned with her discipline.

Catalina loves her current position at Southeastern Public University. She feels valued and respected by her supervisors and administration. Her workplace culture is positive, and she is happy to come to work most days. Catalina's daily work ranges from simple tasks like ordering office supplies to complex projects like assisting in grant writing. She enjoys interacting with passionate researchers and appreciates that every day is different than the last. Catalina's hard work was rewarded when her position was reclassified to a higher pay grade after a year of employment. She feels lucky to have landed where she is now. Having watched others struggle to balance faculty and family demands, Catalina is happy she pursued a support staff position. Now that her husband is making his way toward tenure, Catalina is sure she made the right decision.

As much as she enjoys her role, Catalina predicts desiring a more challenging position as her child gets older and more independent. She is interested in pursuing upper-level administrative positions in institutional research or faculty affairs at Southeastern Public University. By building on her experience in her current role and adding additional duties and training, Catalina believes she will be able to transition into a position with more challenge and responsibility in the future.

Eliza

Eliza is a woman in her mid-40's who identifies as Caucasian. She holds a support staff position in an academic department at Southeastern Public University, where Catalina is also employed (please refer to the description of Southeastern Public University above). Eliza handles the Dean's Office in her department, coordinating the calendar, onboarding faculty hires, assisting with development and alumni relations, working with internal and external clients, and coordinating events, among other duties. She is a full-time, classified employee. Eliza currently holds bachelor's degrees in journalism and sociology and is using her tuition benefits to pursue a master's degree in public administration.

Eliza's career experiences have always been in customer service or administrative support. She worked in retail for five years as a student and then moved to banking when she completed her undergraduate degree. Eliza worked at the bank for fifteen years, being hired as a customer service representative and eventually promoted to branch manager. After having twins, Eliza took time off from the bank and worked as a temp at Southeastern Public University. While she returned to the bank after her temp work, after ten more years at the bank, Eliza returned to Southeastern Public University, and she remains in her support staff position there today.

Eliza believes her current position is an excellent fit with her role as a mom. The work is not too difficult or stressful, and she never takes work home. Eliza never wanted to miss her children's activities, and her support staff role allows her to remain present in the lives of her children. Eliza decided to pursue a master's degree when her children were older. She has been able to work her full-time job, attend classes in the evenings, and still be a very present mother. Eliza does not regret pursuing a more challenging career, as she enjoys her duties helping others at home and work.

Eliza enjoys her job and coworkers, but as she approaches graduation in the coming months, she is considering the future of her career. If she remains at Southeastern Public University, which she plans to do for retirement benefits, Eliza believes her choices may be limited. Eliza is drawn to working with underrepresented and marginalized students, as she would like to feel a greater sense of purpose in her work. However, the available job openings are similar in compensation to her current position but hold a much higher workload. If Eliza does not leave her current role, she feels content to continue helping the students, faculty, staff, and alumni of her academic department.

Jackie

Jackie is a woman in her late 30's who identifies as African American. She holds a support staff position in an academic department at a four-year private institution of higher education in the United States, to which I have assigned the pseudonym Southeastern Private University. Located in a large city setting, Southeastern Private University is a doctoral university by Carnegie Classification. Southeastern Private University enrolls approximately 14,000 students and employs approximately 13,000 staff members, of which approximately 850 are categorized office and administrative support staff. Jackie's role is dedicated to supporting faculty, enrolling students, and coordinating large-scale meetings and events. She is a full-time, classified employee. Jackie holds a master's degree related to archival studies and history.

Jackie was diagnosed with three major chronic pain illnesses as a senior in high school, drastically altering her career goals. Jackie shifted from being active and pursuing a career in paleontology or archaeology to rethinking her career trajectory in light of her disabilities. An avid history enthusiast, Jackie considered pursuing a doctoral degree that would allow her to be a researcher, archivist, or professor. To save money on higher education, she pursued a career at

her local college. Her disabilities also influenced her decision to work in an office. Jackie did not plan to continue working in the field for more than five years, as she was met with a negative experience almost immediately, feeling restrained and uninspired in higher education.

While Jackie enjoys working with her current coworkers, she ultimately feels unfulfilled in her career today. Although she worked her way up from a lower support staff role, Jackie believes that any position in higher education feels unimportant, overworked, underpaid, and ignored. She feels new ideas are stifled, criticized, and discouraged in higher education. Jackie is a creative, motivated person who feels stagnant in higher education. Jackie's three side businesses exercise her creativity, but they alone do not generate enough revenue to allow her to exit the higher education field. Jackie does not believe in staying in one role for longer than three years if she has not acquired new skills, which she sees to be a common occurrence in most higher education roles. Jackie also feels it is nearly impossible to secure a higher-level title in higher education if you are an African American woman without a doctorate.

As Jackie looks toward her future career, she feels controlled by her disabilities. Any positions she pursues must not be too strenuous or stressful. Jackie feels burned out by her unfulfilling support staff role. She has investigated either pursuing certifications in information technology, project management, or moving forward with securing her notary signing agent certification. Additionally, Jackie has not given up on the idea that she could pursue a career related to her academic expertise. However, well-paid archival career opportunities are rare in Jackie's city, so she must be creative with what career path she pursues in the future.

Janie

Janie is a woman in her early 30's who identifies as Asian. She holds a support staff position in an academic department at a four-year public institution of higher education in the

southeastern United States, to which I have assigned the pseudonym Southeastern Coastal University. Located in a midsize city setting, Southeastern Coastal University is a doctoral university by Carnegie Classification. Southeastern Coastal University enrolls approximately 35,000 students and employs approximately 8,000 staff members, of which approximately 1,200 are categorized office and administrative support staff. Janie coordinates logistics for a certification program and a master's program and serves as the administrative assistant to an associate dean. She is a full-time, non-classified employee. Janie holds two master's degrees.

Janie did not have a specific dream job while she was growing up. She studied English while in college in the United States and studied business at a university in East Asia. After completing her MBA, Janie worked in marketing at a large company in East Asia. After a year, Janie quit working at the company and began taking Chinese classes at another university in East Asia for personal interest and enrichment. She took a few semesters of coursework before she needed to supplement her income, so she started another full-time job in marketing. Feeling unhappy and uninspired, Janie left the position to take more Chinese classes. She excelled in the coursework and was soon earning an ongoing, reliable source of income through freelance translation work for about a year. Janie then decided to move to a new city in East Asia, taking another job in marketing for a small business. By that time, Janie realized she was no longer interested in marketing; however, she felt her past career experiences boxed her into the field. Janie continued to freelance as a translator, ultimately leading her to leave the city to pursue a more permanent position in translation. She left the country to enroll in a master's program to become a linguistic professional. Upon completing her second master's degree, Janie intended to find a job as a project manager at a translation agency, an in-house translator, or a freelance

translator. However, just as she completed her degree, Janie's partner was offered and accepted a job at Southeastern Coastal University.

After relocating, Janie continued looking for full-time translation-related jobs, but her new city did not have a demand for translation. Janie continued translating freelance and focused on building her professional services (e.g., getting certified, creating a website, etc.). At the same time, Janie began considering roles in higher education. Since her partner intended to work in higher education long-term, Janie contended, a role in higher education would make it easier for the couple to stay in one place together. Furthermore, she knew working at her partner's large public institution would provide appealing benefits and stability. In February 2020, Janie was hired into her current support staff position at Southeastern Coastal University.

Janie's department consists of herself and her manager, the associate dean of the academic department in which she works. Just weeks after beginning her job, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted everyday life and sent Janie to remote work. Janie theorizes she was not at risk of losing her position during this time due to the small size of her department and the ability to fulfill her job duties remotely. In a time of much instability, Janie was grateful to report to a manager who was supportive of her ability to work remotely.

Janie was concerned she might feel bored, unchallenged, or uninspired when she began this role. Janie attributes her leaving previous office jobs to similar feelings. The qualifications for the support staff position left her thinking she had wasted time on her specialized degrees. However, Janie describes the first six months of her position as a whirlwind: the pandemic became an opportunity to re-envision and implement one of the programs she runs as a fully online program. Janie's manager, in his 80's, did not have the technical skills necessary to convert this program on his own, so Janie was uniquely qualified to meet the challenge. Janie

threw herself into researching online teaching resources, recreating processes for online delivery, and managing all correspondence and logistics related to the transition. She enjoyed the large-scale organization of this immense process, and unlike office jobs she had previously, Janie felt needed and challenged.

By August 2020, much of Janie's day-to-day tasks reverted to those of traditional support staff. Janie enjoys having a list to check off each day but sometimes feels insulted by the mundane and repetitive nature of the position. Working remotely, Janie will perform her tasks as needed, but she can also find things to do around the house or run personal errands when work is slow. During the initial COVID-19 lockdown, Janie could freelance over 100 hours of freelance translation work because her day-to-day work had slowed so significantly. Since then, remote work has allowed Janie to continue her position in higher education while taking on additional translation cases.

While Janie enjoys the stability and benefits provided by her position, she recognizes her compensation is low, and there is no opportunity for advancement within her department. Janie has begun exploring job opportunities throughout Southeastern Coastal University, mainly in student services and advising, but she is not searching urgently at this time. She has also considered moving back into freelance translation full-time or seeking in-house translation positions, but Janie and her partner plan to remain in their city for the next three to four years, where translation opportunities remain limited. Janie recognizes her degree in translation is not a waste if the couple relocates to an area with a higher demand for translators. Janie is also considering enrolling in a translation certification program, which would give her an advantage in future translation work.

Janie's current and past jobs have not defined the fulfillment she gets out of her life. She has specific hobbies and interests that fulfill her outside of work hours. Janie's position does not negatively impact her or keep her from engaging in personal interests, so she is content with her work circumstances at this time.

Renee

Renee is a woman in her early 30's who identifies as White. She holds a support staff position in the executive offices at a four-year private institution in the northeastern United States, to which I have assigned the pseudonym Northeastern Ivy League University. Located in a small city setting, Northeastern Ivy League University is a doctoral university by Carnegie Classification. Northeastern Ivy League University enrolls approximately 20,000 students and employs approximately 10,000 staff members, of which approximately 1,500 are categorized office and administrative support staff. Renee coordinates office calendars, plans events, upkeeps databases, and oversees many office management duties. She is a full-time, classified employee. Renee currently holds a master's degree in photojournalism and is using her tuition benefits to pursue a master's degree in higher education.

Renee describes her career journey as long and winding. She began working at 15 years old to keep up with her slightly more wealthy friends. After finishing her first graduate degree, Renee took a year-long contract position conducting research for a private foundation she found through a personal contact. After the contract position ended, Renee took a local bakery and catering job because it made $15 an hour, much higher than the minimum wage. After a few years in that position, Renee began working at an immigration law firm, where she earned valuable work experience. This was the first time Renee felt confident in her employment, gaining knowledge in immigration law. She worked with many higher education students at the

law firm and became interested in transitioning to higher education. Renee initially wanted to work in an international office at a college or university, but she applied to all jobs for which she was qualified to get her foot in the door. At that time, Renee applied to a master's degree program in higher education to give her an advantage as she interviewed for positions. Renee feels master's degrees are required for far too many jobs but speculates she may not have been chosen for her current support staff role if she had not pursued her higher education degree.

Renee's position at Northeastern Ivy League University supports various entities of the upper administration, including the institution's budget office, capital and space planning office, institutional research office, and academic affairs office. Renee recognizes she holds a unique position that has taught her a great deal about how an institution functions at its highest levels from various vantage points. Renee's job has also been advantageous as she pursues a degree in higher education; her day-to-day work has informed her studies on multiple occasions.

Renee hopes to be moving into a new position in the very immediate future. On the same day Renee wrote her career reflection, she interviewed for a higher executive assistant position with senior leadership. When Renee started her current job, she was apprehensive about staying in support staff roles long-term, as she felt they did not lead to any upward mobility. At that time, Renee saw herself moving toward more student-facing positions, possibly related to her interest in international student support. However, now that she has seen positive examples of women supporting leaders at her institution, Renee is considering moving up in administrative support roles. The chief administrator for the provost has been at Northeastern Ivy League University for over 20 years. Renee looks up to this person and asserts her position is vital to the university operations. Renee is not certain what her career future may look like, but she thinks she would be successful as an administrator with managerial responsibilities.

Sweet Pea

Sweet Pea is a woman in her early 60's who identifies as African American. She holds a support staff position in the information office at a two-year public institution in the midwestern United States, to which I have assigned the pseudonym Midwestern Public Community College. Located in a large city setting, Midwestern Public Community College is an associate's college by Carnegie Classification. Midwestern Public Community College enrolls approximately 20,000 students and employs approximately 3,000 staff members, of which approximately 400 are categorized office and administrative support staff. Sweet Pea provides resources and support to students, faculty, employees, and the community. She is a full-time, classified employee. Sweet Pea currently holds a master's degree related to mental health and is using her tuition benefits to pursue an associate degree in a language area of interest.

Sweet Pea has always focused on helping others through her various career experiences. She worked with summer youth programs and job development programs as a teenager. When Sweet Pea was older, she worked as a nurse assistant, preparing patients to see the doctor. While earning her first associate degree in community college, Sweet Pea was hired as a student assistant at the institution where she now holds a support staff position. Attending college and working was challenging, but she made many connections throughout the college and had a support system in her office. Sweet Pea left college for her first full-time job as a receptionist at a local corporation, which she greatly enjoyed. But as time passed, Sweet Pea was ready for a change and returned to college to finish her associate degree. After graduating, Sweet Pea was hired as a dispatcher for her city's police department, which was incredibly stressful. Eventually, Sweet Pea became a dispatcher back at her community college, which was a much better experience. She was able to help many people, and every day was different. She knew she

wanted to work for Midwestern Public Community College because she enjoyed working there as a student. Sweet Pea held this position for ten years and earned her bachelor's degree at a local four-year institution through her tuition benefits. However, Sweet Pea began to realize there was no opportunity to advance within her current department at the community college. Sweet Pea then applied for and was offered the support staff position she holds today.

Once in her support staff position, Sweet Pea began taking courses related to mental health counseling for her master's degree. While taking graduate coursework and working full-time was challenging, Sweet Pea was supported and inspired by her supervisor. After successfully completing her master's degree, Sweet Pea pursued licensure in the mental health field. Unfortunately, Sweet Pea did not pass the test due to test anxiety and was not licensed. She was left feeling depressed and unsure about her career opportunities.

However, Sweet Pea soon learned her institution was hiring instructors for the first-year experience course required for all freshmen. Sweet Pea's master's degree qualified her to be an instructor, so she applied for the job. In addition to her support staff role, Sweet Pea has taught the first-year experience course for five years. Sweet Pea describes her teaching experience as a blessing. In this role, she is able to connect with students and develop positive relationships. Sweet Pea attributes her connection with students to her identity as a life-long learner. Sweet Pea is thankful that she has a supervisor who encourages her teaching first-year experience in addition to her support staff position.

As Sweet Pea looks toward her career future, she believes there is no opportunity for growth from her support staff position. She has applied for several higher positions within the institution with no reply, and it has left her feeling frustrated. However, Sweet Pea is comforted by the fact that she likes her current support staff job, and she has the opportunity to teach first-

year experience. After more than 20 years at Midwestern Public Community College, Sweet Pea believes moving up is more about who one knows rather than how qualified one is for the position. Sweet Pea has not given up on potentially advancing within her institution but also concludes she would be satisfied to continue her current position helping students, faculty, and the community in addition to teaching first-year experience until her retirement.

Themes

The participants contributed to this study by partaking in a virtual introductory meeting, completing a written reflection outlining their career journey thus far, and participating in a virtual interview. I transcribed the virtual interviews, and all participants member checked the transcriptions. Once all transcripts were member checked, I coded the written reflections and interview transcripts narratively, with an emphasis on the commonplaces of the three-dimensional space: temporality, sociality, and place. Then, I coded the transcripts inductively to ensure I did not omit any themes.

Through my qualitative data analysis, I interpreted 11 distinct but interrelated themes: (1) the challenge and reward of support staff work, (2) the disrespect and invisibility of support staff work, (3) uncertain career goals inside higher education, (4) openness to career goals outside higher education, (5) perceiving opportunity, (6) navigating absence of opportunity, (7) the value of networking, (8) the benefit of an advanced degree, (9) the benefit of woman identity, (10) the hindrance of woman identity, and (11) the influence of identities beyond gender. I will share participants' stories within each theme.

Theme One: The Challenge and Reward of Support Staff Work

Most participants cited aspects of their support staff role that were enjoyable to them, though these specific aspects varied widely by the participant. Many participants described their

roles as challenging and fulfilling on both a professional and personal level. The support staff role can be ambiguous, leading to discontent and unclear expectations. However, in some cases, this ambiguity can lead to work duties that are consistently evolving and challenging, resulting in more substantial employee engagement. Bella, Catalina, and Renee expressed feelings of engagement in their work, describing it as rarely repetitive. While these participants appreciated the challenge, they were also outspoken about this reality in their day-to-day work. Renee, for example, reported to three different institutional leaders and appreciated the varied perspectives gained from her wide-ranging duties. However, as she assisted primarily on a surface level in her current support staff role, Renee was interviewing for positions that report to a single leader. She shared:

> I'm learning a lot from supporting three different people. I'm always trying to keep up with all of them, so it's not boring… [but] I feel like because I don't spend all of my time with each person… I've certainly learned all of their preferences, I guess… but I don't get to become fully immersed in the work. And there are still some things I don't totally understand, like what's the point of this, or what is this committee that you're on? And so, I do look forward to being able to fully immerse myself in [the support of] one person.

Two participants, Bella and Catalina, earned promotions by serving in capacities beyond their initial job duties. For example, as a new president was about to be hired at Midwestern Arts College, the interim president seized the opportunity to recognize Bella's contributions beyond her initial job duties through a promotion, including a title change and pay increase. Similarly, Catalina, who came into her support staff position with a doctoral degree, earned her promotion when a new leader became her supervisor. She highlighted:

> [My new supervisor] felt strongly, after working with me for a few months, that he didn't want to lose me, and he didn't want me to just be treated as admin. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but he felt like given my degree and background and the level of tasks that I was doing, he wanted to recognize that it was a little more complicated than just a basic administrative role. He felt like other faculty and people at other places would give me more respect if I had a different title. I think he felt like it would give me more incentive to stay here and be happier here, to put me in a little bit of a higher-level position than just an admin position. Because the work that I was doing was a lot more complicated than the other people who had that same position.

While additional participants referenced performing duties outside of their official support staff job descriptions, not all had been recognized in the form of promotion for their efforts.

The participants shared stories of helping supervisors, faculty, students, and the community. Assisting these different factions of the higher education population brought the participants a sense of pride in their role. When describing her contributions, Catalina justified how she sees her role directly impacting the successes of her academic department:

> We're one of the most highly productive schools in the entire university, and it's a very large university. I think part of that is because our faculty have this really solid support foundation and they have people who will help them with anything they need… When they're not spending all their time trying to figure out where this grant money went, or how to get that student paid… when they have someone that can help take care of that, they can spend their time doing the real things like teaching and research. I feel like helping support that success for them is a win for me.

Sweet Pea, who interacts with various constituent groups across Midwestern Public Community College, expressed a similar sentiment:

> I know in my heart what I do by helping people… just being there to help students, faculty, and the community. I like it when I can make a smile on someone's face. If they're stressing out about taking a test, or a hold on their account for whatever reason, financial aid, or academic issues… those little accolades are what really make me appreciate my career and what I do. I feel I am where I am supposed to be.

Working in the executive offices of Midwestern Arts College, Bella's contributions help her feel secure in her position:

> Without sounding overconfident, I think it would be harder on the president to try to replace me after five years, than to hang on to me. So that's a really good feeling and that makes me work harder… I just want to do everything I can for him. I care and respect what he has done for that institution so much that I want to continue to support the institution by the work I do… I love being a part of the challenges, the successes. It's just been a real joy to see what both the vice president and president have accomplished, and to have a part in that… I mean, that makes me very happy.

While some participants found the most fulfillment through their contributions, others found fulfillment through the relationships they have built with colleagues. Jackie, who worked at other institutions before taking her current position at Southeastern City University, described this kind of collaborative relationship:

> It's refreshing to actually have that kind of work experience. I've never had it before in my professional career… we don't just toss things aside; we don't say "that's not my job" and pass the buck to someone else. Because we really care about supporting one another

> and ensuring the department is taken care of… we respect each other as professionals and as people.

Eliza also appreciated her colleagues at Southeastern Public University. In fact, she expressed apprehension about pursuing career goals, as her pursuit will likely take her away from her current colleagues and the pleasant relationships she has built. The participants who described a positive workplace recognized this environment is not guaranteed in every office. Jackie described her office environment as "an anomaly" in higher education. And some, like Eliza, seek to enjoy this environment as long as possible - even if it means forgoing opportunities to advance.

Many participants attributed positive feelings about their support staff roles to working in higher education overall. Bella, Eliza, Sweet Pea, and Renee were all drawn to working at their respective institutions rather than their specific roles. Bella, for example, earned her master's degree from Midwestern Arts College before she had children and was thrilled to return as support staff when her children were older. Similarly, Sweet Pea worked at Midwestern Public Community College as a student and had so many remarkable experiences with staff mentors during this time that she was inspired to return as a staff member after earning her degree. Eliza and Renee both described their institutions as the preferred places of employment in their respective cities, and for this reason, they expressed challenges in getting an interview. Eliza elaborated on this struggle:

> I remember when I was working as a temp [at Southeastern Public University]. I would see the applications come in. You'd have 800 applications per job… you get so many applicants. It's incredibly hard. My husband has applied in the past, 60 plus jobs. My sister did that too.

Although there are many reasons the participants were drawn to working in higher education, they most frequently cited employment benefits. For example, Alice, Eliza, Renee, and Sweet Pea, all currently enrolled in degree programs at the time of their interviews, emphasized tuition benefits. While the participants believed their education would help them advance in their careers to some extent, participants like Eliza valued the networking opportunities alone:

> My institution paid for [my master's degree], so that was huge… Would I have done it if I had to pay for it? No. I would not have put my family in that kind of debt because I don't think that the outcome would have been worth it. But the friendships I've made and the connections I've made in this program have just been absolutely wonderful, and nobody can take it away from me.

Some participants emphasized how their support staff roles were complimentary to pursuing another degree. The relatively low-stress nature and flexibility of their duties allowed participants to balance schoolwork and career. However, the extent to which one can maintain this balance is highly dependent on the support of one's supervisor and colleagues. Alice illustrated her experience:

> I'm really grateful to be on my team because they're just so flexible on my work hours. Like, one of my classes starts at 4:55. And so, I was asking, can I just start my workday at 8:30 and end at 4:30? My boss was like, that's totally fine with me. So, I'm really grateful to have a team that is so flexible with that and so understanding. Because my boss also got her degree from this institution while she was working full time, so she understands.

Alice and Renee, pursuing advanced degrees in higher education, expressed how their schoolwork was integrated into their day-to-day work experiences. Renee described one assignment related to space planning in which she was able to collaborate and learn from her director. Renee emphasized, “I have learned a lot from this job, and it has been a great introduction to higher education.”

While exploring other benefits associated with working in higher education, Renee and Janie described how employment at a large, stable institution was alluring as they considered potential careers. Janie, who did not originally intend to work in higher education, explained why she was comforted by employment at Southeastern Coastal University amid the COVID-19 pandemic:

> It wasn't [related to my original career goals], so at the time, I did feel a little disappointed about what I was getting myself into. But it was maybe the right choice… There was comfort in knowing that despite all the disruptions and uncertainty with the pandemic, people still wanted to get an education and get a degree, so the university had to keep chugging on… being in education and in an industry that’s such a social pillar gave my job a lot of cover and gave us a constant through everything.

Overall, while the participants had different perspectives on what they enjoyed about their positions, they each actively recognized aspects of their employment that were challenging and rewarding.

Theme Two: The Disrespect and Invisibility of Support Staff Work

Although the participants cited qualities of their support staff roles that were enjoyable, many participants also expressed unpleasant aspects. The participants’ concerns varied among

those role-specific, those applicable to their institutions at large, and those applicable to the entire sector of higher education.

The most common concern among the participants was disrespectful treatment. While the participants stressed not all people treated them with disrespect, they still felt disrespected by the actions of certain individuals or groups, and they felt this disrespect was related to support staff's place within the organizational hierarchy. Catalina, Eliza, and Jackie expressed some faculty members exhibited disrespectful actions toward them. Catalina recalled her interactions with disrespectful faculty:

> As a support person, we're not always treated with a great deal of… I don't know if respect is the right word… but we're just kind of expected to do our job and people can be pretty brusque and demanding and not very appreciative. And there's a small handful of folks that are pretty difficult for all of the staff to deal with, and that's been the hardest or the most unenjoyable part. You still have to do what they need and be pleasant and polite and happy and friendly about it. But they can be pretty rude and demanding. Kind of expecting miracles sometimes that we can't make happen.

Similarly, Jackie has felt belittled by the faculty in her academic department:

> It is almost as if anything goes. You can just be as toxic as you want, as abusive as you want. Faculty are allowed to do that, especially if they're tenured. They're allowed to be very abusive, very mean spirited. I've had people yelling at me… a lot of very accusatory combative language.

Eliza, who has experienced similar unpleasant faculty encounters, has found correcting her title helps to minimize the disparagement:

> I have these older [male faculty members], you know, 60-70, come in, and they're like, oh, are you the dean's secretary?... Don't call me that. Not that there's anything wrong with that. I just did not go to college for somebody to call me that. And that's not my role. There's so much more to my role. That's why they call us administrative assistants and not secretaries.

The participant's stories of disrespect were not exclusive to faculty interactions. Jackie also illustrated the lack of respect she feels from the graduate students with whom she works:

> At times the graduate students can be very condescending. They have an assumption that you're not educated because you're working in-person and you're not in possession of a Ph.D. I have to constantly remind people that you have to be respectful, you can't speak to me like that. Don't speak to me in a manner that I'm an idiot. You have no idea what I have accomplished.

The participants' advanced degree attainment can compound the disrespect they perceive, as Janie shared:

> I feel insulted sometimes by the nature of the position. I get emails from students asking me basic information that could be found on the university website with a little time spent on the search bar, or my manager will ask me to find him an old email or read me a link that he wants me to save "somewhere." Moments like that – they're funny as happy hour stories, but it's also laughable to me that this kind of position would require a master's.

Although the severity of the disrespect varied for each participant, the interviews revealed that disrespect is widespread among the support staff work experience.

In addition to disrespect, some participants vocalized feelings of invisibility. Jackie, Renee, and Sweet Pea revealed they sometimes feel their efforts go unnoticed. While these

participants recognize their contributions as necessary, they know that many, including those at the highest levels of their organizations, have little knowledge of support staff functions. Jackie has faced this reality when bringing new ideas to her organization:

> In higher ed support roles, you don't feel seen. It's like they expect you to be there to be seen and not heard. You're just a filler in the seat. Do your job, that's it. We don't want to hear your plans, we don't want to hear about your day, we don't want to hear about your life goals. We don't care. Just do what we want you to do and what we need. As long as you keep us happy and give us what we want, that's all we care about.

Another concern among some participants was compensation. In regard to their current support staff roles, Jackie and Janie explained their salaries are low and offer no option of negotiation. Jackie grappled with the frustrations of this reality:

> The cost of living has increased dramatically, but the pay has not in higher ed support staff roles, your job description is never exactly what you will be doing… in this current role, there are things I'm doing now that I was not told I would be doing two years ago... you're just expected to just do it and just shut up.

Of all participants, Jackie expressed the most discontent with her experiences working in higher education, to the point where she feels she can no longer work in the sector. She conveyed feelings of burnout in her role and garnered the most enjoyment from her endeavors outside the higher education workplace. Jackie asserted:

> A lot of people wouldn't take these roles if they knew that this is the way they would be treated. It's just that there's a bait and switch when you're doing your training. I think a lot of, especially millennials, I don't think we're just going to be paper pushers. Like we

really want to do some things that are innovative and creative and inspiring. You want to feel alive when you go to work.

Although they adamantly recognized their own contributions, these participants felt unheard and largely ignored by others in their institutions. However, it is important to note that the first two themes, focusing on the benefits and harms associated with support staff work, were not exclusive. Most participants cited both positive and negative aspects of their support staff roles, explaining that this is the reality of being support staff in higher education.

Theme Three: Uncertain Career Goals Inside Higher Education

Participants shared thoughts about their career futures regardless of where they were in their careers. Most participants felt, while they did not know exactly where they saw their career journeys leading in the future, they were looking forward to what the future could hold in higher education. Alice, Catalina, Eliza, Janie, Renee, and Sweet Pea vocalized this balance between uncertainty and possibility. Of these participants, those under 40 years old (Alice, Catalina, Janie, and Renee) were confident they would move beyond their current support staff roles at some point. Conversely, those over 40 years old (Eliza and Sweet Pea) expressed feelings of contentment if they could not eventually advance in their careers. Eliza stated, “Who knows where this new degree may take me? But if it doesn’t, I’m content to continue helping my academic department be the best it can be for its students, faculty, staff, alums, and supporters.”

All participants discussed job searching to some extent, though they varied in their approach and urgency. At the time of our interview, Renee had just interviewed for a support staff role in the executive offices of Northeastern Ivy League University. Renee did not know if she wanted to stay in similar roles at her institution until recently. She revealed a realization during our interview:

> Since I've been talking to you and thinking about support staff more, I am seeing it as more of a career path and an opportunity rather than just, like, jumping from job to job. I'm invested in this with a master's degree, and I am interested in it. I feel like I've found my thing.

Renee also recognized she is not entirely sure where her career may take her. "I feel like I'm still in a building up stage to whatever that job is, and I'm not sure what that job is yet."

At the time of our interview, Alice had recently interviewed for a career advising position at her institution, Northeastern City University. While her current support staff role is situated in a career services office, she recognizes the limitations of her role that prevent her from having the direct, student-facing interactions she hopes to have in the future. When thinking about the student populations she would like to serve, Alice recognized the determination of non-traditional students. Alice shared:

> I think [non-traditional students] are pursuing education to redevelop themselves, reform their narratives… I want to work with these students… help them understand and navigate the job market. Help them really sell themselves to employers.

Alice said once she completes her master's degree, she intends to broaden her job search to positions beyond her current institution.

At the time of our interview, Janie was casually looking at other positions in her institution, Southeastern Coastal University. Among these positions were student services and advising openings, as those positions are consistently open at her institution. However, Janie recognized she does not have formal training in advising or student support, which may inhibit her from meeting the qualifications for these positions. Janie expressed interest in event planning and has considered seeking out event planning positions in higher education. However, she

recognized these positions are harder to find than those in advising or student support. Janie emphasized merging her translation expertise with her higher education career, but she seemed unsure what positions might unify those two aspects of her life.

Eliza, who was weeks away from completing her master's degree at the time of our interview, was also casually job searching within her institution, Southeastern Public University. Eliza aspires to work with students as a professional staff or faculty member, emphasizing equal opportunity and access to higher education. She described:

> I would like to have a purpose in my job. I feel I'm not really making a difference in anyone's life, and I think it would be very fulfilling to help underrepresented and/or marginalized students.

Eliza recognized her interests had been primarily inspired by recent political movements toward justice and equity for minoritized populations. Overall, she said, "I want to make a difference, besides at the voting booth. I want my kids to see that."

Catalina, who was also employed at Southeastern Public University, acknowledged her support staff role is ideal for her life right now, as she has a young child and a husband who is a tenure track faculty member. Although she did not plan to begin her job search soon, she planned to seek higher-level positions when "home life gets a little easier to manage." She discussed:

> Eventually I'd like to take on something a little more challenging with a little more responsibility. Maybe at a higher level where, instead of just helping my one department, I can have more of a hand in university-wide progress or support… helping faculty to just be as successful as they can be… I'm just so impressed and in awe of all this amazing work that all these people do that I just want to help them all be successful at it in any way that I can, by just providing any support that they need.

While Catalina was not sure what her future position may look like, she was confident about continuing assisting faculty in any capacity.

Both Bella and Sweet Pea were in their early 60's and were beginning to contemplate retirement. Though neither participant intended to 'retire fully.' Bella shared she was looking forward to supporting other organizations as a temporary executive assistant. Likewise, Sweet Pea hoped to continue her adjunct instructing position for the first-year experience course long beyond her support staff role. Sweet Pea was also open to counseling students part-time after her retirement, if the opportunity were to be offered to her. Having served their institutions for many years, both Bella and Sweet Pea expressed a sense of respect for their work, not intending to retire until it was the 'right time.'

For those who sought advancement within higher education, the participants' career goals were unclear. There was no common or traditional career ladder for advancement in higher education for these women support staff.

Theme Four: Openness to Career Goals Outside Higher Education

While all participants shared their career goals, not all goals were related to careers in higher education. Several participants were currently pursuing employment opportunities outside higher education or considering doing so.

As previously discussed, Janie's background in translation has contributed to her career considerations. Janie said if she leaves higher education employment, she knows she can move into a translation position. Janie anticipated staying in her current location for another three or four years, as her partner was also employed at Southeastern Coastal University. Therefore, Janie will likely stay employed in higher education until she and her partner decide to move to another location with a higher demand for translators. When reflecting on her career goals, Janie

recognized her perspective was not limited to staying in higher education because she has always been concentrated on making her life fulfilling beyond her labor. She shared:

> My current and past jobs have always been strictly 9-5 events that don't define much of the fulfillment I get out of my life. I'm aware of the idea that you should do what you love and love what you do, but I have very specific hobbies and interests that fulfill me outside of work hours, so I don't feel like I need a day job that checks that box for me. My current job doesn't negatively impact me or keep me from engaging in the things I love, and it's easy to compartmentalize, so I'm content with my current situation, even if it has the appearance of unambitious.

Janie's work was a mechanism through which she could sustain the lifestyle she desired, rather than a calling through which she gained purpose.

Similarly, although Alice sought career advising positions, she was not limiting her job search to higher education institutions. Alice detailed her apprehension about remaining in higher education employment:

> I've read online… [about] the intense burnout and toxicity of various organizational cultures at many schools across the nation. I know I have many transferable skills that can be applied outside of student affairs… and I know I don't need to stay within student affairs all my life. I learned from these groups that companies value our knowledge of adult learning, on curriculum development, and how institutions function, especially campus recruiting roles, so I know I can choose to leave this field when I feel the time is right… I've been in higher ed since I was in college, and I know there are roles in corporate (also for non-profits and government work) that are people-serving, so those fulfill my values.

Jackie also attributed the toxicity of higher education employment to her longing to leave the field:

> Unfortunately, for me at this time, I feel the best bet for me is to be an entrepreneur. I'm just burned out from working within the realm of higher education. I don't like the abuse. I don't like the racism, the sexism, the ageism.

Jackie felt work outside higher education would be far more fulfilling, rewarding, and affirming. For Alice and Jackie, the toxicity of the field has encouraged them to look beyond higher education for employment opportunities.

Although their reasonings varied, these participants were willing to look beyond higher education to advance their careers. These participants recognized their value and were open to transferring their knowledge and skills to a new employment sector.

Theme Five: Perceiving Opportunity

Alice, Catalina, Eliza, and Renee felt there was an opportunity to advance within their institutions. Their evidence of career opportunity manifested in different forms. Alice and Renee felt their institutions promoted infrastructure that encouraged internal advancement. Alice found her institution prioritized employee promotion. Although Northeastern City University was vocal about this priority, Alice noted this priority was supported by action, as they provided employees with resources on resumes, interviewing, and cover letters. Renee described similar provisions at Northeastern Ivy League University, including shadowing opportunities for current employees:

> If you want to go learn more, you can spend a few days with somebody in a different department if you want to see what that department is all about. They're very open to doing informational interviews with HR and hiring managers… [they also offer] temporary gigs… it was really big when everybody went remote and a lot of people had

> more time on their hands, but there were some departments that were overwhelmed… and they were like, hey, we have this [need], but they also kind of use it as an educational tool for people who might want to learn a different role. Like, hey, there's this temporary job in student services if you want to do 10 hours a week, if you have the capacity in your current role.

Renee recognized this opportunity was unique. She felt her institution used the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic to fill needs across campus while allowing staff to expand their career opportunities. Both Alice and Renee recognized their institutions' promotion of career opportunities as a primary reason they felt they could advance.

Catalina and Eliza also felt they could advance within their institution, but they more directly attributed their opportunity to personal actions rather than institutional infrastructure. Catalina posited by building on her experience in her current support staff role, adding more duties and participating in training opportunities, she would be positioned to move into a more challenging administrative role in the future. Eliza deemed her current place inside the university to give her the most advantage when considering her ability to advance, as many individuals struggle to gain employment at her institution. However, Eliza felt the most crucial factor when seeking career opportunity was remaining aware of the opportunities that become available across campus, which she recognized can be challenging in a large institution. She mentioned:

> You just have to keep your eyes and ears open. I think the opportunity is there, it's just how hard I'm going to work to get that opportunity. Right now, not that hard because I'm very happy where I am. But when my supervisor leaves, or if something changes, then I may be working harder to find that, if that makes sense.

While these participants felt their ability to advance derived from different sources (their institutions and themselves), they unanimously felt the opportunity to grow professionally was present at their current institutions.

When reflecting on the extent to which they perceived career opportunity, all participants alluded to the importance of supervisor support. Many participants felt their supervisors would support them as they sought career advancement opportunities. In some cases, this support manifested in the form of flexibility to pursue advanced degree coursework. Alice, Eliza, and Renee, all enrolled in advanced degree programs at the time of their interviews, attributed their ability to pursue an advanced degree to the support of their supervisors. Eliza shared her experience:

> When I told [my supervisor] I wanted to go back to school, he was 100% on board. He would let me leave at 3:00 one day a week to go to a 3:30 class. He completely understood. He would always ask how the classes were going… I always felt very supported by that.

Similarly, Sweet Pea, who derived much personal and professional fulfillment from her adjunct teaching opportunity, recognized this would not be possible without the support of her supervisor. She highlighted:

> The supervisor I have now said if there's anything I want, let her know. If she could do anything to help me, she will… [when] I was given the opportunity to teach, I emailed her with the information on the class to get her permission before I accepted the position… I never do anything without talking to her first. So, I think that's what helps me. I think it motivates me as well.

Jackie, who has had her share of unsupportive supervisors, found her current supervisor to be incredibly supportive of her ability to advance. She theorized if there were a career ladder from her current position within her department, her supervisor would support advancement. Jackie said her supervisor often showed his support through the performance review process, ensuring Jackie knows how much he values and appreciates her contributions. Bella also referenced the importance of the performance review, explaining that performance reviews increased the confidence she felt in her role. She emphasized:

> I think an annual review is really important. That gives you the platform to share these things that you may be frustrated with during the year, and there doesn't seem to be a really good time to talk about these things during a busy year unless you schedule an annual review. [A review gives you the opportunity to say] "I was doing this for this salary, and now all of this is my responsibility and I'm taking leadership in these projects." So, recording your accomplishments each year shows that as well.

For Bella and Catalina, the extent to which they perceived opportunity related to the extent to which they could work beyond the limits of their official duties. Having worked at her institution for seven years, Bella built strong relationships with the senior leaders she supports. During the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the chief administrators recognized Bella's service beyond her traditional duties, and asked if she would begin attending the president's council meetings. She described this as the moment she "became part of the team." Bella was proud and inspired by the leaders with whom she worked closely during this time. She largely credited this transition to her colleagues' knowledge of her skills and abilities:

> Let's focus on an administrative assistant: you're hired based upon an hour interview, you get into the position. Then the people that you report to learn about the skills you have,

> what you really can do. So, then the mindset is, “Oh, he or she does that very well. Let's take that part of the pie and let's put that over here on them.”

Catalina had a similar experience at Southeastern Public University. Having earned a doctoral degree, Catalina recognized she was technically ‘overqualified’ for the support staff role she currently holds. When she first started her position, her duties were primarily those of a traditional administrative assistant. However, once her supervisors saw the work of which she was capable, Catalina’s duties expanded. She shared:

> [My supervisors] felt, given my experience in academia, that they could give me tasks that they hadn't felt comfortable giving to [those in this position] before me… after I had been here for a while and I was doing really well and my boss was really happy with my performance, the dean would just have something that he needed to be done, and I would do that… it's just been their confidence in my abilities. They just keep giving, adding more duties onto my plate because they are confident that I'll be able to get it done.

Bella and Catalina recognized the expansion of their duties instilled a sense of pride. They felt their efforts and abilities were recognized, and they were able to expand beyond the traditional roles of their positions, leading to a greater perception of career opportunities.

Though their perceptions of opportunity were influenced by different factors, these participants were confident they would one day advance within their institutions. This was not always the case for all participants, as evidenced by the following theme, which describes navigating the absence of opportunity.

Theme Six: Navigating Absence of Opportunity

Alice, Catalina, Eliza, Jackie, Janie, Renee, and Sweet Pea expressed feelings of limited or nonexistent career opportunities. Alice recognized barriers when thinking about the future of her career:

> I think it's really hard to transition from support staff to administrator. I think you really have to get yourself out there and, you know, move beyond the boundaries of your job responsibilities. I just think… I don't know, it's just so hard.

While Catalina expressed enjoyment of her current role, she also recognized an absence of roles to which she could advance within her department. Catalina said she will need to move out of the department she loves to move up within her institution. In her early 40's, Eliza stated she would like to stay within her current institution for her retirement benefits; however, she knows staying at her current institution will limit her career opportunities. Jackie most prominently felt she had little career opportunity within not only her institution, but within higher education as a whole:

> Unfortunately, I just don't feel as if there is any room for growth in higher ed… you have to bounce around. I don't want to do that. I would like to stay in a role for 10 years, you know, get to know my coworkers, my teammates, continue to grow, continue to have my salary increased based upon my skill sets and education. But … I just don't see it happening because there's a certain point - they're not going to hire you for a director position if you don't have a Ph.D. You will not be a chair, you will not be a dean, unless you have a Ph.D.… at our institution there are maybe like two or three Black women who are deans or assistant directors.

Jackie's experiences with racism in higher education are further explored in theme 11: the influence of identities beyond gender.

Janie also felt she had little career opportunity in her current role. Similar to Catalina, Janie explained the only way for her to move up was to move to a different department or college. However, Janie recognized that transition as a challenge because the jobs available in her institution require a significant amount of experience she has not had in her support staff role. Renee, also experiencing this limitation, summarized her observation:

> For me, I think there are very few paths from where I am to a real leadership role… I feel like there's just limited paths for the many [support staff], for them all to be something more than that.

In a support staff role in her college information office, Sweet Pea has encountered similar constraints. She said there was no opportunity for growth in her current position, and she felt as though all efforts she has made to advance within higher education have gone unnoticed. The positions available at Sweet Pea's institution include specific qualifications she cannot meet within the limitations of her support staff role. She asserted:

> I'm not going to give up… as a matter of fact, I did apply for a position at the institution where I earned my master's. And I never heard from them. So, it's like, dang, it makes you kind of frustrated because, like, what did I do wrong?… I just think it's just the way the system is set up.

Some participants observed their institutions do not play a role in their career advancement. Alice and Janie both recognized a lack of institutional support from their respective organizations. Alice described her office as so focused on assisting students in their career journeys they spend no time discussing the career journeys of their staff. She desired to utilize similar career services workshops and software to which her students have access. Janie, whose department consisted of herself and her supervisor, felt she had not had enough structural

support from her supervisor. Janie's work consists of many "self-taught" processes, and she craved a more direct supervisory relationship through which her supervisor could teach her transferrable skills that would help her advance in the future. In Janie's words, "I feel somewhat supported [by my supervisor], but very limited, and mostly just in words." This concept of 'neutral' supervisor support recurred throughout multiple interviews. Alice, Janie, and Renee surmised their supervisors would never actively impede their career advancement opportunities; however, their supervisors did not take an active role in supporting their career trajectories. Alice and Renee concluded they might be partially to blame for this reality because they had not initiated career discussions with their supervisors.

Alice, Jackie, and Janie expressed a limitation by the confines of their roles as support staff. These participants explained while they sought career advancement, the boundaries of the support staff role prevented learning new skills transferrable to higher roles. Alice illustrated this predicament:

> If I were to go outside of my boundaries in terms of doing work that's administrator level, like career counselor level, I could get in trouble if I were to give the wrong advice… I can't really branch out as much as I want to. I think I would have to go into the other parts of the university to do that because [our department] acts as its own entity, so I can't really do anything unless it's [related to my role].

Jackie and Janie felt similarly. They knew the skills and experiences needed to advance in their institutions; however, they felt unable to acquire those skills within the limits of their current support staff roles.

When reflecting on their perceptions of career opportunity, Alice and Eliza discussed the low compensation associated with roles to which they sought to advance. While these

participants wanted to advance, they were apprehensive about pursuing advancement opportunities because the low salaries for those in professional staff positions would not be worth advancing. Eliza contended with this dilemma:

> I'm kind of in a place where all the jobs I look for pay pretty similar, maybe a little less, maybe a little more but that's very rare. And it's not like I'm making a lot of money, but it's the university, it doesn't pay that great unless you're faculty or in the president's office. I am not going to take this degree and just go find another job that pays the same and has four times as much work … There was a job in [a different] college… it was a recruiter position… It would have paid less than what I make, and so it's like, I can't. I know it's more work, which is not a big deal, that would be fine. But not for less money.

Alice has considered leaving the higher education field altogether for this reason. She has been influenced not only by the low salaries but also by the toxic work cultures experienced by some in student affairs positions. She noted:

> … people are leaving their field and they just post their stories of horrible bosses, toxic work cultures, not being paid enough, horrible benefits… all these different things and… just even assessing the salary level of the position I'm [currently] interviewing for, it's only like a $5,000 bump from what I'm earning now, so the salary isn't the greatest. And I knew that going in… when I was younger, I thought that would be OK, but now that I'm assessing my lifestyle, the cost of living here, I've just been reconsidering the whole thing.

Although these participants expressed interest in pursuing advancement opportunities in higher education, the salaries offered for these positions may discourage them from applying for these positions at all.

While these participants shared differing emotions surrounding their perceived lack of opportunity, most prominently, they felt discouraged by the absence of opportunity. Yet, regardless of one's perception of opportunity, the majority of participants felt they had benefited in some way from connections with others. This is explored in the following theme, the value of networking.

Theme Seven: The Value of Networking

Whether participants perceived career opportunity, almost all participants extolled the value of networking within their institutions. Alice, who worked in career services, most explicitly stated the importance of networking:

> [Advancement is] really hard. And you're told with [a master's degree in higher education], you're going to be able to move up, but it's not really guaranteed. What I would tell my students is it's not always about the degree, it's about who you know. And one thing that we always emphasize is networking.

Some participants had informal networks throughout their institutions, while others had access to networking groups organized by the institution. Eliza was one such participant who enjoyed networking with colleagues through a formalized group. Eliza's networking group allowed her to foster relationships throughout Southeastern Public University. At the time of our interview, Eliza was new to her latest networking group. She said it was too early to determine how beneficial her membership would be in relation to her career opportunities. When reflecting on the potential benefits of the networking group, Eliza recognized most of the other members were

also in support staff roles. In her words, “you’re not going to find those higher ups in the networking groups… they don’t have the time.”

Other participants felt they lacked any networking opportunities at their current institutions. When reflecting on her career goals, Catalina expressed concern about her lack of a networking outlet. She emphasized growing her network over the next few years in preparation for her future advancement:

> I guess I haven't really been here long enough and had enough dealings with the institution as a whole… to really know enough about the other people in the kind of roles that I might want to transition into, to know where they came from. So, I think that's something that I'm hoping for over the next few years, that I can meet a lot of those people and learn about where they are from and what their background is in and see how I might fit into that world.

Janie, whose partner worked at her institution as an academic advisor, recognized the differences in networking opportunities for academic advisors and support staff:

> [When you are an academic advisor you] have a mentor who's with you for two or three weeks while you learn the ropes. You have monthly advisor meetings with advisors across different divisions at different colleges, so you see faces throughout the different schools. So, you talk to people one-on-one, you talk to your counterparts. So, they are definitely building a network. At least, they are building a network of this knowledge and support, being able to see faces across the university. [My partner] is also encouraged to visit other departments and colleges and talk to their enrollment or advising staff… It’s not a support network per se, but it’s definitely building those relationships that can be

> valuable later on. Whereas, I feel like, in my position in my department, and specific to me, I definitely don't have a similar network of support.

Sweet Pea's lack of networking resulted in significant dissatisfaction, especially as she sought advancement within her institution. Sweet Pea summarized:

> I realize there is no opportunity for growth within [my] department. I have applied for several positions within Midwestern Public Community College and interviewed for several positions, but I never hear from anyone. It makes me frustrated… I have learned it is all about who you know to get hired.

Regardless of the extent to which participants had access to networking opportunities, this access appeared to influence participants' perceptions of career opportunity.

Theme Eight: The Benefit of an Advanced Degree

All participants reasoned their advanced degrees positively impacted their career experiences and opportunities. The degree to which each participant perceived this benefit varied. Alice and Renee, both on the cusp of completing their master's degrees in higher education, could most directly illustrate the benefits of their degrees. They felt their pursuit of an advanced degree in higher education was enhanced by first-hand experiences in their workplaces. Furthermore, they felt their advanced degrees in higher education helped them qualify for future advancement opportunities within their institutions. Eliza was also about to finish her master's degree in public administration at the time of our interview. In addition to her interest in working with underrepresented and marginalized students, Eliza has considered teaching at her university. Eliza imagines her degree will help her qualify for faculty positions.

Catalina was the only participant who held a terminal degree. With a doctoral degree in the same discipline as her academic department, Catalina used the skills she gained from her

studies often. While a doctoral degree was beyond the academic degree requirements for her support staff position, she recognized the unique benefits of her academic expertise:

> I think that it just enabled me to speak the language a little, the language of academia. And it helped me build a lot of skills like critical thinking, and problem solving, and writing, and statistical analysis… I think the skills that I learned there helped prepare me to be really analytical about it, and ask the right questions, and maybe think a little outside the box. I think it just helped me, that double perspective, of how it works on the inside as someone dealing with research, and grants, and students, and etc., and then as someone on the outside analyzing those metrics… I think definitely the degree is a positive in that way.

Bella's master's degree in the arts directly benefited her support staff role at Midwestern Arts College. Bella earned her advanced degree from the same institution she now works. While her master's degree was not a requirement for the position, she felt advanced knowledge in the arts allowed her to foster more nuanced relationships with the students, faculty, staff, and trustees at Midwestern Arts College.

While Sweet Pea did not feel her master's degree directly benefited her support staff role, she noted the degree qualified her to teach first-year experience at Midwestern Public Community College. She expressed appreciation for having earned the degree, as her adjunct teaching position brought her a powerful sense of personal fulfillment.

Janie, having earned two master's degrees, felt her advanced degrees were not necessary to be able to perform her support staff role; however, an advanced degree was a minimum requirement for her position. She shared:

> My job called for an MA, even though clearly you don't need one to be doing what I do, but they required it because it's an opportunity to signal how worthwhile and valuable higher ed is. But I definitely think if I didn't have my master's degree, it would be a lot harder for me to find a job. I'd be doubtful if I'd even have the position I have now if I only had a bachelor's. So, I don't think it's fully wasted, having had those two advanced degrees. It's definitely helped.

These participants recognized their advanced degrees were not required for their support staff positions. However, the skills participants gained from their education benefited their work and career experiences.

Theme Nine: The Benefit of Woman Identity

When asked about the extent to which their identities as women influenced their career experiences and opportunities, three participants, Eliza, Janie, and Renee, regarded their woman identities as beneficial. Renee explained the lack of women in leadership roles at her institution served as motivation. At the time of our interview, Renee had recently interviewed for a support staff role serving the Vice Provost of her institution, a woman she admires. Renee remembered:

> I asked [the Vice Provost], 'Why did you get into this role?' And she said, 'Well, because I didn't see any women do it before, and I wanted to do it.' We talked about how the hallway is filled with the portraits of White men, you know?

Although she recognized the majority of leadership positions in higher education are held by men, Renee left the interview feeling inspired by the Vice Provost and hopeful about her career future.

The benefit of woman identity was also related to organizational initiatives to increase the number of women in leadership positions at their respective institutions. Eliza summarized this perspective:

> I actually think right now it's a good time to apply for jobs, and being a woman is not going to be detrimental… I look at the faculty that are being hired across campus. I look at the deans that are being hired, and how many recently being hired are women. So, I feel really good at the university being a woman. And I love that for my girls. That makes me feel good as a mom of girls who are growing up in this world. So, for me personally, I feel really good at this point in time that if I'm looking for opportunities, being [a woman] will not hinder me at all. I am also past childbearing years, so that may help me as well.

When looking back on their current and past career experiences, participants also noted that their identities as women may have helped them acquire their current support staff positions. Because most support staff are women, these participants considered they may have had a better chance of earning a support staff role than someone who did not identify as a woman. Janie contemplated her gender may have helped her earn her current support staff role in her male dominated academic department:

> When I got hired for this job, I did think that it was because I fit a certain role, and my gender was part of it… a lot of the admin assistants that you see - certainly in [my male dominated academic department] - are [women], and I certainly matched that for my much older, male boss. So, I think my gender helped me step into a role that maybe was envisioned for my gender. When you think of an admin assistant or somebody in a secretarial position, I imagine it’s not hard to think of that as being held by a woman.

Janie concluded her experience was shared widely. Her support staff counterparts in similar academic departments had all identified as women, while their supervisors identified as men.

While their individual benefits varied, these participants believed their identities as women to some extent benefited their career experiences.

Theme Ten: The Hindrance of Woman Identity

Almost all participants reflected on how their identities as women have negatively impacted their career experiences and opportunities. These participants recognized most people in positions of power at their institutions identified as men, while women overpopulated the lower ranks. This reality has impacted the way Renee views her potential to advance:

> I think we still base a lot of our thoughts and assumptions on the notion that higher education is a very male dominated field, in leadership… I think that mostly, or traditionally, seeing men in leadership roles in higher education may have influenced what I thought I could do or what I think I can do.

Jackie reflected on the troubling reality of why support staff positions are often populated by women with a personal experience. She shared:

> I do recall one particular role at my former institution… this particular manager refused to hire men who applied for the position. He only hired women, and sometimes he would only hire a woman who had a child because he knew that if she's a mother, she needs this job, and so he could say and do whatever he wanted because she's going to be afraid to quit this job. Like, if I hire a woman, she's not going to push back if I tell her to do something. A man would fight against this, he would stand toe-to-toe regardless of what his title is, regardless of what his degree is… If they feel that you're this scared, insecure, low self-esteem woman, and they know you need the job, they can just throw whatever

> they want your way, and you'll just take it. You're not going to say anything. You won't stand up for yourself. It's a sad reality. But it does happen.

Janie explained that the hindrance of her gender has historically surfaced during the interview process. She revealed:

> I'm uncomfortable asserting myself during interviews about my expectations and my hopes for particulars like salary, and I've never negotiated my salary in any job I've held, and I've been working for almost a decade now. Just feeling like there's a space for you and feeling empowered to advocate for yourself is really daunting, and I am sure that my feelings about that are tied in part to my gender and internalized ideas about the kind of forcefulness and behavior I'm 'allowed' to exert or is acceptable for me as a woman to display.

Eliza and Sweet Pea described how their gender negatively impacted their career experiences; however, they attributed these experiences to the actions of other women. Eliza described feeling held back by a former woman supervisor who felt 'threatened' professionally by Eliza's confidence and ability. Eliza ultimately left this workplace but reflected on how the experience stayed with her. When asked to what extent her woman identity influenced her career experiences, Sweet Pea, an African American woman, described a discouraging experience with a leader who was also a woman of Color:

> The way I see it, with women of Color, if you're not connected with them, if you're not part of the social environment, there is no opportunity for growth. I'll never forget, one time, I had this [leader], she watched me go to school. She knew I was working on my master's degree, and she would always ask me how classes were going… I would tell her I was doing really well. She told me, once I graduated, if I needed anything to give her a

> call. I applied for a position, and I told her I applied for it. Her administrative staff scheduled an appointment for me to meet with her. The day I was scheduled to meet with her to talk about opportunities, the meeting was cancelled. I arrived at the office and was told an email cancelation was sent because it was conflict of interest. I wasn't asking for anything. I just wanted to talk to see exactly what I could really do to get an opportunity to advance, what she could have recommended, considering that she's already up in upper management. Women of Color who have opportunities, they bring those who are close to them. They help them get ahead. I think it depends on who you know. If you know someone, and you're real close with them, and you want another job, you want opportunity to grow… I can look at my institution and see how so many people have gotten promoted, but it's all because of who they know.

These participants recognized their identities as women may have helped them earn the support staff roles they currently hold; however, they understood these same identities, sometimes shared by those in power, could prevent them from advancing within their institutions.

Theme Eleven: The Influence of Identities Beyond Gender

While this study initially sought to address how women support staff perceive the influence of gender on their career experiences and opportunities, there were many identities beyond gender influencing participants' career experiences and opportunities. The participants, coming from varied life stages and backgrounds, were eager to share their perspectives in this area.

Age

The most commonly referenced influence beyond gender identity was age. The participants, ranging in age from their mid-20's to their early 60's, expressed both positive and negative influences resulting from their current age. However, the positive influences were only present for two participants, Alice and Bella. Alice, the youngest participant, surmised her younger age helps her remain better acquainted with the experiences of the students she seeks to advise. In her early 60's, Bella said her "shoulders are broader through life experiences," which allows her to handle the stress accompanying her high-level support staff role with more ease than she would have had at a younger age.

Multiple participants referenced the negative influences associated with age, including those who referenced positive influences. For Alice, although her age helps her relate to students, she also holds a significant lack of work experience compared to others who may be seeking the same career advising positions as she. Conversely, Bella stated she is one of the oldest people on staff at her institution. As a result, she sometimes feels "a bit on edge and nervous" about staying on top of technology and computer skills. Sweet Pea, also in her early 60's, said the remote work phenomenon also made her question her career future. She has found her deep longing to counsel students is now often conducted remotely, a modality for which she did not express interest.

For other participants, their age negatively influenced their opportunity to seek career advancement entirely. Eliza noted:

> I have begun looking at other job opportunities, but sadly if I am to stay at Southeastern Public University (which is the plan because I feel I'm too old to start somewhere else and I'd like to be vested/have a pension when I retire), my choices may be limited.

Similarly, Catalina contended age made it challenging to attain her current support staff role, as most of the other entry-level staff were younger than her and had much less academic

experience. Her age and experience made it “difficult to get taken seriously” for a support staff role, even though she was genuinely interested in the position for many reasons. Renee, who held varied positions in retail, catering, and law before working in higher education, also expressed some insecurity related to her age and career. She highlighted:

> Not that I’m old, but I feel like I should have already found my thing by now. I don't think that anybody else is looking at me and being like, ‘oh, she's too old’ or that I'm being discriminated against for my age, but I do worry that I'm late to the game or something, you know? That I’m not going to have as long to learn and be in my career.

Although the individual experiences varied widely, both positively and negatively, these participants expressed their age had a profound impact on their career experiences and opportunities in higher education.

Family Dynamics

Participants often referenced family when considering the career influences outside gender identity. Both Catalina and Janie were in their current support staff roles at their respective institutions because their partners got job offers at the same institutions, and they followed. Neither participant expressed any resentment about this reality - the moves made sense for their lives holistically. Catalina examined the seeming juxtaposition of her identity as a feminist and her career choices made in support of her husband and young child:

> I've always identified as a very feminist woman, and I never planned on being the wife who followed my husband around and supported his career. And yet somehow, that's where I ended up. And I'm still totally OK with it, and it's a totally valid choice. I definitely feel like if I had been a man, or if I had not been married to another academic,

> my career would have taken a much different trajectory. Like, if I had married someone outside of academia. I might be a professor right now, or I might be a research scientist somewhere. If they had a lower stress job… I don't know if it's related to gender or just my personality and reluctance to live a highly stressful life that led me to kind of make those choices. But I definitely would say that being the woman, it was kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy. I was expected to be the one to follow my husband, and I did.

Catalina sought her support staff position to have more time and flexibility to take care of her child because her husband, a tenure track faculty member, had a hectic work schedule. She said she was content with this choice, as it was the right choice to support her family. Eliza expressed similar perspectives as she considered the possibility of moving up in administration:

> I love women in power, and I will support them. I think it's wonderful. But I also support the women who are like, "I just want to make a good living by helping people and balance it out with my family life." I think that's really hard for some of those other positions that are typically held by men, because [men] don't have the family dynamics that women do.

Jackie echoed these sentiments when she reflected on the career experiences of other support staff in her office:

> I had a coworker who had a child, and her daughter was sick, and [our supervisor] would complain about her coming to work late. But I'm pretty sure if she were a man he would be like, "I commend you for being such a dedicated father." It's just this idea that if we're moms, we're not dedicated to our jobs anymore. We're only caring about our children, our families. We cannot function or multitask and focus on our jobs and our careers as much as we will focus on our families. That is not the case! In most cases, even if you are

> married, women are taking on the majority of the workload at home and in the office… I also feel that it hinders your career growth.

Bella was the most vocal about her choice to pursue support staff roles that would allow her to "be a very involved parent and mom." Bella sought roles that could support her balance of work and family: "That, for me, has always been the priority versus stepping up the ladder."

While the degree to which families influenced the participants' perceptions varied, it was evident one's identity as a partner and/or parent, or future identity as a parent, was a major influence on their career experiences and opportunities in higher education.

Race

All women of Color participants (Alice, who is East Asian; Janie, who is Asian; Jackie, who is African American; and Sweet Pea, who is African American) referenced race when considering career influences outside of gender identity. Alice recognized the lack of Asian American representation in higher education overall, and specifically in career counseling. She reflected on how important it was that more Asian Americans are represented in her field and the discrimination playing into hiring practices. She voiced concern about one experience wherein another Asian American woman in her department wanted to avoid hiring another Asian American for an open position:

> And I mean, that could have been for multiple reasons. We really try to keep the team diverse, and they already have like three Asian Americans on the team. Or it's because they didn't want someone who was going to be soft spoken… It's funny because we did end up hiring an Asian American person anyway. And yeah, it was just really odd, honestly … why would that look so bad? I feel like no one would bat an eye if the team was mostly White.

Alice suggested this individual may have been contending with internalized racism. The event did not sit well with her, and she continued to consider how important representation is for the field and the students with whom she interacts.

Janie, who was trained in Chinese translation, once thought her race, nationality, and bilingualism would be an advantage in her career in American higher education. However, being located in a Southeastern city with little demand for translation has limited her career opportunities. Nevertheless, Janie expressed confidence in one day using her skills and identities to her advantage, especially if she and her partner relocate to a place with a higher demand for translation skills.

Jackie experienced racism at many points within her career in higher education. She reflected on her experiences as an African American woman employed at multiple higher education institutions. Regardless of how advanced a position may have appeared, those in power continued to oppress. She explained:

> They just make it so difficult for you to advance. Be it a supervisor who's trying to sabotage you. They will tell you, “Oh yeah, there's plenty of room for advancement; we believe in professional development; we believe in implementing new ideas and changes.” But as soon as you're in the role, you’re shut down immediately and you're discouraged from doing everything they told you in the interview.

Jackie has also dealt with racism from the faculty members she serves. In one instance, a faculty member mailed racist propaganda to the office to make the staff uncomfortable. While the staff reported this faculty member’s behavior to human resources, Jackie explained he was still affiliated with their university. As she considered a future where higher education has touted the importance of diversity and inclusion initiatives, Jackie questioned the potential impact:

> And now it seems that [institutions are] hiring a lot of women of Color to do diversity and inclusion roles. But why aren't we allowed to do something that's completely out of the box? You're still trying to pigeonhole us in a particular role. And so yeah, in that particular instance I do feel that my identity as a woman of Color has dictated the level of professional success that I have had over the past six years or more.

At this point in her career, Jackie expressed burnout from the racism and sexism she has experienced in higher education employment. She described a longing to leave the field altogether for an entrepreneurial career; "there's just a certain level of the ceiling that you hit, and you're just tired of fighting against it, especially when you see people who are not nearly as professional or worthy of the titles that they have."

Sweet Pea, nearing retirement, vocalized race-related barriers to her advancement. She has applied for many higher positions throughout her tenure at Midwestern Public Community College and rarely heard from hiring committees. When reflecting on these barriers, Sweet Pea concluded, "it's just the way the system is set up." When I asked her to describe this system, Sweet Pea reflected on her learning and understanding of the way her institution perpetuates these advancement barriers:

> I look at things different now. I was never taught about racism, or to hate people because of the color of their skin. As I become more educated, I see how things have changed. I don't see anyone who looks like me in higher positions. Maybe one, two, or three… I recently participated in a YWCA diversity and inclusion workshop, and I've learned a lot. It has made me open up my eyes more. I don't like the word racism or how it is used, but I feel racism may be why I am not receiving a call from HR, and [it may be] keeping certain people from getting promoted. I've been with the college for over twenty years.

> I've done everything I can, such as volunteer and participate in various departments to engage students. I don't want anyone to give me anything, I work hard. So, it's just disheartening to see new people come into the college and hire or bring their own people.

Sweet Pea expressed an interest in continuing her job search, but she described how many people have been hired into desirable positions without the position ever having been posted publicly. Like Jackie, Sweet Pea expressed skepticism about diversity hiring initiatives. In her words, "I feel if you really want people to advance within the institution, then give those people an opportunity."

Disability

Jackie also shared how her disabilities have influenced her career experiences and opportunities. Jackie was diagnosed with three major chronic pain illnesses while in high school. In light of these disabilities, Jackie sought employment that would lessen the physical toll on her body. Jackie described the discrimination she feared when identifying her disabled status on job applications: "If I say no, then they're going to feel that I misled them. And if I say yes, I could be excluded from being offered the job." For Jackie, the COVID-19 pandemic compounded the discomfort and risk of working in an office. Jackie's immunocompromised status not only poses a significant threat to her health, but she was also put at a financial disadvantage, having purchased much personal protective equipment out of pocket. When Jackie reflected on how she could telecommute, but had been denied the opportunity, she expressed frustration with the leadership of her institution. She said, "They don't seem to care. They just want to give this illusion that things are normal, everything is OK. Never mind the fact that we are afraid." With

her health and well-being at risk, Jackie continued to focus on gaining employment outside of higher education.

Revisiting the Commonplaces of the Three-Dimensional Space

I situated this study within Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. When designing the inquiry, I initially focused on the dimension of temporality, which refers to the context of time (i.e., past, present, and future). This provided a framework within which I could design my research questions and methodological choices. However, it was only after determining the 11 themes I could fully recognize this inquiry touches all aspects of the three-dimensional space (see Appendix H). In this section, I will holistically situate the 11 themes within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space.

Temporality

As previously discussed, I designed this study with temporality at the forefront. Narrative inquirers must unveil the past, present, and implied future of participants' stories to better understand the holistic career experiences of women support staff in higher education with advanced degrees. Accordingly, I situated the themes within each of the temporal dimensions.

Past

The participants reflected on their past experiences with an appreciation for the opportunities they were granted, as well as recognition of the advancement-related barriers they encountered in the workplace. Theme one explored the challenge and reward of support staff work. Within this theme, I found participant stories related to opportunities they were granted, like Bella and Catalina's promotions. However, I recognize the other participants who described taking on additional duties, like Jackie and Sweet Pea, who did not experience the same promotional opportunities. The nuances of the individual career experiences were made apparent

through themes nine, ten, and eleven, in which I discussed the influence of women's gender and other minoritized identities. The challenging and rewarding career experiences were strongly influenced by their identities as women: older and younger women, women who were parents and partners, women of Color, and women who held disabilities. Through my analysis, it is apparent the past career experiences of women support staff in higher education with advanced degrees are inextricably influenced by individual identities.

Present

The participants' present experiences similarly spanned a continuum, featuring both negative and positive aspects of their current roles. Within theme one, I identified participants' feelings of appreciation for their present career experiences. This appreciation was often related to the benefits associated with higher education support staff work, as well as the low stress nature of the work. Some participants referenced flexible scheduling and structures to support advancement, discussed within theme five: perceiving opportunity. As discussed in theme six: navigating the absence of opportunity, others recognized the limiting qualities of their current roles, explaining there was no career ladder upon which they could advance. Like experiences within the temporal dimension of the past, present experiences were influenced by identities, as presented within themes nine, ten, and eleven, in which I discussed gender identity and identities beyond gender. However, as presented within theme eight, the participants also referenced their educational attainment, explaining that their advanced degrees helped them navigate challenges associated with their present roles. Ultimately, the temporal dimension of the present was characterized by both contentment and confinement: the participants felt simultaneously comfortable in the present while often recognizing their interest in advancing as well as the present lack of support they faced in such pursuits.

Future

Because of the prominence I placed on advancement within this inquiry, the temporal dimension of the future situates varied themes found in this study. Themes three and four, in which I discussed career goals inside and outside higher education, respectively, illustrate implied and possible career experiences and plot lines. Some participants expressed confidence in advancing within their institutions, while others implied, they would be content if they were not able to advance. When discussing advancement goals, participants referenced personal areas of interest, including directly supporting underrepresented and/or minoritized students, supporting faculty in their research agendas, and leading at the highest levels of the institution, among other areas of interest. Others explained they were looking beyond higher education for future employment opportunities, as they did not feel their identities and holistic lives were supported within the sector.

Themes five and six, in which I discussed both the presence and absence of opportunity, respectively, further unveiled feelings related to the future. The commonality of this perception was strongly influenced by supervisor support and institutional structures available to foster advancement. Those who felt supported by their supervisors and institutions could see upward advancement in the future, while those who did not feel supported were aiming for employment outside higher education. As with the temporal dimensions of the past and present, participants' perceptions of the future were also influenced by their identities as women, as well as their age, family dynamics, race, and disabilities. These influences, evidenced in themes nine, ten, and eleven, contributed to the future plotlines the women support staff perceived both negatively and positively. As described within the themes, these outcomes varied based on the individual participant experience. Furthermore, as presented in theme eight, the participants' advanced

degrees positively contributed to their perceptions of the future, increasing the extent to which they felt they could advance.

Sociality

In conducting this narrative inquiry, I found personal and social conditions intrinsically shape career experiences. While ruminating on career experiences and opportunities, one may singularly focus on personal choices and goals. These choices and goals are nonetheless influenced by internal hopes and desires, as well as external, contextual motivations. Accordingly, I situated the themes within the personal and social dimensions of sociality.

Personal

As the participants shared their career experiences and opportunities with me, they revealed the many feelings, hopes, and desires underlying these stories. Theme one, describing the challenge and reward of support staff work, unveiled feelings of pride. The participants were proud of their work and garnered much intrinsic reward from helping others in their day-to-day tasks. Some, like Bella, looked up to those they supported and described this relationship as characterized by care and respect. However, not all feelings were positive, as evidenced by theme two: the disrespect and invisibility of support staff work. Many participants felt unheard, ignored, and belittled. The source of this disrespect came from others in the workplace, including supervisors, faculty, and students. Theme six: navigating absence of opportunity also revealed feelings of frustration. Because the participants referenced in this theme felt in many ways they could not advance, but could not always articulate the exact reasons why, they felt discouraged in their career goals. Theme four: openness to career goals outside higher education also

revealed the internal conditions of one participant in particular, Janie. She strongly recognized her job was simply a "9-to-5 event" and that she did not gain purpose from her work. Rather, Janie's work allowed her to live the life she wanted beyond her working hours. Through this narrative inquiry, it became apparent internal, personal conditions strongly influenced participants' perceptions of career experiences and opportunity.

Social

I was cognizant of the hierarchical dynamics related to support staff roles while I was designing this study. However, it was not until reframing the findings through the three-dimensional framework that I fully appreciated how the themes were linked to inseparable social influences. In theme one, participants appreciated working with many different people, explaining this led to work that was rarely boring. Additionally, participants highlighted the relationships they developed with colleagues. Eliza felt she might postpone seeking advancement because she appreciated these relationships so significantly. Like the personal dimension of sociality, theme two revealed disrespectful behaviors from others in the workplace directed toward support staff. Catalina, Eliza, Jackie, and Janie all perceived this disrespect, and some speculated their positions on the hierarchy drove these negative interactions. Themes five and seven, which detail perceiving opportunity and the value of networking, respectively, also alluded to the importance of social dimensions. Several participants noted the primary skill related to upward advancement was to simply remain aware of opportunities within the institution, which participants associated with maintaining connections with other people across the institution.

As with the other dimensions, social influences were informed by identities. Themes ten and eleven, outlining the hindrance of woman identity and the influence of identities beyond

gender, unveiled this connection. The participants' identities were closely tied to those in their internal support system. Most often, this took the form of family members. These relationships formed not only the current lived experiences in which the participants found themselves, but also shaped participants' career futures. Through this narrative inquiry, I found these social influences were at the core of many women support staff career decisions, especially as they related to family dynamics and caretaking expectations.

Place

Throughout this inquiry, the significance of the dimension of place was the most challenging to locate in investigating career experiences and opportunities. However, because of the thematic analysis, it is evident that context, time, and place play a significant role in the ways in which support staff perceive opportunity.

Many participants, including Bella, Eliza, Sweet Pea, and Renee, were drawn to the overall institution rather than the specific support staff role they held. As evidenced by theme one: the challenge and reward of support staff work, the reasons for this appeal varied by participant. Primarily, the participants sought stability and dependable benefits, which were afforded by higher education employment. However, place also accounted for the extent to which the participants felt they could advance. As illustrated by theme five: perceiving opportunity, structures built into the institutions helped support staff feel there was opportunity for advancement. Examples of these can be found in Renee's institution's job shadowing program for current employees, as well as Alice's institution's resume and interviewing support for employees. The participants who did not reference similar supports also expressed apprehension about advancement potential. It is clear the extent to which the institution, the

place in which support staff find themselves, prioritizes advancement has a meaningful impact on perceptions of opportunity.

Summary

I interpreted 11 themes through a narrative and inductive coding process. I recognize at times, these themes seem contradictory, representing a polarized view of support staff career experiences and opportunities. But the reasoning for this polarity is evident in the truth of sharing lived experiences, as well as the simultaneity of the three-dimensional space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These participants represented experiences across the United States in different types of departments. They inhabited a multitude of career experiences, inside and outside of higher education. Their years of service varied widely, some new to their careers, others approaching retirement. Furthermore, each participant held separate and intersecting identities, inextricably influencing their career experiences and opportunities. The experiences of these participants spanned the positive to the negative, the empowering to the painful. These experiences spanned the three-dimensional space, weaving in and out of each dimension. In chapter five, I will discuss these findings in greater detail, utilizing Kanter's (1977) structural empowerment theory and Acker's (1990) gendered organizations theory, as well as Acker's (2006) notion of inequality regimes.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Influenced by my experience as support staff in higher education and my spring 2020 pilot study, I conducted a narrative inquiry to explore the career experiences of women support staff with advanced degrees who work at higher education institutions. I recruited eight women support staff from various higher education institutions across the United States to participate in this study. Guided by Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional space narrative inquiry framework, I collected qualitative data through the participants' career journey reflections and responsive interviews. I then coded the data, categorized the codes, and analyzed for common themes among the categories. Through this process, I found the 11 themes discussed in chapter four. In chapter five, I revisit the research sub-questions and discuss themes addressing each question in greater detail. Finally, after providing theoretical implications, I offer implications for policy and practice, as well as implications for future research.

Revisiting Research Sub-Question One: Career Experiences

In this narrative inquiry, I sought to answer the question, "How do women support staff reflect on their career experiences?" This question helped me guide my participants into the three-dimensional spaces of sociality, place, and the temporal dimensions of past and present. Through the qualitative data analysis process, I found two themes that answered this question: theme one, discussing the challenge and reward of support staff work, and theme two, discussing the disrespect and invisibility of support staff work. The participants reflected on their career experiences with both gratitude and recognition of the negative aspects of support staff work. These participants shared positive stories of empowerment, collaboration, and mission-driven contribution. However, as women in a marginalized profession, they also shared feelings of discomfort. In soliciting stories of career experiences, I found there was no one shared

experience, but rather a spectrum of experiences that illuminates the varied moments of empowerment and marginalization that create the ebbs and flows of work lives. In the following sections, I will discuss themes one and two in greater detail.

Discussion of Theme One: The Challenge and Reward of Support Staff Work

The majority of participants quickly identified the ways in which their support staff roles were gratifying and enjoyable. All arrived at higher education employment in different ways, and each participant conveyed, to some extent, they 'fell' into their current roles without initially aiming to hold support staff positions. While no participant felt their original goal was to serve as support staff in higher education, each participant felt there were tangible benefits associated with their current positions.

Most participants described their positions as engaging, challenging, and rewarding. They explained their positions serving higher education institutions brought them feelings of pride and a sense of community with coworkers. On top of their day-to-day work experiences, these participants expressed appreciation for the benefits associated with higher education employment, most often citing tuition benefits. Several participants sought their advanced degrees through tuition benefits, and some explained their advanced degrees would not have been attainable without their employment benefits. Although each participant also cited downsides to their roles, they were emphatically conscious of the positive aspects of support staff work in higher education.

As previously discussed, little academic inquiry has focused on support staff career experiences and well-being. However, these findings confirm much of the limited but existent literature. Iverson's (2009) participants who had moved from clerical to professional roles also entered support staff roles with a "lack of intentionality along the career path" (p. 149). Bauer

(2000), who referenced the importance of "mentally challenging work with which one can successfully cope" (p. 88), recognized higher education support staff could be happier and more productive when recognized for their contributions and valued by their institutions. Additionally, Bauer (2000) specified perceptions of the work environment, including interpersonal relationships with coworkers, were a contributing factor to support staff satisfaction and commitment. For those participants who expressed positive aspects of their support staff roles, they felt part of a larger mission and valued by their institutions. The narrative accounts of the participants also confirm other findings, as previous researchers have found fair compensation, benefits, job security, and supportive work environments can contribute to support staff well-being (Field & Buitendach, 2011; van Straaten & du Plessis, 2016).

Ash (2013) recognized support staff roles contribute to the overall mission of higher education institutions, though these contributions are often not seen as valuable as those of professional staff, faculty, and leaders. For those participants who could identify how their roles directly contribute to the institution's mission, this identification was primarily related to their mindset. In other words, while the institution may not have publicly recognized these support staff for their contributions, the support staff themselves were able to deduce their own value to the institution. Additionally, as cited in previous research (Bauer, 2000; Benson et al., 2004; Pattie et al., 2006), the participants' utilization of tuition benefits positively contributed to their career experiences. While not all participants utilized tuition benefits, those who did were grateful for the benefit and looked favorably upon their institutions for the opportunity to advance their educational attainment.

Higher education support staff help carry out the critical functions assisting the well-being of students, faculty, and staff. Although institutions rarely intentionally show their

appreciation to support staff, support staff themselves are often able to see their own value and understand their contributions. Recognizing the challenge and reward of their work has helped the support staff in this study understand their significance to the institution and find pride in their roles. This satisfaction is often derived in resistance to patriarchal standards relegating women support staff to subservient status in the hierarchy of higher education. Theme two explores the disrespect and invisibility support staff felt as a result of this hierarchy.

Discussion of Theme Two: The Disrespect and Invisibility of Support Staff Work

These participants found, while they could identify positive aspects of their day-to-day work experiences, they could also identify ways in which they felt disrespected and invisible in the higher education workplace. Specific groups of employees inflicted varying levels of belittlement and disregard toward the participants. Some participants cited minor insults, while others cited more severe instances of denigration. The faculty were the most frequently cited sources of disrespect, with some tenured faculty members verbally assaulting support staff in the workplace. Some participants indicated other groups, like graduate students, were condescending to them on the job. These participants expressed feelings of invisibility that were compounded by low salaries with no option of negotiation and a lack of advancement options. Some participants surmised their positions on the employment hierarchy drove most of these negative interactions.

The findings related to the disrespect and invisibility of support staff work confirm much of the scholarly research on support staff roles. Since the 1920s, when women began to overpopulate support staff roles (Institute for Career Research, 2017), critics began devaluing their contributions and ridiculing their status (Davies, 1982). As evidenced by the stories of participants in this inquiry, these devaluations are still present in the 2020s. Those in support staff roles are located at the bottom of the institutional hierarchy. Support staff "are perceived to

perform unimportant, menial tasks invisible within the organization" (Costello, 2012, p. 100), and their contributions are rarely seen as "valuable within academic prestige culture" (Perry, 2020a, para. 15). This perception can lead to lower support staff satisfaction, influencing morale, camaraderie, and performance (Bauer, 2000).

In her study of female classified staff, Costello (2015) found a prevalent theme of a non-supportive climate wherein women felt devalued by their institutions and unsupported by their supervisors. Iverson (2009) suggested gender discrimination and negative attitudes by those in power, often men, can account for the chilly environment clerical women may experience in higher education. Iverson (2009) also illuminated the influence of social class on women's advancement from support staff positions, concluding, "assumptions about classified workers as 'less than' professionals and responsible for the 'dirty work' had implications for each individual's worth and potential within the organization" (p. 160). Costello (2012) found women in clerical roles often experienced feelings of invisibility, which led to resentment and bitterness toward the institution as a whole. This invisibility is often reinforced by support staff exclusion from "networks, meetings, professional development, career training, and mentoring" (Costello, 2012, p. 100). Furthermore, Ash (2013) found, while support staff recognize their contributions to the missions of higher education institutions, the "roles they formally occupy often make them feel invisible" (p. 114). As evidenced by the preceding narrative accounts, participants in this study vocalized similar feelings of negativity and toxicity as women support staff in higher education.

While higher education institutions publicize significant advancements in representation and gender equity, the reality of gendered divisions of labor (Acker, 1990) is still widely apparent. The lower status of women in support staff roles is evident not only to the support staff

who inhabit these roles but also to the students, staff, and faculty with whom they interact. These gendered divisions, compounded by disrespect, are replicated repeatedly as more women relegated to the bottom of the hierarchy are forced to endure the realities of systemically patriarchal work environments in higher education.

Revisiting Research Sub-Question Two: Career Goals

In this narrative inquiry, I sought to answer the question, "How do women support staff describe their career goals?" This question helped me guide my participants into the three-dimensional spaces of sociality, place, and the temporal dimension of the future. Through the qualitative data analysis process, I found two themes that answered this question: theme three, discussing uncertain career goals inside higher education, and theme four, discussing openness to career goals outside higher education. The ambiguous nature of the support staff role is distinguished by a nonexistent career ladder, resulting in little direction for career exploration. In some cases, the toxic environment of higher education employment encourages support staff to set career goals beyond the field. In the following sections, I will discuss themes three and four in greater detail.

Discussion of Theme Three: Uncertain Career Goals Inside Higher Education

Many participants explained they were enthusiastic about the possibility of advancing within higher education. Yet they were often unsure about what goals they wanted to pursue and what positions would be a fitting advancement opportunity. One participant was at a loss for words when describing the transition from support staff roles to professional positions but settled on "it's just so hard." Through the coding process, I noticed those participants under 40 felt confident they would move beyond their current support staff roles. At the same time, those over 40 were satisfied in their current positions if they did not advance. The urgency with which the

participants approached job searching varied: some were currently interviewing, while others thought they would start applying to positions within the next few years. Although the positions the participants sought varied across the higher education employment sector, each participant seeking to advance emphasized pursuing roles with more challenge and responsibility than their current support staff roles. These participants had earned advanced degrees and felt their knowledge and skills may be more actively utilized in more advanced positions. Those participants who were approaching retirement expressed they would like to maintain some form of employment after retirement.

These findings are consistent with the prior research on support staff, particularly research related to the ambiguity of the support staff role and how it can impact career trajectories. As noted by Bauer (2000), "satisfaction moves from the extrinsic to the intrinsic as workers age" (p. 89), which could explain why younger participants were more confident about their intentions to advance to positions higher in the hierarchy, while older participants were able to find satisfaction without advancement. Similar to the findings of this study, Costello (2015) found a lack of career progression plans for women in clerical staff positions. Whereas the professional staff included in Costello's study appeared to have "progression plans," support staff had no ladder on which they could build a career within their institutions (p. 125). van Straaten and du Plessis (2016) also recognized a short career ladder impedes the professional advancement of support staff. Ryttberg and Geschwind (2017) found while the ambiguous role of support staff may provide freedom in shaping one's responsibilities, this vagueness can also challenge support staff to conceptualize their contribution to the academic mission. These realities, which result in uncertain contributions to the institution as a whole, may lead to uncertain career goals in higher education.

A hallmark of higher education employment is the vast diversity of positions within colleges and universities. Many varied employment sectors are represented within higher education institutions like counseling, technology, finance, hospitality, health care, human resources, recruitment, research, and recreation, among others. As is apparent from the findings of this study, support staff may struggle to identify internal roles that adequately meet their advancement needs. It is the responsibility of higher education institutions to help identify advancement opportunities and assist support staff in their advancement. Because when women support staff with advanced degrees struggle to progress within their institutions, they are likely to look beyond their current institutions for advancement opportunities, as is evidenced in the following discussion of theme four.

Discussion of Theme Four: Openness to Career Goals Outside Higher Education

Although currently employed in higher education, many participants were open to employment opportunities beyond the field. Most of these participants were relatively early in their careers, and many of them were encouraged to look for employment outside of higher education due to poor working conditions inside higher education. These participants cited toxic work environments, burnout, low wages, racism, sexism, and ageism. One participant concluded her life beyond work was the primary focus of her life. Therefore, working in higher education was not the primary goal; having a job that allowed the greatest work-life balance was the goal.

While I found little previous research related to support staff interest in leaving higher education employment, many prior studies echo the concerns of these participants. Discussing the lack of advancement opportunities available within their institutions, Costello's (2015) participants felt discouraged, hopeless, and resentful. Some, like several participants in my study, were searching for employment beyond their institution, as they were frustrated by years of

applying and ultimately seeing positions offered to others, often men. Bauer (2000) referenced work-life balance as a contributing factor to classified staff satisfaction and workforce commitment. “Perhaps more than other workers,” concluded Bauer (2000), “classified staff members are often challenged with resolution of tough life issues such as child care or elder care issues” (p. 90). These outside influences, distinct for the women who are more often assumed caretaking duties in our society, may compound the poor conditions they perceive inside the higher education workplace. Costello (2012) argued flexible scheduling and telecommuting options could improve the work-life balance of support staff. These options are far more prevalent today, amid the significantly more flexible working conditions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

My findings related to openness to career goals outside of higher education could conflict with those of Renkema et al. (2008), who found support staff preferred to participate in professional development opportunities that enhanced their current job performance more than those that would lead them to a significant career change outside their present workplaces. This reality brings to light today’s higher education work environment as well as the shifting perceptions surrounding the purpose of work. Rather than looking to move upward within toxic environments, these participants have decided their overall lives would be better fulfilled in a new work organization.

When women support staff with advanced degrees exit the field, they leave with valuable institutional knowledge. In my personal experience, I have seen women support staff move up within their institutions and develop a stronger sense of commitment and loyalty. This can lead to greater productivity, as well as a genuine passion for the work of higher education. As colleges and universities grapple with increasing challenges related to employee retention, they

must consider the advancement opportunities of women support staff like the participants in this study. Without advancement support, higher education will continue to lose valuable employees to other sectors with more significant opportunity.

Revisiting Research Sub-Question Three: Career Opportunity

In this narrative inquiry, I sought to answer the question, "How do women support staff perceive their career opportunity?" This question helped me guide my participants into the three-dimensional spaces of sociality and the temporal dimensions of present and future. Through the qualitative data analysis process, I found three themes that answered this question: theme five: perceiving opportunity, theme six: navigating the absence of opportunity, and theme seven: the value of networking. Like the findings related to research question one, these themes span the support staff career experience. Those who felt they could advance felt supported by their supervisors and institutions, whereas those who did not feel they could advance felt little support and encouragement in their environments. Regardless of where participants fell on the spectrum of perceived opportunity, they felt that networking mattered significantly. In the following sections, I will discuss themes five, six, and seven in greater detail.

Discussion of Theme Five: Perceiving Opportunity

Half of the participants perceived opportunity to advance within their institutions. This perception was influenced by the extent to which their institutions encouraged advancement. Some institutions encouraged employees to shadow other roles, and others assisted with employee resume and interview preparation. Other participants felt their ability to advance was attributed to their grit and willingness to remain open to new opportunities rather than the institution's support of their advancement. As they considered the possibility of advancement, the participants emphasized supervisor support. In many cases, without this support, the

participants would not feel they could move up within the institution. This support took many forms but most often included the freedom to occupy additional duties beyond the traditional support staff role and flexibility to pursue advanced degrees. Participants also discussed the importance of annual performance reviews, as they offer the opportunity to discuss current responsibilities, compensation, and advancement potential.

These findings confirm prior research, as Ash (2013) found working beyond the job description can help support staff feel a greater sense of empowerment. This empowerment would likely lead to greater interest in advancement within the institution. These participants were grateful for the flexibility to pursue advanced degrees. As indicated by Bauer (2000), the benefits associated with increased access to educational opportunities to aid in advancement can largely outweigh any issues regarding scheduling office coverage: "Not only will classified staff members be learning skills that directly affect their daily competency, but they will also gain the indirect benefits of increased self-esteem and empowerment" (p. 92). Iverson (2009) noted flexible scheduling not only increases access to educational opportunities but promotes balance of "the demands of coursework with work and family" (p. 153).

The attainability of these benefits hinges on the support of one's supervisor. Ash's (2013) and Costello's (2015) participants also noted the capacity of the supervisor in terms of advancement. Supportive supervisors, who could be considered "instrumental individuals" (Iverson, 2009, p. 152), have been cited as significant factors in the path to advancement for support staff. While most of Iverson's participants applied for positions with increased responsibility, some "were promoted by a supervisor; for a few, their positions were reclassified to a higher rank" (p. 150). It is evident without the support of one's supervisor, support staff may struggle to advance within the institution and thus perceive little opportunity.

Additionally, Ash (2013) concluded the "work role audit" provides the opportunity to reflect on the ways in which support staff work beyond their job descriptions (p. 116). Iverson (2009) also noted the significance of the "desk audit," wherein Human Resources reclassified positions after evaluating existing job duties. Iverson also noted this process must be initiated or supported by the supervisor. However, the participants in my study seemed to enjoy the annual review process, whereas Iverson's participants found the desk audit "grueling" and "demoralizing" (p. 151). The primary indicator in such positive experiences appears to be the supervisor.

Kanter (1977) concluded "opportunity structures shape behavior in such a way that they confirm their own prophecies" (p. 158). That is, those whose positions lack a career ladder may become indifferent and dejected from the higher education workplace. At the same time, those who are brought into roles in which opportunity is perceived are likely to advance. Although support staff roles are distinctly characterized by their lack of career ladders, these findings prove that supervisors have the power to alter support staff career trajectories. If a woman in a support staff role has a supervisor who is actively invested in their professional growth, they will perceive they are capable of such growth, and, in many cases, the advancement prophecy will be fulfilled.

Discussion of Theme Six: Navigating Absence of Opportunity

Many participants shared apprehension about their career futures, as they felt their opportunities were limited or nonexistent. Transitioning from support staff to a higher-level non-support staff position was challenging. In some cases, the participants struggled to identify a clear next step in their career trajectories. Other participants enjoyed their current work

environments but recognized there was no opportunity for them to advance within. To move up, these participants disclosed, they would need to move out.

Although the absence of a career ladder for support staff was commonly cited, others contended they would not be able to move up unless they were in possession of a doctoral degree. Other participants referenced a lack of institutional support for advancement as well as "neutral" supervisor support. While these participants reasoned their supervisors would not actively hold them back from advancing, their supervisors did not initiate conversations surrounding advancement with their support staff. The omission of any discussion related to advancement led some support staff to believe their advancement was not a priority of consideration by their supervisors. Some participants concluded the narrow scope of their support staff roles made an expansion to additional duties nearly impossible. The participants reasoned it was not possible to prepare for advancement opportunities without exposure to new responsibilities. Additionally, the low salaries associated with most staff positions across higher education influenced the participants' perception of opportunity. With inadequate compensation and relatively minimal benefits related to higher-level positions, these participants reasoned, why would one in a support staff position seek to advance within higher education?

These findings are consistent with those of previous researchers of support staff advancement. The participants recognized the difficulty in obtaining duties beyond their job descriptions while also acknowledging the importance of acquiring these duties to prepare for advancement opportunities. As noted by Iverson (2009), these strict boundaries can significantly contribute to one's frustration in a support staff role. Researchers have found support staff are uniquely vulnerable to the "loyalty trap," which occurs when women in support staff roles are clustered in entry-level jobs and stay in those roles too long (Costello, 2012; Iverson, 2009).

Existing literature has also documented this phenomenon as the "sticky floor," concluding women in low-paying, low-mobility jobs face both internal advancement barriers (organizational culture and structure) and external advancement barriers (sexism, classism, and racism, among other discriminatory biases) (Harlan & Berheide, 1994).

Research on clerical staff has shown those who seek advancement but perceive low opportunity are less committed and more likely to leave the organization (Landau & Hammer, 1986). Those in support staff positions who are motivated and equipped to advance "may find themselves at the tops of their ladders in a few years, with nowhere to go" (Glenn & Feldberg, 1989, p. 301). Specifically focusing on the classified staff population in higher education, Costello (2012) noted supervisors could unintentionally contribute to this limitation:

> Without realizing the impact of their actions, [supervisors] promote "pigeonholing" into roles by excluding classified employees from networks, meetings, professional development, career training, and mentoring. Thus, positional location in the lower levels of the organizational hierarchy seems to place women at both a gender and a classification disadvantage. (p. 100)

One participant's interest in having career resources available to staff, as they are to students, was also found in Costello's (2015) study:

> While students have access to career centers, staff have no campus resource for career planning. Adding a staff liaison to the career center for employees is one option, as well as creating a position in human resources that focuses specifically on career planning and assistance with career advancement would be a welcome addition and show employees that the college is investing in them. (p. 200)

Like the participants of this study, Iverson (2009) noted when her participants earned promotions to professional staff positions, wage increases were minimal at best. Without attractive wage increases, support staff will remain unlikely to pursue advancement opportunities. Ash's (2013) findings summarize the absence of opportunity for support staff: "while support staff seem content with the dynamism of their positions and feel informally empowered to make a difference, they are bound to their roles with few opportunities to move up" (p. 88).

The findings of this study confirm women in support staff roles require structures that promote internal advancement. Without these formal structures, those in support staff roles are unlikely to perceive opportunity. Furthermore, those with the power to grant opportunity may continue to overlook qualified support staff in the absence of such institutional opportunity structures.

Discussion of Theme Seven: The Value of Networking

The vast majority of those interviewed advocated networking within and beyond one's institution. The extent to which one could network with others varied by participant experience. Some institutions offered formal networking groups that encouraged relationship-building across the institution. However, as Eliza noted, most members of these groups were also support staff, leaving little interaction with those in higher-level positions to which one would hope to advance. Most participants felt a significant lack of opportunity to network. Some participants surmised institution-supported networking opportunities would help fill this need.

Ash (2013) noted, "empowerment can stem from an employee's political and social connections within the hierarchy of a given organization" (p. 94). The participants' stories in this study reflect the need for relationship-building across the institution. These findings confirm those of Ryttberg and Geschwind (2019), who argued networking opportunities are essential for

support staff to make sense of their ambiguous roles. In instances where formal networking opportunities existed for the participants, there was also a need to improve the efficacy of such groups. Eliza's observation of homogeneous, and thus limited, networking groups echoes the need for "breaking down the caste system" as referenced by Costello (2015) and the creation of "chaotic" mentoring programs as defined by Iverson (2009). The existing literature concludes networking groups should not only encourage connections with peers but also with those elevated on the institutional hierarchy. These connections can "facilitate empowering conversations and relationships within and among individuals and groups" (Iverson, 2009, p. 159).

As evidenced by the findings of this study, support staff experience a lack of networking opportunities. Since networking can lead to more meaningful connections, those lacking this outlet are continually subjected to low opportunity. Networking structures can allow women support staff with advanced degrees not only to interact with like-minded, advancement-oriented peers but also to interact with those who hold the power to connect support staff to advancement opportunities.

Revisiting Research Sub-Question Four: Advanced Degree Attainment

In this narrative inquiry, I sought to answer the question, "How do women support staff perceive the influence of advanced degree attainment on their career experiences and opportunities?" This question helped me guide my participants into the three-dimensional spaces of sociality and the temporal dimensions of past, present, and future. Through the qualitative data analysis process, I found one theme that answered this question: theme eight, discussing the benefit of an advanced degree. Overall, the participants felt their advanced degrees helped both

their current career experiences and future career opportunities. In the following section, I will discuss theme eight in greater detail.

Discussion of Theme Eight: The Benefit of an Advanced Degree

Following the purpose of this study, all participants had earned or were in the process of acquiring a master's or doctoral degree. Most of the support staff interviewed felt their advanced degrees benefited their career experiences and opportunities. They felt the knowledge and skills gained through their advanced degree attainment not only qualified them for future advancement opportunities but also helped them navigate challenges associated with their current roles. The participants acknowledged an advanced degree was not a requirement for a traditional support staff role, and in some cases, this made them feel 'overqualified' for their current positions. However, more often, the participants were fortunate to have the opportunity to pursue an advanced degree. For many, the advanced degree was made possible by tuition benefits associated with their support staff roles.

These findings confirm the existing literature on support staff educational opportunities. Research has shown those who seek educational opportunities are more likely to advance (Sicherman, 1990). When discussing the classified staff pursuit of higher education, Costello (2012) advocated "organizations that invest in their employees help increase work satisfaction, which can lead to increased motivation and work performance" (p. 110). In studying professional staff, Costello (2015) found while most of her professional staff participants had advanced degrees, often higher degrees than their supervisors, they were "still treated as having little knowledge, skills, and abilities" (p. 96). What Iverson (2009) referred to as "advanced knowledge," was always pursued with occupational advancement in mind. This was not always true for my research participants, with Eliza as one such participant pursuing her master's degree

for personal fulfillment more than advancement opportunity. In the discussion of advanced degree attainment, it is also important to note employers are more likely to retain staff who participate in tuition benefit programs if those individuals are offered a promotion soon after degree attainment (Benson et al., 2004). This further promotes the need for institutional structures to support advancement, especially for those who have earned advanced degrees.

While all participants expressed their advanced degrees were beneficial to their career experiences and opportunities, it is important to note one participant also recognized the hindrance of her advanced degree. Catalina, who holds a doctoral degree in the same discipline as her academic department, asserted her degree prevented her from earning her support staff role when she was first interviewed. The hiring committee was concerned Catalina would leave the support staff role once she found a more advanced position. Hence, they selected another candidate who did not have a doctoral degree. Catalina felt grateful when the chosen candidate left the job after six months, and she was offered the role. While Catalina was proud of her doctorate, she recognized the dilemma this degree can pose for those seeking advancement. While Catalina has considered her advanced degree may hinder her potential for advancement, she feels she will be able to advance by continuing to expand the duties of her current support staff role.

Those leading institutions of higher education, more than other employment sectors, know the value of an advanced degree. Colleges and universities should actively continue to recognize and reward those who seek to further their knowledge in a particular area of expertise. Institutions can only attain this recognition through active and specific identification of advancement opportunities and targeted assistance to help women support staff reach their employment goals within the institution.

Revisiting Research Sub-Question Five: Gender

In this narrative inquiry, I sought to answer the question, "How do women support staff perceive the influence of gender on their career experiences and opportunities?" This question helped me guide my participants into the three-dimensional spaces of sociality and the temporal dimensions of past, present, and future. Through the qualitative data analysis process, I found two themes that answered this question, themes nine and ten, which discuss the benefits and hindrances associated with woman identity. Like the findings related to research questions one and three, these findings span the support staff career experience. In some contexts, the women felt their genders would help them advance, while in others, it could impede their advancement.

However, some participants had not actively considered their gender identity in relation to their career experiences and opportunities. It is possible that, had the participants been provided more time to sit with these considerations over a period of time, they may have found other insights on their experiences and perspectives. As a researcher immersed in the study and theory around women's experiences in the workforce for several years, I had taken my familiarity with the concepts for granted. In future iterations, I may present more research in my initial presentation to the participants and then ask them to reflect on their identity as a woman within the context of their careers before the interview.

Regardless of this reality, the participants share some reflections on their gender identities concerning their career experiences and opportunities. Additionally, as evidenced by theme eleven, the participants shared multiple identities beyond gender salient in their discussion of career experiences and opportunities. In the following sections, I will discuss themes nine, ten, and eleven in greater detail.

Discussion of Theme Nine: The Benefit of Woman Identity

Many of the support staff described their woman identities as beneficial within the context of their career experiences and opportunities. Some explained the overpopulation of men at the top and the overpopulation of women at the lower positions motivated them to advance. Renee was one participant who reflected on all the portraits of White men in the executive leadership offices of her institution. She wanted to be part of her institution's future, where more women were in leadership positions. Some institutions publicly promoted the need for a more diverse staff, faculty, and leadership. Some participants thought their institutions' publicized initiatives to cultivate a more representative community helped them feel a greater sense of opportunity, explaining their identities as women could help them advance in this context.

I found little research confirming the benefit of woman identity for women seeking advancement from support staff positions. With fairly recent institutional interest in increasing the number of women in higher education leadership positions, it could be possible that women are now more frequently recognizing the advancement benefits associated with their gender. I acknowledge Ash's (2013) participants referenced benefits associated with woman identity. However, these benefits were primarily linked to successes experienced in "addressing the emotional need" and caretaking responsibilities in the office environment (p. 83).

It is promising to see the participants in this study articulate how their gender identity could assist in advancement goals. These findings could suggest that institutional initiatives to increase women in leadership roles foster a greater sense of confidence in women support staff seeking to advance. Women should always feel that their gender identity is valued within higher education employment; however, as evidenced by the discussion of the following theme, this is not always true for women support staff.

Discussion of Theme Ten: The Hindrance of Woman Identity

The majority of participants, including many of those who cited their woman identities as a benefit, thought being a woman brought many barriers to one's career experiences and opportunities. The barriers sometimes took the form of internalized self-doubt and apprehension to self-advocate, particularly when negotiating salary. Participants cited oppressive behavior from men and women in the workplace. When Jackie reflected on this behavior as inflicted by men, it exhibited taking advantage of women's societal conditioning to be perceived as agreeable and accommodating. When Eliza and Sweet pea reflected on this behavior as inflicted by other women, it took the form of perceiving another woman as a threat in advancement opportunities. The participants felt, regardless of the presence of shared experiences in marginalization, their gender identities may have held them back in the past and could hinder advancement in the future.

The ways in which one's identity as a woman can negatively impact career experiences and opportunities are widely researched in the existing literature on support staff. The negative ramifications for women result in lower compensation (AAUW, 2019; Levanon et al., 2009; McGrew, 2016) and the general "devaluation of women's work" (Ansel, 2017, para. 6). Iverson's (2009) participants posited their career experiences would have been different if they were men and "illuminated organizational factors that continue to erect structural barriers for women seeking opportunities to advance" (p. 157).

The participants' reflections that ambition to advance had been perceived as a threat by others was also present in the existing literature. Most notably in Costello's (2012) research:

> There was a firm belief that supervisors felt threatened by women who wanted to advance, as evidenced by comments such as, “Male supervisors are intimidated by strong women” and “Female supervisors think you want their job.” (p. 108)

In her study of female classified staff, Costello (2015) found “gender bias is manifest through an oppressive climate created by both male and female supervisors as well as the institutions as a whole” (p. 96). The “Good Old Boy’s Network” through which men are “hoisted up the ladder very quickly” (p. 129) supports advancement for men within higher education institutions rather than the advancement of women. This phenomenon is commonly recognized as the “glass escalator,” in which primarily White men quickly advance to the top of female-dominated career fields compared to their woman-identifying counterparts (Goudreau, 2012).

As evidenced by the participant experiences in this study, chilly environments for women support staff are still widely present, even decades after Kanter's (1977) and Acker’s (1990) theoretical discourses. The hierarchy of higher education repeatedly relegates women to the lowest ranks. The sustainment of such patriarchal hierarchy is continually reproduced through policies and practices that inordinately marginalize women. However, as demonstrated by the following and final theme, those who hold multiple marginalized identities are more subjected to the patriarchal domination of higher education institutions.

Discussion of Theme Eleven: The Influence of Identities Beyond Gender

As decided in the purpose of this narrative inquiry, gender was the primary identity under study. However, throughout this research, the many identities beyond gender which influence the career experiences and opportunities of women support staff became evident.

Age

Age was a benefit across the spectrum of participant experiences. Younger participants concluded their closeness in age to college students helped them better understand the student experience and thus made them able to provide informed support. Older participants described their wealth of experience as a significant benefit, enabling them to thrive amid work and life stressors. However, age was also considered a hindrance, with younger support staff feeling less qualified for the roles they sought and older support staff struggling to adapt to changing work dynamics and norms. While acutely aware moving up may mean applying to new institutions, some participants feared they might be ‘too old’ to start somewhere else. Regardless of one’s identity as a younger or older person, one's age appeared to impact both career experience and perception of opportunity profoundly.

These findings are consistent with previous research on age as a factor impacting career experiences. Ash (2013) found age shaped clerical staff career experiences, most notably influencing “how stakeholders approach them and how they engage to carry out their work” (p. 85). Additionally, Lambert (2019) found higher education professional staff experienced perceived ageism across the age spectrum, either in being perceived as "too young" or "too old" (p. 48). However, beyond these exceptions, there is little research on women’s perceptions of age-related influences on careers in higher education, with the exception of research on faculty experiences (Johnson, 2021; Krauss Whitbourne & Mortepare, 2017). According to a 2019 survey on staff in higher education, 37% of office/clerical staff are over 55 years old (Pritchard et al., 2019), heightening the need for more research in this area.

Family Dynamics

Family dynamics also influenced the participants' career journeys. Although participants did not regret making choices that benefited their families over their careers, these choices were impactful, nonetheless. Some participants, like Jackie, expressed frustration with the lack of support for mothers in the workplace. Eliza observed, in heterosexual relationships, society pressures more women than men into assuming the majority of caretaking roles.

Some researchers of support staff have investigated the influence of family dynamics. Similar to this study, Iverson's (2009) study also included participants who had followed and/or supported a partner. Iverson found career choices were greatly influenced by other life choices, most prominently in one's choice to have a family and assume primary caretaking responsibilities. In her research on classified employees in higher education, Bauer (2000) referenced child care and elder care issues as contributing factors to work-life balance. It is important to note gender differentials in this context, as being married and having dependent children is positively associated with men's career progression and negatively associated with women's career progression (McCollum et al., 2018). While career advancement practices in higher education have historically disadvantaged women with caretaking responsibilities, the COVID-19 pandemic unveiled further gender inequities for women in higher education (Augustus, 2021; Allen et al., 2021). Brantley and Shomaker (2021) discussed the uneven impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, explaining that more women, particularly women of Color, have been forced to leave the higher education workforce due to childcare responsibilities than men. Although family-friendly policies may be present in some colleges and universities, women taking advantage of such policies are often penalized in ways that harm career advancement opportunities (Aiston & Fo, 2021; Jones & Taylor, 2013). The words of Sanchez and Thomson

(1997) still hold: "Parenthood crystallizes a gendered division of labor, largely by reshaping wives', not husbands', routine" (p. 747).

Race

Racial identity primarily influenced one's career experiences and opportunities for women of Color participants in this study. Some participants shared the underrepresentation of women of Color in their institutions lessened feelings of belonging and increased feelings of toxicity and othering. For these participants, the overwhelming absence of women of Color at the highest levels of institutions was apparent and telling. In the discussion of institutional diversity and inclusion initiatives, the two participants identifying as African American, Jackie and Sweet Pea, expressed doubt. They explained institutional initiatives like these tend to 'talk the talk, but not walk the walk.' Overall, these participants identified a need for women of Color to have more support in advancing within their institutions.

Women of Color are largely underrepresented in the office and administrative employee population in higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). In the existing research on support staff career experiences in higher education, a handful of research has referenced the influence of racial identity. Bauer (2000) posited women of Color in support staff roles may experience additional perceptions of bias or discrimination, determining "perceptions of campus multiculturalism affects all members of the campus community but may impact frontline staff significantly more" (p. 93). Furthermore, Costello (2012) conveyed classified staff perceived some women in institutional leadership positions were selected as "tokens" "to make the institution look good on paper – to the outside world" (p. 106). Sweet Pea's reflection on new leaders bringing in "their own people" rather than promoting those within the institution confirms Costello's findings: the majority of her participants also "believed that too many

outside applicants were hired and promotion from within the institution was not a priority" (p. 107).

Across staff positions in higher education, women of Color are often compensated the least (McChesney, 2018). Black women, in particular, are overpopulated in lower-level roles in higher education and underrepresented in leadership roles (Long, 2022). While there is little existing literature specific to women of Color in support staff positions, several researchers have proactively examined the advancement of women of Color in higher education overall. Bynum and Stordy Gomez (2017) found five factors attributed to the advancement and success of women of Color in higher education: formal education and training access, mentorship and relationships, supportive workplace environments, individual attributes and self-directed learning, and spirituality. Additionally, Gutierrez Keeton et al. (2021) concluded cross-cultural networking, mentoring, and identity development were beneficial for women of Color seeking career advancement in community colleges. Ultimately, these studies further the narrative, but more research needs to center the lived experiences of women of Color support staff, specifying and validating the varied racial and ethnic identities living underneath the term 'women of Color.'

Disability

For one participant, Jackie, disability was also considered a career influence. Having been affected by her disabilities since high school, Jackie contended with her disabled status throughout all past employment experiences. In the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic, her working conditions deteriorated. Her institution did little to protect the health of her and her colleagues. Accordingly, Jackie focused attention on transitioning to employment outside of higher education.

Virtually no existing literature centers the experiences of women support staff with disabilities. However, Costello's (2012) previously referenced recommendations in telecommuting options speak to Jackie's needs and others like her. Sullivan (2021) extolled the benefits associated with employing people with disabilities in higher education, as their intellectual and social capital is then shared with students, and students are better equipped to "interact in an increasingly disabling country and world" (para. 4). However, employed people with disabilities are more likely to be self-employed and less likely to work in management and professional occupations (U.S. Department of Labor Statistics Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Because of the workplace-imposed barriers related to both gender and ability, women with disabilities often "face a double jeopardy situation when selecting a meaningful career" (Lindstrom, 2008, p. 32). Noonan et al. (2004) illuminated these barriers, concluding they often take the form of "restricted educational opportunities, discrimination in hiring, biased performance evaluations, job tracking, pay inequities, lack of support and mentoring, negative attitudes and chilly workplace climates, lack of accommodations, and general discouragement" (p. 74). As with Jackie, the COVID-19 pandemic has prominently impacted the employment experiences of Black women with disabilities (Buckles & Ives-Rublee, 2022). The pandemic deepened "pre-existing inequalities, exposing the extent of exclusion and highlighting that work on disability inclusion is imperative" (United Nations Sustainable Development Group, 2020, p. 2). Overall, more research must center the lived experiences of support staff with disabilities, specifying and validating the various and intersecting disabilities held by women in support staff positions.

If higher education institutions are to encourage the advancement of women support staff, *all* identities of women support staff must be validated and supported. While I have discussed the

additional influencing identities within this inquiry, the varied and intersecting identities of the participants in this narrative inquiry require targeted qualitative investigation. As I will discuss in my implications for future research, the areas of inquiry open to those passionate about making the higher education workplace a supportive environment for all women are rich and vast. Before making these suggestions, I will revisit the primary theories that have guided this inquiry.

Theoretical Implications

As previously discussed, I developed this study through the theoretical frameworks of Kanter's (1977) structural empowerment theory and Acker's (1990) gendered organizations theory, as well as Acker's (2006) notion of inequality regimes. Before providing recommendations, I will revisit these theories through the lens of my findings. The following section will explore the ways in which the findings of this study connect to the theoretical frameworks I selected to guide this research.

Reflection on Kanter's Structural Empowerment Theory

Kanter (1977; 1993) argued aspects of individual behavior and attitudes significantly impact one's structural empowerment. The findings of this study confirm Kanter's theoretical discourse but may provide more grounding to extend our perception of high and low opportunity behaviors. Participants shared perspectives and opinions that, through the lens of Kanter's structural empowerment theory, range her polarized dimension of opportunity. Some participants shared ambitions to exit the higher education workforce entirely, were critical of management, expressed value through their interpersonal working relationships, and were focused on extrinsic rewards. Through the lens of structural empowerment theory, these opinions would indicate low opportunity. Conversely, participants also expressed high aspirations and self-esteem, were committed to their institution's mission, compared themselves to women in leadership positions,

sought power through networking groups, advocated for collective action, and craved the intrinsic rewards of learning and growth. Through the lens of structural empowerment theory, these qualities would indicate high opportunity.

When looking at the collective career experiences, participants of this study more often reflected high opportunity, even though some behaviors may indicate low opportunity. Participants expressed alignment with the mission of higher education and could articulate how their roles contributed to the institution as a whole. They felt valued by their organizations and were confident in their abilities to exceed in their current roles. They sought guidance from those in higher positions, positions to which they aspired. Those who were critical of management and sought employment outside of higher education also reflected personal qualities Kanter (1977) would consider indicative of high opportunity. Situating this theory into a modern context allows researchers to conceptualize how critical evaluations of the workplace and the value of external rewards can still be held by those who seek and eventually achieve advancement in their institutions.

Kanter's (1977) conceptualization of cycles and feedback loops provides a lens through which researchers can better understand the individual behaviors and circumstances of these women support staff, especially in the current context of work and organizations:

> The feedback between structure and behavior can produce upward cycles of advantage, or downward cycles of disadvantage. And it is hard for a person to break out of the cycle, once begun. To some extent, low opportunity… constitute(s) [a] self-perpetuating, self-sealing [system], with links that can be broken only from outside. (p. 249)

While participants articulated their agency in their potential for advancement, many, often unconsciously, identified the ways in which their institutions, and the societal norms surrounding

women's labor, hindered their opportunity. It is with this discovery I acknowledge higher education is still "the system [that] remains uncriticized" (Kanter, 1977, p. 262). Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations helps to situate this tension.

Reflection on Acker's Gendered Organizations Theory

Acker (1990) recognized organizational structures are built upon assumptions surrounding gender norms. In her theoretical discourse, Acker posited "advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control… are patterned through a distinction between male and female" (1990, p. 146). In reviewing the literature for this narrative inquiry, I considered Acker's description of gender divisions of labor to be particularly relevant when considering support staff career experiences. Indeed, the findings of this study show how one's identity as a woman can significantly impact the experiences of women support staff in higher education. Woman identity was considered a benefit by some participants and a hindrance by others. Most often, individual participants could see how their identities as women benefited *and* hindered their career experiences and opportunities for advancement.

Acker's (1990) conceptualization of the ideal worker is of particular importance in this narrative:

> The closest the disembodied worker doing the abstract job comes to a real worker is a male worker whose life centers on his full-time, life-long job, while his wife or another woman takes care of his personal needs and his children. (p. 149)

Acker (1990) recognized the most fundamental assumption of the gendered organization: "those who are committed to paid employment are 'naturally' more suited to responsibility and authority; those who must divide their commitments are in the lower ranks" (p. 149). Through the stories shared by the participants of this study, I recognized the disembodied, universal

worker is still the one who advances throughout the institution. It was evident to me that this worker is rarely a woman in a support staff role due to the patriarchal systems that govern institutions of higher education. As evidenced by the lack of women in higher education leadership positions (Johnson, 2017), this worker is often a man, and he rises through the institutional hierarchy through "patriarchy, a more or less autonomous structure, that exists alongside the bureaucratic structure" (Acker, 1990, p. 144). The participants who sought advancement within their institutions were working in resistance to the ideal worker, and several recognized both the emotional toll and the gained empowerment of this resistance.

Reflection on Acker's Notion of Inequality Regimes

I found Acker's (2006) notion of inequality regimes profoundly applicable to this inquiry. In her discussion of inequality regimes, Acker (2006) examined informal interactions and practices that create and maintain class, race, and gender inequalities. Today, many of these interactions may be commonly considered microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions are deeply embedded into inequality regimes and were present in the disrespect of support staff work found in this study. Acker explained, "the interaction practices that re-create gender and racial inequalities are often subtle and unspoken, thus difficult to document" (p. 451). In addition to microaggressions, many participants felt these subtle practices. Several participants cited oppressive behavior from individuals, regardless of gender, across their institutions. As primarily discussed in theme eleven: the influence of identities beyond gender, participants shared feelings of marginalization grounded in their age, family dynamics, race, and disabilities. While Acker's conceptualization of inequality regimes, referencing class, gender, and racial inequalities, is present today, this study proves a continued need to consider the regimes that maintain inequality

for women who choose parenthood, women who are either “too young” or “too old,” and women with disabilities.

Kanter’s (1997) and Acker’s (1990, 2006) theoretical discourses have provided a framework for this study, illuminating women's continued marginalization in hierarchical organizations. Within this context, it is critical to note that eliminating the hierarchy is the only way to eradicate this shared marginalization. Although this is highly desirable and certainly a “utopian dream” (Bird, 2017), the structure of higher education institutions is so characteristically rigid, under a capitalist society, a complete dismantling of hierarchy in favor of a non-hierarchy is unlikely. However, there is a fruitful area for developing institutional policies and practices that better support all women in the higher education workplace.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The participants of this study understood the importance of their roles, and most had ambitions to advance, either within or beyond their institutions. The extent to which the participants were critical of their supervisors, institutions, and higher education as an employment sector varied widely. Nonetheless, the shared career experiences illuminated many positive and negative influences on advancement opportunity for women support staff with advanced degrees. In this section, I will share the subsequent implications for policy and practice: supportive supervisors, institutional opportunity structures, and addressing the inequality regimes of higher education.

Supportive Supervisors

The extent to which the women support staff felt they were interested in and prepared for advancement opportunities depended on supervisor support. Today’s supervisors in higher education have an incredible responsibility. Supervisors are expected to do more with less

considering budget cuts, which are frequent across the higher education landscape. The discontented middle managers have been considered ‘higher ed’s unacknowledged crisis,’ as they too struggle with work-life balance and deteriorating compensation (Scott, 2022). To compound these issues, supervisors in higher education receive little to no formal training in supervision (Nichols & Baumgartner, 2016). As I recognize this reality, I argue effective, collaborative relationships between supervisors and support staff can help mitigate this ineffective environment and create more affirming working conditions for all. Research has revealed feminist approaches to higher education supervision are associated with lower levels of burnout and indirect trauma (Gilbert & Burden, 2022). Feminist supervision is defined as:

> a collaborative, respectful process, personal but unintrusive, balanced between supervisory responsibility and supervisee autonomy. Feminist supervision emphasizes an open discussion and analysis of power dynamics, and targets the best interests of the supervisee. It is a process that remains focused on the social context of the lives of the client, supervisee, and supervisor. (Porter & Vasquez, 1997, p. 169)

With recognition of this approach to supervision, and based on the findings of this study, there are several measures managers can take to help women support staff with advanced degrees pursue opportunity within their institutions.

Encourage Support Staff Professional Development and Educational Opportunities

All participants valued the opportunity to pursue professional development. The options took many forms, from day-long workshops to advanced degree attainment, but the participants deeply appreciated each opportunity. Within discussions of professional development, the participants recognized their ability to pursue these opportunities would not be possible without the support of their supervisors. The support was personal and motivational, like Eliza’s

supervisor's continued interest in her master's degree coursework. The support was also tangible, like Alice's supervisor's willingness to adjust her hours so she could take courses during the workday. Support staff are keenly aware of the extent to which their supervisors are supportive of their pursuit of professional development. Supervisors can remain abreast of professional development and educational options that could lead to opportunities for their support staff to advance. Communicating these options to support staff transparently will provide more motivation to increase their knowledge in the field and confidence in their profession.

Initiate Conversations About Career Futures

I asked all study participants, "To what extent do you feel supported by your supervisor as you pursue career goals?" Often, the participants revealed their supervisors were not aware of their career goals at all. Some participants who shared this revelation were quick to deflect responsibility from their supervisors and blame themselves. From their perspectives, they were not actively self-advocating their career goals enough. However, patriarchal standards have long punished those at the margins when they take the initiative to self-advocate and share their professional goals (Moss-Racusin & Rudman, 2010). As a result, women may be reluctant to share visions of their career futures. To remediate this issue, after building professional rapport, supervisors can ask their support staff to think about their career futures and share if they are comfortable doing so. Supervisors taking this initiative should emphasize their goal in these conversations is to support the career trajectories of their support staff. In some cases, support staff may not seek upward advancement. This was the case for Bella, who was nearing retirement. This decision should be supported by supervisors as well. Facilitating these conversations can help inspire confidence in the workplace, creating a more fulfilling and rewarding workplace for support staff.

Recognize and Develop Support Staff Contributions

Previous research has revealed that contribution recognition can improve support staff's work experiences (Ash, 2013, 2017; Bauer, 2000; Ryttberg & Geschwind, 2017). The support staff in this study had advanced degrees and have thus demonstrated they are capable of advanced communication, independent inquiry, and investigation of complex issues. Furthermore, they have demonstrated appreciation and value of the product of higher education. However, as evidenced by the findings of this study, support staff are often subject to disrespect and invisibility in the workplace. Compounding this issue, participants shared the limiting qualities of the support staff role, as they often sought to perform work beyond their job descriptions and were met with immense barriers. As a result of these realities, support staff may feel unfulfilled and as though they are unable to acquire the experience necessary to advance within their institutions.

When supervisors discuss career futures with their support staff, they can learn about interests, skills, and ambitions that may not have been known prior. Based on these conversations, supervisors can incorporate additional duties that foster skills transferrable to their career goals. However, it is crucial supervisors approach these conversations with support staff consent and careful consideration of compensation and potential exploitation, given the patriarchal structure of higher education institutions as well as the capitalist structure of our society as a whole. As previously discussed, the ambiguous role of support staff can create confusion and a lack of contribution awareness. Conversely, this ambiguity can also open the door for support staff development. The extent to which this ambiguity is empowering or detrimental is largely dependent on the extent to which the supervisor facilitates support staff development. Accordingly, supervisors of women support staff should illustrate how the support

staff role contributes to the overall mission of the institution, and in cases where this illustration is minimal, investigate, in collaboration with support staff, how duties can be amended to build upon support staff knowledge, skills, interests, and career goals.

Institutional Opportunity Structures

While I have illustrated how supervisors can improve the experiences of women support staff in higher education, I must also recognize the institutional structures guiding and constraining the extent to which supervisors can make an impact. Higher education institutions are largely bureaucratic structures, characteristically distinguished by rigid hierarchical systems (Martin, 2016). Within the hierarchy, those who hold marginalized identities are often crowded into lower positions (Acker, 2006). The higher education support staff population, overpopulated by those identified as 'female' (U.S. Department of Education, 2020), is often subject to the lower classifications of the institutional hierarchy. To remediate this problem, I recommend several practice and policy measures at the institutional level.

Investigate Potential Career Ladders

Almost all participants were highly interested in advancing within their institutions but were unsure of what positions would be logical next steps. Each participant held individual interests, which assisted in their career planning to some extent. These interests ranged student support, academic support, event planning, and beyond. However, regardless of their individual interests, they recognized their current positions did not have a set career ladder, so it was difficult to hypothesize how to advance. Furthermore, the experience required for many entry- and mid-level positions made some support staff feel they would never be as qualified as other candidates. In these instances, the participants felt it would be a waste of time to apply for advancement opportunities. Given this reality, institutions should discuss career ladders for those

in support staff positions. This conversation may be complex due to the ambiguity of the support staff role. However, Kanter (1977) indicated, “despite how different their titles and content areas might make them sound; *bridges between job ladders* can be identified" (p. 268). Conversations around career ladders can lead to identifying positions that would be transitional fits for those seeking advancement from support staff roles, as well as dialogues about how to better prepare support staff for upward advancement. Furthermore, these conversations can lead to a review of certain positions for which an institution has required too narrow qualifications, as well as discussions on how institutions can emphasize transitional skills from position to position.

Within this context, addressing the characteristically low compensation of higher education employment is imperative. Higher education employees consider uncompetitive salaries a primary reason staff leave the field (Ellis, 2021). Several participants of this study concluded that while they would enjoy taking on greater responsibility in a more challenging role, the salaries associated with the positions they sought to advance were not desirable. These participants were excited about the possibility of advancement but recognized the minimal pay increase would not be worth the challenge of the new position. To remediate this issue, institutions must evaluate the salaries of all employees against the realities of the cost of living today and adjust salaries accordingly.

Create Institutional Infrastructure for Advancement

When discussing whether they perceived advancement opportunity within their institutions, many participants reflected on the extent to which their institutions encouraged advancement for support staff. Alice cited her institution provided employees with assistance in resume and cover letter writing, as well as interview preparation. Renee referenced how a program created amid the COVID-19 pandemic encouraged job shadowing within the institution.

Although Renee's institution initiated this program as a response to understaffing in some areas, whereas other departments had fewer day-to-day duties due to working remotely, the program has continued even as the institution began to resemble a post-pandemic world. Participants navigating the perceived absence of opportunity also provided insight into the need for institutional infrastructure for advancement. These participants shared a lack of career-related resources. Often these resources are readily available for students but not accessible to staff. Institutional infrastructure for advancement is needed to hold a more diverse and representative staff to serve student needs. To remediate this issue, institutions should explore extending career resources to staff, as Alice's institution has done. Institutions can also explore providing job shadowing opportunities for support staff and others, as Renee's institution has done. Taking these steps not only increases support staff preparedness to advance but communicates a culture of support and empowerment throughout the entire institution and may increase employee retention.

Additionally, one theme I found through this study was the value of networking. Regardless of where participants found themselves on the spectrum of opportunity, they greatly valued the ability to network. As concluded by multiple participants, the ability to advance often hinges on awareness of opportunities. Without structures to encourage networking, support staff will continue to face exclusion from connections that could support advancement opportunities. Previous research has noted the importance of networking for higher education women support staff (Costello, 2012, 2015; Iverson, 2009). Iverson (2009) specifically documented the importance of "chaotic" programs that facilitate interactions with peers as well as with those in positions to which support staff may aspire (p. 158). This approach could address issues highlighted by Eliza's experience, wherein she found her formal networking group provided no

interaction with those in upper positions on the hierarchy, impacting her ability to learn more about career options beyond support staff roles. Colleges and universities can institute formal networking structures encouraging horizontal and vertical networking relationships. Members of such groups should be rewarded by institutions, possibly in the form of institutional recognition that can be highlighted on annual performance evaluations to encourage participation.

Promote Organizational Initiatives to Increase Women in Leadership

While the number of women in leadership positions is increasing, women account for less than 40% of executive leadership roles in higher education (Whitford, 2020). While not all support staff seeking advancement are pursuing leadership roles, increasing the number of women in leadership roles can positively impact all employees across an institution. Higher education institutions led by women are more likely to present "transformational leadership characteristics which motivate innovation and growth through teamwork" (Cheung, 2021, p. 5). Additionally, increasing women's presence in leadership roles prepares colleges and universities for "a more equitable future," benefiting all students, faculty, and staff across the institution (Ford, 2016, p. 510). Furthermore, the presence of women in leadership roles increases social modeling, as senior women can inspire others in the institution to advance (Ford, 2016).

Promoting organizational initiatives to increase women in leadership significantly impacts the student experience. Increasing the number of women in leadership is crucial, as it ensures those who have faced barriers associated with woman identity are in positions of power. This power can be employed to enact changes that directly benefit women students. However, increasing women in higher education leadership is particularly significant for women who hold multiple marginalized identities. The participants in this study referenced varied intersecting identities associated with their age, family dynamics, race, and disabilities. These women faced

identity-related barriers across their employment experiences, resulting from attempts to advance within an environment designed around the patriarchal norms of the "universal worker" (Acker, 1990, p. 151). Kanter explained for transformational moments to occur, women who have faced these obstacles must "be in the room" (Ely & Kanter, 2018, para. 23). To address the systemic barriers inordinately impacting women who hold multiple intersecting marginalized identities, women who hold those identities must advance to positions of power. When these women are in decision-making seats, they can enact change that cultivates equity for students who hold these marginalized identities.

Several participants of this study cited seeing a few women in senior positions at their institutions, and the presence of women in leadership roles alone was motivational. Some participants referenced institutional initiatives to increase the number of women in leadership roles at their institutions. However, Jackie and Sweet Pea, who both identified as African American, expressed doubt. They explained institutional initiatives like these tend to "talk the talk, but not walk the walk." While organizational statements touting the importance of women's leadership are no doubt more beneficial than silence, words must be met with action. A deeper aspect of this action is rooted in the analysis of the higher education workplace environment: what *is* making this environment disadvantageous for women seeking advancement? To address this problem, I will move toward a final section of implications on policy and practice: addressing the inequality regimes of higher education employment.

Addressing the Inequality Regimes of Higher Education

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education employees feel increasingly demoralized and burned out in their workplaces (Lederman, 2022). Rising workloads, understaffing, and stagnating wages have resulted in a mass exodus from higher education

employment, with data indicating more than half of higher education employees intend to leave their workplaces over the next year (Moody, 2022). While the pandemic exposed the needs of higher education employees, it is critical to note these needs were present before COVID-19. Research conducted over a decade before the pandemic revealed higher education employees experience comparatively high levels of job-related dissatisfaction and stress (Edwards et al., 2009). As evidenced by the findings of this study, women support staff are not immune to this toxic environment. The participants expressed feelings of disrespect and invisibility, compounded by a perceived inability to advance within the institution. Some participants were exploring or actively seeking career goals outside higher education to improve their quality of life. Many participants easily identified how their identities as women hindered their opportunities in the workplace, and others discussed the influence of identities beyond gender, like age, family dynamics, race, and disability. Based on the career experiences shared in this narrative inquiry, it is imperative institutions begin to identify and dismantle the inequality regimes woven into the fabric of higher education institutions.

In her work on inequality regimes, Acker (2006) proposed analyzing specific organizations and "the local, ongoing practical activities of organizing work that, at the same time, reproduce complex inequalities" (p. 442). Acker argued, while inequality regimes can be challenged and ultimately reformed, the process of this change is complex and often results in failure:

> One reason is that owner and managerial class interests and the power those interests can mobilize usually outweigh the class, gender, and race interests of those who suffer inequality. Even where no obvious economic interests are threatened by changes, men

> managers and lower-level employees often insist on maintaining ongoing organizing patterns that perpetuate inequalities. (p. 455)

Those in power resist giving up their advantage and addressing inequality regimes in the workplace, as these changes "can be seen and felt as an assault on dignity and masculinity" (p. 455). Acker explained successful instances of organizational change often involve: (1) targeting a limited set of inequality-producing mechanisms, (2) combining social movement and legislative support from outside the institution, and (3) coercion or threat of loss. However, Acker also recognized these interventions often fail to address the other underlying processes of inequality regimes: "the male model of organizing or the persistent gender and racialization of interactions in the workplace" (p. 457). While institutions may implement policies that primarily benefit women, the women who actually take advantage of such policies may be perceived as lacking commitment to the role and unworthy of rewards and promotion in the workplace.

To address inequality regimes, institutions should assess the current practices and processes maintaining inequalities on the basis of individual identity and circumstances. To fully reform the inequality regimes in higher education, leaders must be co-conspirators with those facing the realities of inequality in the workplace. Bell Smith and Nkomo (2022) explained the role of the co-conspirator:

> The co-conspirator relationship resembles a partnership between women who may not be similar to one another. It is built on a trust that blossoms into comfortable connections. But co-conspirators are not afraid to disagree to make their ideas better, stronger. Co-conspirators collaborate with other women to advance equality for all women in their organizations. (p. 50)

The authority of co-conspirators in decision-making positions actively hinges on the presence of women in leadership positions at higher education institutions. To disrupt inequality regimes, institutions must foster more supportive work environments for all women in higher education. This involves ensuring more women, especially those who hold intersecting minoritized identities, are in positions of power. While those who do not identify as women also have co-conspirator responsibilities, if organizations are to move toward eradicating inequality regimes on their campuses, the presence of women in leadership roles may assist in this effort. Women's presence in higher education administration has increased the motivation of employees (Ford, 2016) and led to transformational leadership (Cheung, 2021). As such, the ability to identify and dismantle inequality regimes may be more likely facilitated by those leaders who hold the minoritized identities harmed by such regimes. Notably, in the case of this research, those who are women of Color, have children, have been discriminated against on the basis of their age, and/or are disabled may more greatly impact these change initiatives.

When more women of Color, women with caretaking responsibilities, and women with disabilities, as well as other women on the margins, have access to power, they have the critical insight essential to identify deeply rooted inequality regimes present throughout higher education. Although it is important to promote the careers of those at the margins, there must also be "systematic paradigmatic shifts to institutions that prioritize their well-being, growth, and their humanity" (Kholi et al., 2022, p. 61). Without these shifts, institutions will not retain and sustain women in these positions.

While I recognize the importance for marginalized women to hold these roles, I simultaneously acknowledge that all leaders, including those with privileged identities, also hold this responsibility. All leaders can advocate for family-friendly policies that benefit society and

institutions (Scribner et al., 2020). They can promote the equitable treatment of women of Color in the workplace, taking note of the microaggressions ever present in today's higher education workplace. They can expand policies improving the work lives of women with disabilities. These leaders can create and support policies that improve the work experiences not only for women support staff but for all students, faculty, and staff in higher education.

Implications for Future Research

From the onset of this study, and as discussed in chapter three, I recognized my findings would not be widely transferrable. To some extent, I do not necessarily perceive this as a 'limitation,' as this is the nature and quality of narrative inquiry. As I found myself in the midst with my participants, I learned the individuality, the nuance of their stories could not be generalizable. However, I recognize these stories and findings can contribute to more dialogues surrounding the status of women in higher education, with particular emphasis on the career experiences of women support staff. As I have been so encouraged, I now encourage those who seek to further the conversation around the career experiences of women support staff to do so through ongoing inquiry and exploration. As such, I will now provide the following suggestions for future research based on the findings of this study: beyond woman identity, beyond gender identity, and researching institutional structures.

Beyond Woman Identity

I specified participants must identify as women in the purpose of this study. I chose to limit this inquiry to the population of support staff who identify as women with a recognition of the common barriers women encounter in higher education institutions (Allan, 2011). I simultaneously recognize the need for inquiry surrounding those who do not identify as women within this context. The research surrounding men in support staff roles is nearly non-existent.

The primary phenomenon explored within this context is the glass escalator, wherein men quickly rise to the top of professions overpopulated by women (Goudreau, 2012). However, as most of those in higher education support staff roles are identified as 'female' (U.S. Department of Education, 2020), those who are identified as 'male' also have experiences to share. If researchers are to improve the career experiences of women support staff, researchers should also explore the career experiences of men support staff.

I also recognize I situated this study on gender normativity. Although gender is a social construct (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), these constructs nonetheless influence the career experiences of support staff. However, to understand the career experiences of all support staff, researchers must explore identities beyond the gender binary. Future research should investigate the career experiences of nonbinary support staff. Additionally, although this study was open to any participant who identified as a woman, including cisgender and trans* women, no participants openly identified themselves as trans* women. Future research should continue to include trans* women, and future studies can be specifically focused on the trans* women support staff population. Because the role of support staff is characteristically gendered toward those who identify as women, exploration of the experiences of nonbinary and trans* support staff could provide great insight into improving the career experiences of all who hold support staff roles.

Beyond Gender Identity

As discussed within theme 11, while this inquiry centered on gender identity, additional marginalized identities influence the career experiences of women support staff in higher education. The participants of this study directly referenced the influence of age, family dynamics, race, and disability. Accordingly, future research should explore these identities in

greater detail. Future research around the impact of age could compare the experiences of younger support staff with the experiences of older support staff. Future research investigating the influence of family dynamics could explore the expectations of women's contributions inside the home and within the family and how those expectations influence career experiences. Future research around racial identity could expand our understanding of how gender and race intersect within the workplace for women support staff in higher education. Because the term 'women of Color' consists of a diverse array of racial identities, researchers should explore these experiences with an appreciation of the individualized and disaggregated experiences of varied racial identities. Additionally, future research around the career experiences of women support staff with disabilities could provide greater insight into making the workplace safer and more accessible, especially within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, although age, family dynamics, race, and disability are the additional identities identified by participants of this study, future researchers should also consider other minoritized identities, including those addressing class, sexual orientation, and religion, among others. Research centering specific identities fosters a more nuanced understanding of the support staff career experience. This understanding can guide practice and policy, creating a more comfortable environment for support staff throughout higher education. Furthermore, this understanding can help institutions implement structures that promote the advancement of *all* support staff.

Researching Institutional Structures

As referenced throughout this chapter, I found much reform must take place within institutional opportunity structures to improve the career experiences of women support staff. Accordingly, additional research centering on these structures is necessary. This research could continue to take qualitative forms, exploring opportunity structures from the perspective of those

who oversee higher education human resources. Additionally, quantitatively analyzing the retention, attrition, and advancement patterns of those in support staff roles would unveil the baseline data of which support staff advance throughout the institution, which support staff retain at the institution, and which support staff ultimately leave the institution. This research may unveil significant patterns related to women's representation in the highest levels of higher education institutions.

Furthermore, longitudinal research on women's career trajectories may provide more insight into the effectiveness of institutional opportunity structures. For example, if participants of this study were to be interviewed in five to ten years, either having had advanced or not advanced, they could provide insight into the mechanisms that did, and conversely did not support their advancement goals. This research could guide institutional practice, emphasizing those structures that have helped retain women in higher education and have supported their professional development.

Conclusion

The progress of all women who serve in college and universities is worthy of inquiry, yet the hierarchical structure of higher education often silences those who occupy the lowest ranks. Thus, this narrative inquiry aimed to explore the career experiences of women support staff with advanced degrees who work at higher education institutions. Utilizing Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional space narrative inquiry framework allowed me to situate the participant stories within the wholeness of their career experiences. As I navigated the midst with the eight participants, I found their stories spanned emotions of pride and remorse, confidence and uncertainty, ambition and contentment. Through shared experiences, I found 11 themes that

revealed how women support staff with advanced degrees describe their career experiences and opportunities.

Within their career experiences, the women support staff contributing to this study felt challenged and rewarded, as well as disrespected and invisible. Some were certain they wanted to move up within their institutions but were unsure how to navigate advancement, while others knew they wanted to exit the higher education sector altogether. Several participants perceived opportunity, often related to supervisor and institutional support, while others felt they would never advance at their institutions, often associated with internal barriers. They valued networking opportunities and considered their advanced degrees a benefit to their career opportunity. The participants saw the benefits and hindrances associated with their identities as women and easily identified the additional identities that influenced their career experiences and opportunities. Overall, while the participants appeared to appreciate their opportunities, they indicated numerous ways in which higher education could better support the career trajectories of women support staff.

As referenced earlier in this research, the 'leaky pipeline' rhetoric is a myth, and plenty of women are qualified to advance within their institutions (Johnson, 2017). However, if these women are not supported by their supervisors, their institutions, and the overarching environment of higher education employment, they will exit the field. Higher education employees are overwhelmingly seeking outside employment opportunities (Bichsel et al., 2022). When support staff hold advanced degrees, they have advanced knowledge. Therefore, institutions that lose these individuals are losing those likely interested in improving institutional realities for all students, staff, and faculty. When institutions lose those women in support staff positions, they lose rich history and understanding of the ways in which higher education

institutions operate. They lose those who have a keen interest in and knowledge of the student population. As such, to fulfill the missions of higher education institutions, leaders must appropriately value the contributions and support the career trajectories of their women support staff.

Conducting this narrative inquiry, with every moment of its challenges and rewards, has been one of the greatest joys of my career thus far. Earlier in this dissertation, I recognized no inquiry of this kind is ever truly final. Because of the limited research on those in support staff roles, I sincerely hope others continue this investigation. With continued research that centers those relegated to the margins, we will foster more inclusive and affirming workplaces and institutions of learning for all students, staff, and faculty. I look forward to working in an environment that embodies these qualities.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INFORMATIONAL RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Appendix A: Informational Recruitment Email

(*Date*)

Re: The Career Experiences of Women Support Staff in Higher Education

Dear: (*Name*)

I hope you are well! I am a doctoral candidate at Kent State University, and I am contacting you regarding my dissertation research study. I am conducting a research study about the career experiences of women support staff in higher education. This study is being conducted by Ashley Maher, and supervised by Dr. Christa Porter, Principal Investigator and Assistant Professor of Higher Education Administration at Kent State University.

My request is that you connect me with potential participants who may be interested in participating in this study. Participation includes completion of a brief questionnaire (approximately 5 minutes), one virtual introductory meeting (approximately 30 minutes), one written reflection (approximately 30 – 60 minutes), and one virtual interview (approximately 60 minutes).

Eligible participants:

1. identify as a woman,
2. are currently employed at a private 4-year, public 4-year, or public 2-year institution of higher education,
3. are currently employed in a support staff role whose main functions primarily support professional staff, faculty, and leadership personnel in higher education (e.g., administrative assistant, office clerk, receptionist, secretary, etc.), and
4. currently hold or be pursuing a master's degree, professional degree, or doctorate.

Please share this link to the pre-screening questionnaire so potential participants can learn more about the study and sign up to participate. Please feel free to share my contact information for anyone who has questions about the study ([redacted]).

Thank you for your consideration, and once again, please do not hesitate to contact me if you are interested in learning more about this Institutional Review Board approved project.

Kent State University IRB#21-254
Questionnaire Link:
[redacted]

Thank you,

Ashley Maher, M.Ed.
Doctoral Candidate, Higher Education Administration
Kent State University

APPENDIX B

INFORMATIONAL RECRUITMENT SOCIAL MEDIA POST

Appendix B: Informational Recruitment Social Media Post

Hello, all!

I am a doctoral candidate at Kent State University, and I am conducting my dissertation research study on the career experiences of women support staff in higher education.

Participation includes completion of a brief questionnaire (approximately 5 minutes), one virtual introductory meeting (approximately 30 minutes), one written reflection (approximately 30 – 60 minutes), and one virtual interview (approximately 60 minutes).

Eligible participants:

1. identify as a woman,
2. are currently employed at a private 4-year, public 4-year, or public 2-year institution of higher education,
3. are currently employed in a support staff role whose main functions primarily support professional staff, faculty, and leadership personnel in higher education (e.g., administrative assistant, office clerk, receptionist, secretary, etc.), and
4. currently hold or be pursuing a master's degree, professional degree, or doctorate.

Please share this link to the pre-screening questionnaire so potential participants can learn more about the study and sign up to participate. Please feel free to share my contact information for anyone who has questions about the study ([redacted]).

Kent State University IRB#21-254
Questionnaire Link:
[redacted]

Thank you,

Ashley Maher, M.Ed.
Doctoral Candidate, Higher Education Administration
Kent State University

APPENDIX C

PRE-SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE & INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Appendix C: Pre-Screening Questionnaire & Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

1. First and Last Name:
2. Email Address:
3. Age:
4. Job Title:
5. Office/Department:
6. Institution of Employment:
7. Institution of Employment Type:
    - Four-Year Public Institution
    - Four-Year Private Institution
    - Two-Year Public Institution
8. Are you a classified employee (paid hourly)?
    - Yes
    - No
9. Do you identify as a woman?
    - Yes
    - No
10. What are your pronouns?
    - He/his
    - She/her
    - They/their
    - Ze/zir
    - Other:
11. What is the highest degree you have completed?
12. Are you currently enrolled in school? If yes, what degree are you currently seeking?
13. What are the main functions of your job?
14. Please specify your race and/or ethnicity:
15. Please provide a pseudonym (a fictional name that will be used throughout this study to promote participant anonymity):

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Study Title: *A NARRATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE CAREER EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN SUPPORT STAFF IN HIGHER EDUCATION*
Principal Investigator: *Dr. Christa Porter; CO-PI Ashley Maher*

You are being invited to participate in a research study. This consent form will provide you with information on the research project, what you will need to do, and the associated risks and benefits of the research. Your participation is voluntary. Please read this form carefully. It is

important that you ask questions and fully understand the research in order to make an informed decision. You will receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Purpose:
The purpose of this narrative study will be to explore the career experiences of women support staff with advanced degrees who work at higher education institutions. To participate in this study, you must:

1. identify as a woman
2. be employed at a private 4-year, public 4-year, or public 2-year institution of higher education
3. be employed in staff role whose main functions primarily support professional staff, faculty, and leadership personnel in higher education (e.g., administrative assistant, office clerk, receptionist, secretary, etc.), and
4. hold or be pursuing a master's degree, professional degree, or doctorate.

Procedures:
If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete:

1. a brief questionnaire (approximately 5 minutes),
2. a virtual introductory meeting (approximately 30 minutes),
3. a written reflection (approximately 30 – 60 minutes),
4. and a one-on-one virtual interview (approximately 60 minutes).

I will also follow up with you regarding clarification on your responses and follow approximately two weeks after the interview is complete. However, there will be no additional follow up necessary after the completion of the study.

Audio and Video Recording:
The one-on-one virtual interview will be audio and video recorded and transcribed. This is so that I can get all the details but at the same time be able to carry on a conversation with you. Recordings will be destroyed after 6 months. You have the right to refuse to be recorded.

I agree to be audio recorded: YES____ NO ____
I agree to be video recorded: YES____ NO ____

Benefits:
This research will not benefit you directly. However, your participation in this study will help us to better understand the career experiences of women support staff in higher education.

Risks and Discomforts:
There are no anticipated risks beyond those encountered in everyday life.

Privacy and Confidentiality:
Your study related information will be kept confidential within the limits of the law. Any identifying information will be kept in a secure location and only the researchers will have access to the data. Research participants will not be identified in any publication or presentation of research results; only aggregate data will be used.

Future Research:
Your de-identified information will not be used or shared with other researchers.

Compensation:
You will not be compensated for your participation in this study.

Voluntary Participation:
Taking part in this research study is entirely up to you. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You will be informed of any new, relevant information that may affect your health, welfare, or willingness to continue your study participation.

Contact Information:
If you have any questions or concerns about this research, you may contact Dr. Christa Porter at [redacted] or Ashley Maher at [redacted] or [redacted]. This project has been approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or complaints about the research, you may call the IRB at [redacted].

Consent Statement and Signature:
I have read this consent form and have had the opportunity to have my questions answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. My completion and return of this questionnaire will be indicative of my consent to participate in this research study. I may print a copy of this consent statement for future reference.

A. I consent
B. I do not consent

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Appendix D: Interview Guide

1. Tell me about your career experiences before your current position.
   Follow-up prompts:
   - In the beginning of your career, what did you set out to do?
   - What aspects of your jobs have you enjoyed?
   - What aspects of your jobs have you disliked?
   - Explain what was happening in your life when you were working in those roles.

2. Tell me about your career today.
   Follow-up prompts:
   - What aspects of your job do you enjoy?
   - What aspects of your job do you dislike?
   - What other aspects of your life today impact your career?

3. Tell me about your pursuit of an advanced degree.
   Follow-up prompts:
   - Why are you/did you pursue an advanced degree?
   - If you worked while earning an advanced degree, describe that experience.

4. Describe your career goals.
   Follow-up prompts:
   - Where do you see yourself working in the future?
   - What has influenced your career goals?

5. To what extent do you feel you are able to achieve your career goals at your current institution?
   Follow-up prompts:
   - If participant feels they are able
     - What characteristics of your institution have helped you feel that you can advance within it?
     - To what extent do you feel supported by your supervisor as you pursue career goals?
   - If participant feels they are unable
     - What characteristics of your institution have helped you feel that you cannot advance within it?
     - To what extent do you feel supported by your supervisor as you pursue career goals?

6. To what extent do you feel your advanced degree can help you achieve your career goals?

7. As support staff who identifies as a woman, you are part of the majority population in this profession. To what extent do you feel that your identity as a woman has influenced your career experiences?

8. To what extent do you feel your identity as a woman influences your career opportunity?

9. To what extent do you feel your other identities (e.g., race and ethnicity) influence your career opportunity?

10. Is there anything else you would like to add about your career experiences and opportunities?

APPENDIX E

NARRATIVE CODING PREVALENCE

Appendix E: Narrative Coding Prevalence

Code	Alice	Bella	Catalina	Eliza	Jackie	Janie	Renee	Sweet Pea	Total Codes
Temporality - Future	8	2	2	5	5	7	6	7	42
Temporality - Past	12	6	2	3	5	3	4	7	42
Sociality - Personal	13	11	6	2	4	3	2	3	44
Place	2	3	1	1	5	3	2	3	20
Temporality - Present	16	4	11	2	7	2	3	5	50
Sociality - Social	12	5	5	3	10	2	3	6	46

APPENDIX F

INDUCTIVE CODING PREVALENCE

Appendix F: Inductive Coding Prevalence

Code	Alice	Bella	Catalina	Eliza	Jackie	Janie	Renee	Sweet Pea	Total Codes
"Falling into" jobs	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	3
"It's about who you know"	1	0	0	2	0	0	1	5	9
"Neutral" supervisor support	2	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	5
"never bored"	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	0	4
"Overqualified"	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	2
Absence - career opportunity	4	0	1	2	5	4	2	9	27
Absence - Institutional support for advancement	2	0	0	1	1	5	0	0	9
Advanced degree benefiting opportunity	4	3	1	3	0	2	3	1	17
Advanced degree for personal fulfillment	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
Advanced degree hindering opportunity	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	3
Age - negative impact on career	1	2	1	1	1	0	1	0	7
Age - positive impact on career	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Antiquated ideas	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Approaching retirement	0	2	0	4	0	0	0	2	8
Bureaucracy	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2

Burnout	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	5
Career goals outside higher ed	2	3	0	0	3	2	0	0	10
Challenging work	0	4	1	1	0	1	1	0	8
Content in current role	0	2	2	1	0	0	0	0	5
Covid concerns	0	0	0	0	4	1	0	0	5
Currently job searching	3	0	0	8	1	1	2	0	15
Devaluing of contributions	0	0	2	3	9	0	2	0	16
Disability	0	0	0	0	7	0	0	0	7
Disrespect	0	0	1	2	13	1	0	1	18
Drawn to the institution	0	1	0	2	0	1	1	2	7
Employment benefits	3	0	0	7	0	5	2	6	23
Feeling siloed	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	4
Finding joy in work	1	3	2	4	2	0	3	0	15
First Jobs	6	4	0	1	0	0	1	0	12
Freelance work/side gigs	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	3
Getting "labeled" as an admin	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Helping others	1	0	3	8	0	0	0	7	19
Higher ed career goals	1	0	2	0	0	3	0	4	10
Inductive Codes	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Invisibility in the organization	0	0	0	0	8	0	1	1	10
Job as a job - not life fulfillment	0	0	0	3	0	2	0	0	5

Job security	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Lack of supervisor support	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	3
Lacking networking outlet	0	0	1	0	0	3	0	0	4
Limited by role	4	0	0	0	6	1	0	0	11
Low compensation	1	0	0	5	7	1	0	1	15
Monotonous work	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	4
Moving for partner's job	0	0	2	1	0	3	0	0	6
Networking outlet	1	0	0	12	0	0	0	0	13
Non-sponsors	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	1	4
Optimism about the future	0	0	1	1	0	1	4	1	8
Parenthood	1	2	6	8	2	0	0	2	21
Performance reviews	0	3	0	0	1	0	0	0	4
Positive office environment	2	2	3	5	1	0	0	0	13
Presence - career opportunity	0	0	3	3	0	1	6	0	13
Presence - institutional support for advancement	1	0	0	2	0	0	1	1	5
Pride in role and contributions	1	3	4	4	0	0	3	3	18
Promotion	0	6	4	0	0	0	0	0	10
Pronouns and gender identity	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Race	4	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	7
Racism	3	0	0	0	7	0	0	1	11
Rewarding career	0	2	3	0	0	0	0	3	8

Role models	1	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	4
Schoolwork/work balance	2	0	0	5	0	0	1	0	8
Sense of belonging	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	2
Sexism	0	0	1	2	6	0	0	0	9
Socioeconomic concerns	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	3
Sponsors	2	0	0	4	0	0	0	1	7
Stable employment	0	0	0	0	0	5	1	0	6
Student loans	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	2	4
Supportive faculty	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	3
Supportive supervisor	3	2	5	7	3	1	0	8	29
Talking the talk, not walking the walk	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	3
The exception, not the rule	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Toxic work environment	4	0	0	0	20	0	0	0	24
Uncertainty about the future	2	0	1	5	0	3	1	2	14
Understaffing	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	2
Unfulfilled career goals	2	0	1	1	6	0	1	1	12
Unhappy in previous work experiences	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2
Unprepared for future of the workforce	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
Unsure about career goals in past	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	3

Wanting to work with students	3	0	0	3	0	2	2	2	12
Wanting upper-administrative roles	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2
Woman identity - negative impact on career opportunity	0	0	2	6	2	2	2	1	15
Woman identity - neutral impact on career	0	1	1	3	0	0	0	0	5
Woman identity - positive impact on career	0	0	0	2	0	2	1	0	5
Woman identity - unsure of impact on career	3	3	0	3	1	2	0	0	12
Working outside traditional support staff role	0	4	2	0	0	0	0	0	6
Work-life balance	1	4	6	8	0	1	0	0	20

APPENDIX G

CODE CATEGORIZATION

Appendix G: Code Categorization

	How do women support staff reflect on their **career experiences**?	How do women support staff describe their **career goals**?	How do women support staff perceive their **career opportunity**?	How do women support staff perceive the influence of **advanced degree attainment** on their career experiences and opportunities?	How do women support staff perceive the influence of **gender** on their career experiences and opportunities?	**Additional Influences**
Three-Dimensional Space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000)	*Relating to sociality (personal and social), place, and the temporal dimensions of past and present*	*Relating to sociality (personal and social), place, and the temporal dimension of future*	*Relating to sociality (personal and social), the temporal dimensions of present and future*	*Relating to sociality (personal and social) and the temporal dimensions of past, present, and future*	*Relating to sociality (personal and social) and the temporal dimensions of past, present, and future*	*Relating to sociality (personal and social) and the temporal dimensions of past, present, and future*
Applicable Codes	***Challenging and rewarding work*** Applicable codes: "never bored" Challenging work	***Uncertain goals inside higher education*** Applicable codes: Currently job searching	***Perceiving opportunity*** Applicable codes: Presence - career opportunity Presence - institutional	***Advanced degree as a benefit*** Applicable code: Advanced degree benefiting opportunity	***Gender as a benefit*** Applicable code: Woman identity - positive impact on career	Applicable codes: Age - negative impact on career Age - positive impact on career Moving for partner's job

	Drawn to the institution Employment benefits Finding joy in work Helping others Positive office environment Pride in role and contributions Promotion Rewarding career Schoolwork/work balance Sense of belonging Stable employment Supportive faculty Unhappy in previous work experiences ***Disrespected and Invisible*** Applicable codes: Antiquated ideas Bureaucracy	Higher ed career goals Wanting to work with students Wanting upper-administrative roles Optimism about the future Uncertainty about the future Work-life balance ***Goals outside higher education*** Applicable codes: Approaching retirement Career goals outside higher ed Work-life balance Job as a job - not life fulfillment	support for advancement Role models Sponsors Supportive supervisor Performance reviews Working outside traditional support staff role ***Absent opportunity*** Applicable codes: Lack of supervisor support Performance reviews "Neutral" supervisor support Absence - career opportunity Absence - Institutional support for advancement Limited by role Low compensation	***Advanced degree as a hindrance*** Applicable code: Advanced degree hindering opportunity ***Advanced degree separate from experiences and opportunities*** Applicable code: Advanced degree for personal fulfillment	***Gender as a hindrance*** Applicable codes: Sexism Woman identity - negative impact on career opportunity ***Gender separate from experiences and opportunities*** Applicable codes: Woman identity - neutral impact on career Woman identity - unsure of impact on career	Parenthood Race Racism Talking the talk, not walking the walk Disability

	Burnout Covid concerns Devaluing of contributions Disrespect Freelance work/side gigs Invisibility in the organization Low compensation Monotonous work Toxic work environment Understaffing		***Value of Networking*** Applicable codes: "It's about who you know" Networking outlet Lacking networking outlet Feeling siloed			

APPENDIX H

THREE-DIMENSIONAL SPACE THEME CATEGORIZATION

Appendix H: Three-Dimensional Space Theme Categorization

	Sociality		**Temporality**			**Place**
	Personal	**Social**	**Past**	**Present**	**Future**	
Themes	**Theme One**: The Challenge and Reward of Support Staff Work **Theme Two**: The Disrespect and Invisibility of Support Staff Work **Theme Four**: Openness to Career Goals Outside Higher Education **Theme Six**: Navigating Absence of Opportunity	**Theme One**: The Challenge and Reward of Support Staff Work **Theme Two**: The Disrespect and Invisibility of Support Staff Work **Theme Five**: Perceiving Opportunity **Theme Seven:** The Value of Networking **Theme Ten**: The Hindrance of Woman Identity **Theme Eleven**: The Influence of Identities Beyond Gender	**Theme One**: The Challenge and Reward of Support Staff Work **Theme Nine**: The Benefit of Woman Identity **Theme Ten**: The Hindrance of Woman Identity **Theme Eleven**: The Influence of Identities Beyond Gender	**Theme One**: The Challenge and Reward of Support Staff Work **Theme Five**: Perceiving Opportunity **Theme Six**: Navigating Absence of Opportunity **Theme Eight**: The Benefit of an Advanced Degree **Theme Nine**: The Benefit of Woman Identity **Theme Ten**: The Hindrance of Woman Identity **Theme Eleven**: The Influence of Identities Beyond Gender	**Theme Three**: Uncertain Career Goals Inside Higher Education **Theme Four**: Openness to Career Goals Outside Higher Education **Theme Five**: Perceiving Opportunity **Theme Six**: Navigating Absence of Opportunity **Theme Nine**: The Benefit of Woman Identity **Theme Ten**: The Hindrance of Woman Identity **Theme Eleven**: The Influence of Identities Beyond Gender	**Theme One**: The Challenge and Reward of Support Staff Work **Theme Five**: Perceiving Opportunity

	Sociality		**Temporality**			**Place**
	Personal	**Social**	**Past**	**Present**	**Future**	
Common Threads within Dimensions	Expressed **pride** in work contributions Felt **unheard**, **ignored**, and **belittled** Felt **frustrated** and **discouraged** in lack of advancement Recognized work as **separate from personal happiness**	Appreciated positive **relationships** with colleagues Felt **disrespected** by others Referenced importance of **networking** Individualized influences – primarily related to **caretaking** responsibilities	Appreciated **opportunities** Recognized **barriers** Individualized influences: • **Gender** • **Age** • **Family** • **Race** • **Disability**	Appreciated **benefits**: • Employment benefits • Low-stress work • Flexible scheduling • Advancement structures Recognized **Barriers**: • Lack of career ladder Individualized influences: • **Gender** • **Age** • **Family** • **Race** • **Disability** • **Educational attainment**	Shared **advancement goals within** their institutions **and beyond** higher education Shared **contentment** in not advancing Appreciated institutional **opportunity structures** Appreciated **supervisor support** Individualized influences: • **Gender** • **Age** • **Family** • **Race** • **Disability** • **Educational attainment**	Drawn to **the institution** as a whole, rather than the individual position Appreciated institutional **opportunity structures**

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