Women Disrupted: Female Academic Leaders’ Perspectives & Experiences in For-Profit, Online Higher Education

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my late husband, Major Charles E. Driscoll (1973-2004). The memories of his unwavering support and belief in my abilities during his lifetime gave me courage to keep moving forward during the darkest hours in years following his death. Essayons.
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ABSTRACT

Customarily, women have had difficulty acceding to positions of leadership in higher education. The reasons for this are varied; among them are a tradition of men in leadership positions within the academe, unfriendly policies that directly impact women during their childbearing years (i.e. tenure), and the hidden, and sometimes overt, beliefs, norms, and stereotypes that create gender prejudice. Literature abounds on these subjects and their impact on women aspiring to leadership. However, one area of women’s leadership in higher education has been heretofore unexamined: that of women academic leaders in for-profit, online higher education.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how women in situations of academic leadership at for-profit, online colleges and universities consciously experienced their roles, relationships, and development as women leaders at such institutions. For-profits are a unique hybrid of a corporation and an institution of higher education; the researcher sought to understand the emergence, success, and role of women in this sector. Using a feminist phenomenological method, the researcher raised the issue of gender as a philosophical question through the application of phenomenological methods of inquiry to feminist issues such as the division of domestic labor, invisible barriers, and social inequality vis-à-vis the women academic leaders’ experiences.

The study discovered several factors that contributed to their leadership success in the for-profit sector: conscious personal and professional choices, support systems,
education, mentorship and sponsorship, and flexibility. Through its findings the study hopes to improve practice by curing a deficiency in the literature and creating a profile of this unique niche of women academics with the intent to ascertain an emerging model of leadership.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

Despite playing significant roles in the evolution of higher education in the United States over the past two centuries, women have had difficulty acceding to positions of administrative leadership within higher education. In fact, although women were first appointed as faculty members in this country in 1783 at Washington College,\(^1\) it took nearly sixty more years for women to be awarded bachelor’s degrees (Washington College, n.d.). In 1841, the first women in the United States were awarded this honor by Oberlin College (Oberlin Heritage Center, n.d.). Thirty years later, Harriette J. Cooke was appointed to full professor, becoming the first female appointed to that rank with a salary equal to her male counterparts (National Women’s History Museum, n.d.). In 1877, Helen Magill became the first woman in the United States to be awarded her Ph.D. (NWHM, n.d.). However, it would be almost another 100 years before a woman was elected president of a major university. In 1978, that honor was bestowed upon Dr. Hanna Holborn Grey when she was elected president of the University of Chicago (University of Chicago, n.d.).

In early America, women were discouraged from pursuing their studies due to many factors: the ruralness of early America, the influence of Victorian Era values that regarded the education of women as going against the natural order of things, the

\(^1\) Although women were hired as faculty members at Washington College in 1783, their positions were limited to the academic subjects of painting and drawing.
dominant biological view that women had smaller brains and were thus unsuited for the rigors of academic study, and the perceived uselessness of education due to women’s restricted day-to-day roles in the community (NWHM, 2007; Solomon, 1985). Given that the family nucleus was the focus in early American society, women were expected to submit to the established patriarchal structure and concentrate solely on domestic responsibilities (Solomon, 1985; Woods, 2013). The education of women was typically relegated to domestic skills and “lady-like” pursuits such as painting, languages, and music (Wood, 2013). In Puritan New England, families were required by law to teach their sons to read and write; however, they were only required to teach their daughters to read. Few girls were taught how to write. By the end of the colonial era in America (1492-1763), only 50% of women were able to sign their names, compared to 80% of men (Solomon, 1985, p. 3). The lack of formal education for women produced a conundrum, particularly in light of the fact that not all women were getting married, despite societal expectations to the contrary. Due to their lack of education, those women who did not marry were faced with extremely limited opportunities to earn a livelihood apart from reliance on family for financial support or participation in domestic labor (Solomon, 1985).

Even after the American War of Independence (1775-1783) and ratification of the new Constitution (1789), women were provided with no legal rights (Solomon, 1985). However, in the newly formed Republic, the formal education of women finally began to advance. There were many reasons for this development, including growth in positive public opinion about the utility of educating women, the influence of mothers within the family structure, the rise of women as teachers both in secular and religious communities,
and the need for women to be educated as consumers and wage earners. These developments led to a growth in formal female schooling between 1790 and 1850 at both coeducational and single sex academies, seminaries, and “colleges” across the country (Solomon, 1985).

It was the advancement in the education of young women during this period that gave rise to a new type of woman in American society—the educated woman. These educated women struggled to apply their liberal education to societal expectations of women, marriage, and motherhood. Education changed the landscape for many of them by shifting their priorities away from a primary focus on marriage and child rearing (Solomon, 1985). Statistics show that educated women during the mid-1800s married later, or not at all, in comparison to the general female population during the period (Solomon, 1985). Education provided women with options, where previously there had been none. While society still discouraged affluent educated women from working, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were able to earn a respectable living as schoolteachers (Solomon, 1985). Furthermore, drawing on their higher education, many women also became writers during this era (Solomon, 1985).

In the early 19th century, women began to challenge the notions of womanly behavior pertaining to the female gender by seeking access to higher education. This in turn began to transform social views of women and their rights (Woods, 2013). Many viewed expanding women’s access to higher education as an extremist activity (Solomon, 1985; Thelin, 2011). Families worried that higher education would render their daughter(s) unmarriageable, and that sending them away for such schooling promoted homosexual tendencies, a fear they did not share for their sons (Thelin, 2011). As
women slowly began to infiltrate higher education, they had to contend with such misconceptions, biases, and barriers as they pursued their education (Lewis, 2012).

Three main factors influenced women’s entry into higher education: (a) the rise in public education in society (i.e., elementary, high school, college); (b) the Reconstruction period after the Civil War; and (c) the expansion of university education throughout the nation (Solomon, 1985). “Between 1870 and 1900 the number of females enrolled in institutions of higher learning multiplied almost eightfold, from eleven to eighty-five thousand” (Solomon, 1985, p. 58). The dominance of men in roles of leadership in higher education during this period was the result of gender bias, misunderstanding, and fear of feminine leadership styles (Bruder, 2012). In the late 1800s, Drs. Edward Clarke and G. Stanley Hall, both eminent biological determinists, opined that requiring women to exercise their brains during menstruation could have a negative impact on their reproductive abilities, and that women’s bodies were not designed to withstand the rigors required by advanced scholarship (Bruder, 2012; Solomon, 1985). However, by the mid- to late-nineteenth century, women were admitted to institutions of higher education alongside men, albeit oftentimes in segregated classes (NWHM, 2007; Solomon, 1985). This previously male-dominated environment now saw women occupying positions formerly held by men at all-male institutions and competing for academic honors. Women who surpassed their male peers academically were viewed in a negative light, as this challenged societal norms and many men saw it threatening to the very fabric of society (Solomon, 1985; Thelin, 2011). The women who sought a place in the academe came largely from middle class families who aspired to upward economic and social mobility. As time went on, the increase of women in higher
education and the modernization of a liberal education led to a larger societal acceptance of educating women. The overall message to women pursuing higher learning was to be useful and womanly (Solomon, 1985).

World War I (1914-1919) and World War II (1939-1945) influenced women both in higher education and in the workforce (Glazer-Raymo, 1999). With many men deployed to support the war efforts, institutions of higher education expanded women’s admissions, opportunities, and programs of study (i.e., to such rigorous curricula as engineering) to compensate for the shortage of male talent in war-critical areas (Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Solomon 1985). Women also assumed previously male dominated roles both in leadership and areas of the workforce (Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Solomon 1985). What resulted was a post-World War II society in which these educated women were less likely to eschew their careers upon marriage. This shift was evidenced by the fact that the more educated a woman was, the more likely she was to be gainfully employed (Solomon, 1985, p. 189). Paradoxically, while opportunities for women were expanding, they were still expected to fulfill their duties as wives and mothers at home. This in turn created pressure to balance educational and career aspirations with personal obligations (Solomon, 1985).

During the twentieth century, a number of factors expanded women’s access to higher education and the workplace: the Russian launch of Sputnik (which resulted in the United States reviewing its educational system as a whole), the National Defense Education Act of 1958 (whose purpose was to attract a wider array of students to higher education—including women), state and federal court rulings, and other state and federal legislation expanding women’s access to higher education and the workplace (NWHM,
2007; Solomon, 1985; Glazer-Raymo, 1999). Examples include the end of marriage bars, the passage of the Equal Pay Act of 1963, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. Marriage bars were state laws put in place in the late 1800s to mid-1900s to prevent single women from continuing to work in a variety of professions (e.g., teaching) once they married, and had the deleterious side effect of discouraging women from pursuing their education (Gouldin, 1988; Solomon, 1985). Marriage bars also allowed employers to refuse to hire married women. The overall purpose of such laws was not overt discrimination per se (i.e., against women) as much as ensuring the health and viability of marriage and the family unit (Gouldin, 1988).

The 1960s was a decade that saw marked expansion of civil and social rights based upon race, ethnicity, and gender (Glazer-Raymo, 1999). In 1963, the Equal Pay Act was passed with the goal of ending wage disparity between the genders—equal pay for equal work. The purpose behind it was to support women who entered the job market, especially those who had pursued an education to obtain a profession (Pearsall, 2013). (Although, almost fifty years later, while not completely successful, women today have made headway in the workforce earning .77 cents for every dollar a man earns, up from .59 cents in the mid-1960s. However, this stands in marked contrast to other countries where women earn 81% (France), 84% (Sweden), and 88% (Australia) in comparison to male wages) (Advertising Age, 2014; Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Hewlett, 2002; Pearsall, 2013).)
All of this led to a resurgence of the women’s movement during the 1970s. Previously male only colleges like the University of Virginia, Princeton, and Yale began to admit women as higher education attempted to mirror the public effort to reduce and eliminate discrimination in society (Solomon, 1985; Wilson, 1990). This was done in a variety of ways, such as by including courses on women in the curriculum (e.g., women’s studies, women’s history). As female consciousness grew, more women in turn began to seek out professional training and enter the political arena. The result was that the view of women on the higher education landscape in the 1980s and 1990s was in marked contrast to the century prior (Solomon, 1985; Wilson, 1990).

A little under a decade later in 1972, Title IX of the Education Amendments was passed. Title IX states that “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (20 U.S.C. § 1681). While frequently associated with its impact on college athletics, in reality Title IX expanded access for women to higher education as non-traditional students (e.g., pregnant women and parents), and addressed areas such as sexual harassment, employment, standardized testing, and the learning environment at the post-secondary level (Winslow, 2013; Glazer-Raymo, 1999). Title IX played a critical role in the educational system of the United States by allowing students to take classes regardless of gender (e.g. girls taking math, science, engineering, and shop classes) as well as provided equal access in academia by granting women professors access to tenure and institutions outside of women’s-only colleges (Chadband, 2012; Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Winslow, 2013). Figure 1 depicts its impact:
The law enabled girls and women to pursue academic studies and professions by providing them equitable admission to education and opportunities they had not previously had by eliminating blatant discriminatory practices. It also helped to carve out less overt practices of holding women back such as sexual harassment, equitizing financial aid, and addressing lack of housing opportunities for women on campus (Musil, 2007). By the end of the twentieth century, women’s enrollment at institutions of higher education began to outpace that of men’s (Solomon, 1985; Wilson, 1990).

In the twenty-first century, the focus on parity has continued as a basis for expanding women’s access to higher education and in the workforce. For example, the Women's Educational Equity Act of 2001 (WEEA), a subsection of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), sought to reach girls and women at the primary and secondary educational levels by addressing inequitable teaching and learning practices traditionally geared towards males (20 U.S.C. §6301). The WEEA focused on sexual harassment, educational materials that discount women’s contributions and experiences,
and promoting teaching and learning practices that increased access for females. In addition, it also aimed to improve teaching and learning strategies that promoted equity, especially in math and the sciences (20 U.S.C. §6301). The overall purpose of the Act was to increase gender equity nationwide by providing women with educational opportunities in an effort to improve their socioeconomic status in society (20 U.S.C. §6301).

**Women, Leadership, and Traditional Higher Education.** Commonly, five general areas are blamed for women’s failure to reach the upper echelons of leadership within higher education: domestic responsibilities, gender stereotypes, gender biases, double standards, and inflexible workplace attitudes and structures (Rhodes, n.d.). Women report feeling intimidated, harassed, and discriminated against more than men do (Jimenez, 2012). In addition, some women report shunning positions of leadership because the position can be a challenging, isolating, lonely, adversarial, and competitive (Jimenez, 2012). (Nevertheless, it is important to note that these challenges are not just confined to women. A recent study conducted by the Harvard Business Review discovered that both men and women leaders reported feelings of isolation in their positions (Saporito, 2012). The researchers ascertained this was especially true for first time leaders, and more than half of the study respondents felt that the sense of isolation had a negative impact on their performance (Saporito, 2012).)

At the institutional level, traditional policies, procedures, and practices in the ranks of higher education have historically been unfriendly to families, and especially to women of childbearing years who are interested in starting a family (Glazer-Raymo, 1999). Mothers in the faculty pipeline face pressure to balance the demands of tenure
track and familial responsibilities (Cook, 2004). The nature of the tenure system and its incompatibility with the biological clocks of women has led to a “leak” in not only the professorial pipeline, but also positions of leadership (Cook, 2004). Only recently have some institutions begun to adopt more “family friendly” policies such as child care, leadership development for faculty chairs to better enable them to address work and life balance issues with their faculty, and tenure clock extensions/half-time tenure models (Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Quinn, Yen, & Riskin, 2007).

As Mason (2013a) points out, the early years in the academy are most critical for “who wins and who loses” in climbing the ladder. Many women who wish to have children or who already have families, experience little to no support from the institution, the department, or their advisers. In fact, in some cases they are unofficially blacklisted. This is one reason why many women choose non-tenure track (NTT) positions to accommodate their children and careers (Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Quinn, Yen, & Riskin, 2007). Mason (2013a) discovered examples of blacklisting during her research. For example, in one case, an adviser for a (female) postdoctoral particle physicist refused to write her a recommendation for a research position unless she cut her maternity leave short (Mason, 2013a). In addition, Mason, Goulden, and Wolfinger (2013) discovered that family formation in the higher education sphere has a positive effect on men and a negative effect on women. In reality, women professors have higher divorce rates, lower marriage rates, and fewer children than their male counterparts. Mason et al., (2013) also discovered that among tenured faculty 70% of men were married compared with only 44% of women.
According to a recent 2009-2010 survey by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), 61% of male faculty are tenured, compared to just 43% of female faculty (de Vise, 2010). Most women who pursue the academic track in higher education receive their doctorates in their mid-thirties and begin to teach, research, and publish in an effort to further their academic careers. Customarily, in the seven years following, tenure is sought and may be awarded with the average age for obtaining a Ph.D. being 34 years old (Mason, 2012). For those women seeking to pursue a tenure track position, the seven years that follow, between their mid-thirties to early forties, are prime child bearing years, and babies matter (Cook, 2004). Cook (2004) states that women who choose to have children early in their academic careers may seriously jeopardize their chance of getting tenure (i.e., the “baby penalty”); however, to delay children for tenure may threaten a woman’s opportunity to ever have children at all (Mason, 2013b). Since the tenure track system is an “up or out” structure, those who are not promoted lose their positions (NEA, 2013).

**Women, Leadership, and the Business Environment.** Women face similar challenges in the business environment, and this study focuses on women leaders in for-profit, online higher education [hereinafter referred to as “for-profits” for the purpose of this study]. For-profits are a unique hybrid of a corporation and an institution of higher education. Thus, it is important to understand not only the emergence, success, and role of women in *higher education*, but also the emergence, success, and role of women leaders in *business*. Studying women leaders at for-profits is the intersection of these two worlds. Similar to higher education, in the business world, women typically opt out of leadership roles, or fall into “middle management” positions of leadership with very few
at the top in positions of Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and President (Mason, 2013a). Even in the commercial sector, a recent survey found that within the top three levels of C-suite only 49% of women occupying these positions were married with children, compared to 84% of men (Mason, 2013a).

The recent literary and media success of the Chief Operating Officer (COO) of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg’s work on leadership (2013), is evidence of the choices many women are forced to make between their careers and their families. Women are increasingly earning more and attaining higher degrees than men, yet many women fail to aspire to leadership positions because of lack of personal and professional mentorship and support (Sandberg, 2013). Sandberg (2013) opines that professional ambition in women is not culturally cultivated in our society. Rather, there is societal pressure on women to prioritize marriage and children to the detriment of their careers (Sandberg, 2013).

This pressure may be the result of societal expectations related to gender. The terms “male” and “female” cause people to make automatic assumptions about an individual (Freud, 1933). Gender itself is a social construct reflecting society’s overall values and beliefs (Woods, 2013). Gender identity is learned as a child with each gender’s traits reinforced throughout the developmental stages and becoming a reflection of cultural expectations of what is normal and right (Woods, 2013; Freud, 1933). Typically, to be “masculine” implies possessing traits such as strength, ambition, success, independence, competitiveness, and logic (Woods, 2013; Freud, 1933). The trait of “leadership” has been historically connected to the male gender (Jamieson, 1995; Woods, 2013). In contrast, to be “feminine” implies having traits such as emotion, physical
attractiveness, weakness, dependence, a focus on interpersonal relationships, and nurturing (Freud, 1933; Jamieson, 1995; Woods, 2013).

The Rise of For-Profit, Online Higher Education in the United States. For-profit educational institutions have been in existence since the late 19th century (Lee, 2012). By the early 20th century, there were an estimated 500 institutions operating in the United States (Lee, 2012). Today, approximately 2.4 million students are enrolled at for-profit colleges and universities (Lee, 2012). The largest period of growth was during a 10-year period from 1998 to 2008, with enrollment at such institutions growing at an astounding 225% (Lee, 2012).

The rise of the for-profit sector during the past 20 years often has been referred to as a disruptor in the landscape of the traditional academy, largely the result of its innovations in course delivery that challenged and displaced heretofore conventional methods of teaching (Christensen, Horn, Caldera, & Soares, 2011). The disruptive innovation theory was a term first coined by Clayton Christensen in 1997.

Christensen’s (2013) theory “…describes a process by which a product or service takes root initially in simple applications at the bottom of a market and then relentlessly moves up market, eventually displacing established competitors.” Over the past two decades, for-profits have challenged the traditional academe’s business model and student population, by appealing and expanding access to disenfranchised segments of society such as low-income, racial, and ethnic minorities, and working adults. This researcher argues that in somewhat the same way, Christensen’s (2013) theory can be applied to women academic leaders at for-profits. Unlike traditional higher education, the for-profit sector has a large number of women leaders who are gaining access to
academic leadership positions in a non-traditional sector of higher education. By doing so, these women are disrupting historically male dominated leadership in higher education and redefining and developing an emerging model of women’s academic leadership. While significant research has been done to date on women and leadership at traditional institutions, a review of the literature evidences no information on the topic as it relates to for-profits. This study explored the profile of women in positions of academic leadership at for-profits and discovered an emerging model of leadership.

**Statement of the Problem**

Over the past twenty-five years, the female undergraduate student population has been steadily increasing. For the first time in history, women are arguably better educated than men, accounting for more than half of all college degrees awarded (Bennett, 2011). In fact, women now represent 50% of most graduate professional programs and are almost on par with their presence in the workforce (Bart & McQueen, 2013). However, while men currently dominate senior management positions in the workforce, women remain in the minority in this area of leadership (Ballenger, 2010).

In 1995, the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission defined the “glass ceiling” as “…the unseen, yet unbreachable barrier that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, regardless of their qualifications or achievements” (U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995, p. 4; Glazer-Raymo, 1999).

Increasing economic globalization has resulted in a demographic shift in the workforce that relies increasingly more on women and minorities (Matsumoto, 2013). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), women currently represent nearly half of the labor workforce, and of this percentage occupy 51.5% of management, professional, or
related occupations. Nevertheless, women are severely underrepresented in senior leadership positions (BLS, 2013).

**U.S. Women in Business**

![Bar chart showing women's representation in various leadership positions.]

*Figure 2.* U.S. women in business (Catalyst, 2013a).

As discussed earlier, traditional higher education is one industry that has a strong history of male dominance in leadership positions (Ballenger & Austin, 2011; Mason, 2013a). While women have made some inroads into senior leadership positions at the post-secondary level, gender disparity at senior levels remains markedly evident because of exclusionary practices and lack of access (Ballenger & Austin, 2011; Mason, 2013a; Glazer-Raymo, 1999). Literature on the topic of women and leadership at traditional institutions centers on gender discrimination, invisible ceilings, and hidden hierarchies (Fox-Cardimone & Wilson, 2010). However, to date, no research has examined women in positions of academic leadership at for-profits. Literature on this particular subject is non-existent. What literature exists on for-profits focuses on non-gender specific leadership characteristics, the institutional environment, and organizational model (Giannoni, 2008; Habblitz, 2009; Hughes, 2006). Given the visible role that for-profits play in higher education landscape in the United States, this area warrants study.
Rationale for the Study

A brief survey of institutional webpages of for-profit universities, such as American Public University System, Ashford, Capella, Grand Canyon, Kaplan, Strayer, the University of Phoenix, the University of the Rockies, and Walden show women clearly visible in positions of senior academic leadership:

Table 1

Women Academic Leaders in the Rank of Academic Dean or Higher at For-Profit, Online Institutions of Higher Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For-Profit Institution</th>
<th>Estimated Student Headcount</th>
<th>Number of Women Academic Deans or Higher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Public University System</td>
<td>124,000</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashford University</td>
<td>89,000</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capella University</td>
<td>36,000</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Canyon University</td>
<td>45,000</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaplan University</td>
<td>48,000</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strayer University</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Phoenix</td>
<td>270,000</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of the Rockies</td>
<td>1,636</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walden University</td>
<td>46,000</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>75</strong></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Sources: APUS, 2013; Ashford University, 2013; Capella University, 2013; Grand Canyon University, 2013; Kaplan University, 2013; Strayer University, 2013; University of Phoenix, 2013; J. McCafferty, personal communication, October 29, 2013; Walden University, 2013; Eduventures, 2013).

Given that for-profits have both academic and business leaders, this study proposed to study women academic leaders in the rank of Dean or higher as part of a feminist phenomenological study. The goal was to discover an emerging model of traits/characteristics of these women leaders. For the purpose of this study, the term “academic leader” refers to academic school deans (e.g., arts and humanities, engineering, education), at both the undergraduate and graduate level, to the Chief Academic Officer (CAO) and the Provost. The conceptual framework was rooted in the feminist perspective in order to explore women’s experiences as academic leaders at for-profits. Within this framework, the social construction of the reality of the study
participants was explored in an effort to generate knowledge about how these women experienced leadership.

The phenomenological method itself is a system of inquiry that seeks to gain knowledge of participants’ lives from a first-person perspective—how an individual lives and interprets his or her experiences—in an effort to discover commonalities and distinctions among participants. Feminist phenomenology begins with the premise that gender is important (S. Madsen, personal communication, October 14, 2013). Participants do not live their lives within a vacuum, but are shaped by the expectations society imposes upon them (S. Stoller, personal communication, October 17, 2013). A feminist phenomenological method aided in exploring these unique women leaders’ experiences and understanding of their careers, positions, leadership, and lives by analyzing their experiences. The method is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how women in situations of academic leadership at for-profit, online colleges and universities consciously experienced their roles, relationships, and development as women leaders at such institutions.

**Research Questions**

The central question underpinning this research was: What are the perspectives of women academic leaders at for-profit, online institutions of higher education on their careers, positions, leadership, and lives?

Contributing to the domain of understanding created in exploring this central questions are several essential sub-questions:
1. Who are these women?

2. Do differences in their profiles exist?

3. What has been their career path?

4. What is their work and life balance?²

5. How do these women academic leaders experience their roles as leaders at for-profits?

6. How do these women experience their roles as leaders in higher education?

**Significance of the Study**

The primary need for this study was to address a glaring absence in the literature on this topic. The for-profit sector is the fastest growing segment of higher education today (Lee, 2012). The knowledge economy combined with emerging, new higher education business models (e.g., Coursera, Udacity, MITx) continues to expand (Allen, 2012). Women are leaving positions in traditional higher education and civilian industries to assume leadership roles at proprietary institutions of learning (Epstein, 2010). Utilizing the feminist phenomenological method discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, this study examined the experiences of these women in their roles as academic leaders at for-profits in order to provide insight into how they felt and processed their experiences vis-à-vis their social reality.

Lastly, this study sought to improve practice by looking at a new and emerging area in higher education. It also hoped to provide understanding into why women are advancing in academic leadership roles at for-profits. This research, in turn, provides general higher education insight into possible opportunities and avenues that may

² For the purpose of this study, “work and life balance” refers the ability to manage multiple competing responsibilities in one’s professional and personal life.
increase women’s chances of obtaining and succeeding in academic leadership positions regardless of institutional type.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

“...[T]hose of you who are women...you are yourselves the problem. When you meet a human being, the first distinction you make is ‘male’ or ‘female?’ and you are accustomed to make the distinction with unhesitating certainty.” – Sigmund Freud

This study focused on women leaders in a new and emerging area in higher education: online for-profits. For-profit, online institutions of higher education originally rose to prominence as a result of issues related to access and affordability by appealing to the needs of disenfranchised population segments (i.e., adult learners) through their flexible, convenient, and responsive educational offerings (Bailey, Badway, & Gumport, 2001; Tierney, 2011). Literature to date on the topic of women leaders in higher education has focused largely on issues related to parity and equity, with emphasis centered on traditional brick and mortar institutions (Acker, 2010; Ballenger, 2010; Mason, 2013a; Madsen, 2008; Rabas, 2013; Rhode, n.d.; Stelter-Flett, 2006). A review of the literature revealed that information centered on women and leadership at for-profits was notably absent. Therefore, since for-profits are a unique hybrid of a corporation and an institution of higher education, this literature review examined information related not only to the emergence, success, and role of women leaders in higher education, but also the emergence, success, and role of women leaders in business. The sections that follow provide an overview of themes related to the impact of gender and sex, social and cultural bias, division of domestic labor, workplace inequality, and leadership as they affect women leaders in the workforce and higher education in general.
The Influence of Gender, Sex, and Biases in the Workforce

Sex and gender have a profound impact on a woman’s career: both inexplicably intertwine with women’s personal and professional lives (Fitzgerald, 2013; Woods, 2013). The literature on this particular area speaks in detail to its impact on women in the workforce. Sex and gender influence areas related to appearance, biology, communication, discrimination, self-worth, and perception (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013; Woods, 2013). While often used interchangeably, the term sex refers to the biological differences between males and females, while gender is “…socially constructed and expressed” (Woods, 2013, p.19). In analyzing research on the impact of gender, “…most women are unaware of having personally been victims of gender discrimination and deny it even when it is objectively true and they see that women in general experience it” (Ibarra et al., 2013, p. 63; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Thus, sex and gender traits can both openly and subtly influence a woman’s professional development, her work-life balance, and how she experiences leadership.

There seems to be little consensus in the literature as to the exact reasons why there are so few women leaders in the upper echelons of organizations (Northhouse, 2010). While some women choose to leave the workforce entirely in response to external demands, others respond by (a) becoming “superwomen”; (b) reducing their work hours or their performance in the workplace (i.e., part-time, leave of absences, sick days, etc.); or (c) by self-selecting out of leadership track positions into “mommy track” ones (Northhouse, 2010, p. 308; Ballenger, 2010; de Vise, 2010; Stone, 2013). There appear to be a myriad of reasons that influence working women’s decisions to seek leadership positions, or not.
The balancing of professional and familial responsibilities places stress upon women. Previous research suggested it was primarily due to the desire to care for their families that compelled women to “opt out” of their careers during their childbearing years (Ballenger, 2010; de Vise, 2010; Kuperberg & Stone, 2008; Stone, 2013). However, recent research postulates that the majority of women who leave their careers do so because of issues in the workplace, such as mixed messaging and lack of support from management (Ballenger, 2010; de Vise, 2010; Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Mason, 2013a; Mason 2013b; Stone, 2013).

In order to balance their personal and professional responsibilities, many women begin to work reduced hours, which creates friction in the workplace. Stone (2013) conducted a study to determine the cause(s) of why women chose to “opt out” of their careers. The participants in the study were current stay-at-home moms who had previously been high achieving professional women before choosing to leave the workforce (Stone, 2013). Prior research suggested that women who had made such a choice were in favor of traditional gender roles (i.e., men work, women stay home), incompetent, unambitious, left because of family, and/or worked for bad companies (Biernart & Wortman, 1991; Stone, 2013). Surprisingly, Stone (2013) discovered that 90% of the study participants opted out due to workplace problems, and it was not until women attempted to combine their careers with motherhood that they began to receive mixed messages from their employer—valued employee versus potential flight risk (Stone, 2013, p. 7; Hewlett & Luce, 2005).

The literature posits that a woman leaving her career, even for a short period, has negative repercussions long term. For example, such a choice causes a gap in a woman’s
resume, leads to varied professional development, and reduces her long term earning power (Biernart & Wortman, 1991; Fitzgerald, 2013). Studies have shown that this often leads to negative messaging about a woman’s professional potential (Fitzgerald, 2013; Stone, 2013). The majority of women who opt out of their careers for a period, do return to the workforce within ten years, albeit into more female-dominated or friendly professions (e.g., education and non-profit organizations) where previously 65% of these same women had worked in male-dominated professions (e.g., medicine, law, engineering) (Stone, 2013).

In an effort to understand the issue better, Eagly and Karau (2002) examined the role congruity theory of prejudice towards women leaders as one reason why there are so few women in positions of leadership. The role congruity theory of prejudice towards women leaders posits that the:

…perceived incongruity between the female gender role and leadership roles leads to two forms of prejudice: (a) perceiving women less favorably than men as potential occupants of leadership roles and (b) evaluating behavior that fulfills the prescriptions of a leader role less favorably when it is enacted by a woman. (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 573).

In other words, individually held stereotypes based upon societal beliefs of specific gender related attributes can result in gender prejudice (Eagly & Karau, 2002; van Engen, van der Leeden & Willemsen, 2001).

According to some authors, women’s careers and roles as leaders can be influenced by societal imposed gender norms related to their physical appearance and movements (Ibarra et al., 2013; Frankel, 2004). Women in the workforce are judged by both men and other women (Ibarra et al., 2013; Frankel, 2004). Whether it is the length of their hair, the tilt of their head, or their clothes, women have a minefield to navigate in
society and at work. Frankel (2004) discussed how women are socialized to smile more even though, when women smile during conversation, they are taken less seriously and can be seen as over-animated at work. However, if they do not smile, they are seen as unhappy and aloof (Frankel, 2004).

The same is true of gestures. Women are socialized to take up less space and therefore, tend to confine themselves within a close personal space (Frankel, 2004). This confinement can have a negative impact in the workplace as gestures can be used to expand one’s personal space and complement the speaker’s message (Frankel, 2004). Even something as simple as a slight movement like the tilting of the head softens a message (Frankel, 2004). Therefore, women must balance not only their verbal messaging, but also their physical appearance during the delivery of it to ensure that the two coincide for the most effective technique in their professional lives (Frankel, 2004).

Women in top leadership roles are intensely scrutinized because of their high visibility among the landscape of male leaders (Frankel, 2004; Ibarra et al., 2013). They are judged by how they look, their likeability, their “executive presence,” and even by how they speak (Frankel, 2004; Ibarra et al., 2013). This intense scrutiny can lead to difficult situations for women leaders, because likeability and competence are not synonymous (Frankel, 2004; Ibarra et al., 2013). Women who are evaluated as highly competent in their leadership roles are often viewed as “less likeable,” in contrast to their male counterparts where competence and likability are synonymous (Ibarra et al., 2013).

Individually held perceptions related to leadership and gender-associated attributes also have an effect on women in the workforce (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Kuperberg & Stone, 2008; van Engen et al., 2001). For example, age plays a role in
gender preference of a supervisor—especially among women. Older members of the workforce (50 years and older) are significantly more likely to prefer a male boss, while younger employees only slightly prefer male or female bosses (Newport, 2011). Between the sexes, women tend to have a greater opinion as to the gender of their bosses, while men less so. However, both men and women would prefer a male boss, with women preferring 39% to men’s 26% as reflected in Figure 3 below (Newport, 2011).

**Figure 3.** Gender preferences in a boss (Newport, 2011).

Recent research into gender supervisor preference is unclear. Since 1953, Gallup has been polling Americans as to their supervisor gender preference. Overall, those in the workforce in this country would prefer to work for a man (32%) than a woman (22%) (Newport, 2011). However, as indicated by Figure 4, almost half of the respondents stated that gender makes no difference
If you were taking a new job and had your choice of a boss would you prefer to work for a man or a woman?

- % Prefer man boss
- % Prefer woman boss
- % No difference/No opinion

If you were taking a new job and had your choice of a boss would you prefer to work for a man or a woman?

Among employed only

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Currently have male boss (56%)</th>
<th>% Prefer man boss</th>
<th>% Prefer woman boss</th>
<th>% No Difference/No opinion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Currently have female boss (30%)

28

37

35

Figure 4. Preference as to sex-gender for a boss on taking a new job (Newport, 2011).

This is in marked contrast to responses in 1953 in which 66% of respondents indicated they would prefer a male boss compared to 5% for women (Newport, 2011). Of current employees in the workforce, 56% reported having a male boss, while only 30% had women supervisors (Newport, 2011). According to Figure 5, the gender of the current supervisor does appear to influence employee gender preference of future supervisors:

If leadership gender preference is trending towards unimportance, then what other factors account for the lack of women in leadership positions?
A recent study by Rivera (2012) discovered that employers hire individuals who are a cultural match to themselves. Rivera (2012) defined *cultural match* as similarities related to “…outside pursuits, experiences, and self-presentation styles” (p. 1,000). Men have traditionally dominated leadership roles, acting as gatekeepers to career opportunities, and generally tended to promote people who were like themselves—in other words, other men (Ibarra et al., 2013; Mason, 2013a; Rivera, 2012).

Throughout the literature there seems to be a myriad of “invisible” barriers against women such as “glass ceilings,” “glass escalators,” and “second generation gender bias” (Goudreau, 2012; Ibarra et al., 2013; U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). Ibarra et al. (2013) defined the term *second generation gender bias* as the subtle and habitual invisible barriers women must navigate as a result of cultural assumptions and organizational structures founded upon four main areas: (a) the scarcity of women leader role models; (b) gendered career path(s) and work; (c) women’s lack of access to networks and sponsors; and (d) irreconcilable demands (p. 65). Second generation gender bias is usually evident in organizations where women fail to thrive in leadership roles (Ibarra et al., 2013). Failure to build professional relationships with male colleagues, filling staff as opposed to leadership positions with women, and the exclusion of women from key leadership positions may reflect that something is amiss within the organization (Ibarra et al., 2013).

Even in women-dominated disciplines like nursing and education, the term *glass escalator* is used to describe the quick advancement of men into senior administrative level positions in these fields (Goudreau, 2012). Interestingly, men tend to fare better in female dominated jobs than women themselves. As discussed earlier, stereotypical
prototypes of what constitutes a leader or manager favor men (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Woods, 2013). Thus, men tend to achieve more promotions, earn higher salaries, and achieve higher-level positions within an organization than women (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Goudreau, 2012; Ibarra et al., 2013; van Engen et al., 2001).

In addition, the literature has suggested that women in the workforce often fight against entrenched, complex stereotypes perpetuated by the media and society whether they choose to work or opt out (Gourdreau, 2011; Kuperberg & Stone, 2013). For example, movies have painted women in powerful positions as ice queen power-mongers (i.e., Meryl Streep in The Devil Wears Prada, 2006; Sigourney Weaver in Working Girl, 1988) and women who are emotional are viewed as mentally unstable (Gourdreau, 2011). Adjectives like “lonely” and “tough” are often used to describe successful women leaders like as German Chancellor Angela Merkel (The Atlantic Times, 2013). If that were not enough, women’s contributions and presence are often marginalized as “tokens” of diversity since they still remain in the minority (Gourdreau, 2011; Green, 2011).

If all of the pressures and expectations placed upon women by society both at home and in the office were not enough, they must also contend with the myth of female solidarity. In recent years, the issue of workplace bullying has come under scrutiny. The Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI) defines workplace bullying as abusive conduct that: (a) is threatening, humiliating, and/or intimidating; (b) interferes with work (e.g. sabotage, misuse of authority, destruction of relationship); and/or (c) verbal abuse (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2014). Thirty-five percent of the workforce in the United States is subject to some form of bullying in the workplace (WBI, 2014). While both sexes can be both the victim and perpetrator, women still comprise majority of victims.
In addition, bullies are most likely to be the victim’s supervisor or boss, with women bullies targeting other women by almost 68% percent, while men bullies tend to be more equal opportunist (Drexler, 2013; WBI, 2014).

Coined the “Queen Bee” syndrome by researchers at the University of Michigan in the 1970s, the term refers to women who have achieved success in a male dominated environment opposing the rise of other women within the same environment (Drexler, 2013). In a survey conducted by the American Management Alliance, 96% of women surveyed believed they had been undermined at some point during their careers by another woman (Drexler, 2013). Lack of routine access to positions of leadership for women can cause other women to use such tactics to effectively eliminate their competition (Drexler, 2013).

However, this is contradicted by recent research that discovered women are more likely than men to help develop potential in other women (Catalyst, 2012; Langfield, 2012). This in turn results in a “pay it forward” mentality from positively influenced women who were coached, mentored, and sponsored to help develop other talented women (Catalyst, 2012; Langfield, 2012). Literature suggests that having this mentality is an important leadership trait for women (Catalyst, 2012; Langfield, 2012).

Not only must women deal with the implications of their sex and gender in the workplace, but also in their personal lives. Women who seek a “traditional” route in their personal lives (i.e., marriage, children) must navigate the inherent gender roles within the institution of marriage itself. In the marital relationship, specific assigned roles are more likely to be reflective of each spouse’s income, education, and occupation (Biernart &
In these three areas, the higher the status of each spouse, the more likely the overall familial duties are to be egalitarian (Biernart & Wortman, 1991). Women who are gainfully employed have reported higher satisfaction in their marriages than those who have not; however, professional women with demanding careers on par with their spouses have been more apt to report being satisfied with their work-home life balance if their partners physically contributed more in household duties and child rearing responsibilities outside of traditional assigned marital gender roles (Biernart & Wortman, 1991; Sandberg, 2013).

The literature elucidates the great deal of stress women executives operate under in their daily lives (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2008; Rao, Apte & Subbakrishna, 2003). Social support from spouses or significant others can play a critical role in managing the demands of role conflicts between professional, wife, and mother by providing stability, as well as physical and mental support (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2008; Rao et al., 2003). Research shows that although dual career couples are more apt to renegotiate gendered roles within marital life, it does not necessarily translate into an equitable division of labor between the sexes (Bartley, Blanton, & Gilliard, 2005; Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2008; Xu & Burleson, 2001). Additionally, if a couple has a child, this inequity becomes magnified (Deutsch, 1999; Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2008).

Authors argue that in order to become successful, women must outperform men in the workplace by taking on demanding and high profile assignments and working long hours all the while juggling their personal lives with their professional one (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2008; Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 2002; Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998). Studies point out that professional women handle these competing demands through the
support of mentors and supervisors, and prioritizing their careers over non-supportive partners/spouses (Ezzedeen & Ritchey 2008; Ragins et al., 1998; Gerson, 1986). While the support of a partner/spouse is critical in supporting a woman’s professional ambitions, Ezzedeen and Ritchey (2008) discovered six categories of spousal support received by executive women (in order of importance): emotional support, esteem support, help with family members, career support, husband’s career and lifestyle choices, and help with household (Hertz, 1989). Additionally, successful professional women tend to have partners and spouses who not only recognize that her career is important, but also understand her work is a priority (Ezzedeen & Ritchey 2008). In other words, these men make space in their women’s lives for them to pursue their careers. Successful women executives choose men who are supportive of both their career and their family (Ezzedeen & Ritchey 2008; Hertz, 1989).

In spite of the great strides in equality and women’s rights made during the past century, and regardless of their position in the workforce, research reveals that women still shoulder the majority of the burden related to children and the household. This often means pulling double duty at the office and at home, which in turn leads to physical and mental stress (Fitzgerald, 2013; Sandberg, 2013). In contrast, the majority of men have a built in support system of wives or partners who carry this burden on the home front for them—often referred to as invisible help (Fitzgerald, 2013). In addition, women also struggle with their own self-imposed identity, demands, and expectations tending to be hypercritical of their own performance at home and work even when their spouse rated their accomplishments high in both areas (Biernart & Wortman, 1991).
Authors submit in a recent study that men tend to feel less guilty over work-life balance than women do. This lessened guilt may be the result of men redefining their gendered role as the “breadwinner” or “provider” in the family which enables them to prioritize work over family when conflict arises (Grose, 2014; Groysberg & Abrahams, 2014). The reframing of necessity and falling back on societal gender norms appears to alleviate the guilt for men, whereas women contend with emotional guilt as a result of the gendered roles of “wife” and “mother” (Grose, 2014; Groysberg & Abrahams, 2014). Likewise, women have to pay for practical help (e.g. childcare), while men rely on their spouses and partners (i.e. invisible help) (Grose, 2014; Groysberg & Abrahams, 2014). One study of executives found that 88% of men were married, and of those, 60% of their wives did not work full-time outside of the home (Grose, 2014; Groysberg & Abrahams, 2014). Compare this to 70% of women in the study were married, and only 10% had spouses did not work full-time outside of the home (Grose, 2014; Groysberg & Abrahams, 2014).

In spite of the numerous negative factors affecting women, the literature evidences that there are positive influences on the development of women leaders. For example, when examining women’s lives, the impact of family and childhood is a powerful influence on their lived experiences and perceptions. From the moment a child is born, he or she becomes gendered and the family begins to shape that child’s development. This is why Madsen (2006) posited the family systems theory plays a role in studying women and leadership. The family systems theory (also known as the Bowen theory) states that in order to understand the individual, one must take into account their relationship with their family (Bowen Center, n.d.). Parents, siblings, and the home
environment all influence the development of women leaders (Bowen Center, n.d.; Madsen, 2006). Parents and siblings help to develop internal boundaries, individual identity, competencies, goals, and drives (Bowen, n.d.; Madsen, 2006). Madsen (2006) discovered in her research on the family lives of 25 women college and university presidents, that all were raised in middle income, two parent households. Moreover, the majority had siblings and were first-born in the birth order hierarchy. The bulk of participants’ mothers were homemakers when they were young, with half of those mothers returning to work in some form (full or part-time) when their children became older (Madsen, 2006). In addition, these women leaders also described their mothers and the influence they had on their lives in a positive manner in terms of expectations and overall happiness during their childhoods. The same held true for their fathers (Madsen, 2006).

Madsen’s (2006) research revealed that these positive experiences, familial relationships, and expectations resulted in these women developing the foundational competencies related to the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for assuming leadership roles later in their lives. These competencies were influenced by a middle class value system and enhanced through education and religion (Madsen, 2006). In addition, the vast majority of study participant’s mothers had a higher degree level than their fathers (i.e., attended college) (Madsen, 2006). Citing Matz (2002), Madsen’s (2006) research echoed that mothers were most influential in terms of self-esteem and inspiration.

In spite of the literature available on the topic of gender, sex, and their influence on women’s personal and professional lives, the literature is a void when it comes to
research on women leaders at for-profit, online institutions of higher education. The emerging themes throughout the literature evidence the invisible barriers working women must contend with in their daily lives, namely, the impact of societal imposed gender norms, the incongruity between the female gender and leadership roles, and a preference for male leadership attributes. This is compounded by the issue of support both at home and work for women who attempt to meld their professional and personal lives. While the literature may be applicable to women at online for-profits, it does not specifically address it. Using the existing literature as a basis, this study used interview questions to collect data in these areas. The existing literature looks at issues affecting women within the contexts of business and traditional higher education, but did not address the implications of sex and gender and how they influence the personal lives and careers of this unique group of women. This area warrants further study.

Women and Leadership

This study sought to understand not only how women academic leaders experience their roles at for-profits but also their career paths and challenges they have faced along the way. The literature on women and leadership addresses the development of leadership identity, professional development, gender preference, and leadership traits. Trait theory has been studied in detail as it relates to leadership in an effort to determine what makes someone a great leader; in other words what specific personal characteristics manifest in leaders? Although research has not yet produced a consensus on this issue, some recent research has suggested that leadership is connected to several core competencies: personality, self-concept, drive, integrity, leadership motivation,
knowledge of the business, cognitive and practical intelligence, and emotional intelligence (McShane & Von Glinow, 2011, p. 363).

The term *leadership* itself is an amorphous noun that is difficult to define because it is a term used to describe “…a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2010, p. 3). The concept of leadership has two different dimensions—*trait* and *process*—which are often used to define it. According to Northouse (2010), traits are inherent characteristics with which an individual is endowed through birth (e.g., intelligence, extraversion, etc.), while process involves interactions between leaders and their colleagues.

Within leadership there exists different bases of power both relative to personal (referent and expert) and position (legitimate, reward, and coercive) (Northouse, 2010). However, leadership is different from management (Northouse, 2010). While the focus in management is on order and consistency, leadership creates change and movement (Northouse, 2010). In addition, leadership is assigned either (a) through a particular position and the expectations accompanying it (e.g., in higher education the positions of department chair, dean, provost, or president); or (b) it emerges when an individual becomes influential within a group setting irrespective of title (Northouse, 2010).

Previous literature suggested that there was little difference in the style of leadership and its related effectiveness between men and women, although women seem to embrace the *transformational leadership* style more than men do (van Engen et al., 2001; Eagly & Johnson, 1990). However, recent studies have shown that women are devalued when they model their leadership style after men, especially when they occupy
a typically male dominated position (Northouse, 2010). This devaluation occurs not only between leaders, but also in subordinate-leader relationships (Northouse, 2010).

Women executives have to develop their leadership skills in a male dominated work environment. How women develop as leaders is important. Their evolution as leaders typically involves three phases: (1) compliant novices; (2) competence seekers; and (3) change agents (Bierema, 1999). Compliant novices refer to women undervaluing their competence, skills, and talents. During this phase women leaders tend to have no concrete plans for their development and use a variety of learning tactics, absorbing information about their position and building relationships across various stakeholders within an organization (Acker 2010; Bierema, 1999; Fitzgerald, 2013). They also tend to pursue formalized learning via higher education and other professional development courses, as well as more informal learning through mentors, peers, and mistakes. As women began to gain more confidence, they then seek to pursue opportunities for further advancement. The compliant novice then transitions to a competence seeker. During this second phase, women executives begin to build confidence in their own competence, skills, and talents (Bierema, 1999). Typically these women tend to be either the oldest (fifty years old or older with seniority in the organization) within their organization or youngest (thirty five years old or younger and with less seniority) (Bierema, 1999). During this period the women continue to build upon their knowledge, skills, and expertise through both formal and informal learning and take on riskier assignments. They are extremely focused on being seen as competence and accepted by their male peers (Bierema, 1999). This supports the literature that argues that women concentrate on operating and acclimating to and within a male dominated system, rather than vice
versa (Acker, 2010; Ballenger, 2010; Dennis & Kunkel, 2004; Eagly, & Karau, 2002; Faludi, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2013; Fox-Cardimone, & Wilson, 2010; Frankel, 2004; Northouse, 2010).

During the last phase, women executives develop as change agents. Through this phase women begin to realize that competence and acceptance are insufficient alone to continue professional upward mobility (Bierema, 1999). They seek to influence the organization and its culture through collaboration, all the while continuing to focus on their own self-development to aid in this change (Bierema, 1999).

In examining the current literature on women and leadership, it is important to keep in mind that in terms of educational and employment demographics, women meet or exceed men, as Figure 6 reveals:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>EDUCATION &amp; WORK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>WOMEN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial/Professional Positions</td>
<td>50.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Labor Force</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor Degrees Graduates</td>
<td>57.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 6. Education and work (Northouse, 2010, p. 305).*

Women tend to be well represented in mid-level management positions in the workforce, compared to senior level positions. However, while women are on par with men for entry level positions, and 83% of them have a desire to be promoted to senior position, research has indicated that their chances are only 60% those of men (Shellenbarger, 2011;
Wall Street Journal, 2011). The literature has proposed a variety of reasons for this. Chief among them are (a) women are promoted on performance, while men are promoted on potential; (b) women feel a greater need to prioritize their family over their careers; (c) women are paid less and have financial considerations that burden them (i.e. child-care); (d) a lack of senior women at their organizations who can model, mentor, and support their promotion; and (e) contentment (Shellenbarger, 2011; WSJ, 2011). Studies have also found that women leaders must contend with several internal and external barriers, notably:

- **Internal:** entrenched mindsets, self-esteem, motherhood, loneliness, and lack of mentors (Drury, 2010; Kaplan & Tinsley, 1989; WSJ, 2011).

- **External:** parental educational level, lack of male attributes, networks, mentoring, support (both at home and work), gender stereotyping, jealousy, and relegation (Drury, 2010; Kaplan & Tinsley, 1989; WSJ, 2011).

The literature shows that mentors can have an impact on the professional development of women. While mentoring can be critical in a woman’s education and career progression, research indicates that having a mentor can be both a benefit and a challenge (Tolar, 2012; Armenti, 2004; Catalyst, 2007; Gibson, 2005). In its most beneficial light, mentors can serve as role models, sounding boards, coaches, and access to individuals, networks and organizations (Tolar, 2012). Conversely, mentoring can be challenging when it relates to appropriate boundary issues, lack of access to the mentor, lack of understanding of mentee’s financial and personal challenges, outpacing of the mentor by the mentee, social/professional ramifications of cross-gender mentoring, generational issues, and ineffective mentoring (e.g. communication, conflicting advice).
Having no mentor at all was seen not only as a challenge, but also a deficit (Tolar, 2012).

However, while generally beneficial, having a mentor alone is insufficient to close the gender-gap for women as men with mentors still receive greater pay and promotions than their female counterparts (Carter & Silvia, 2010). Authors suggest that while overall having a mentor can be a positively impact a woman’s career, it is more likely to be beneficial when the mentor-mentee relationship is current, the mentor is the CEO or a senior level executive, and the mentee also has sponsorship (Carter & Silvia, 2010; Hewlett, Marshall, & Sherbin, 2011). It is important to note that there is a difference between mentorship and sponsorship. A mentor provides the mentee with guidance and advice, while a sponsor actively advocates for his or her protégé (Carter & Silvia, 2010; Hewlett, Marshall, & Sherbin, 2011). Research has uncovered that high potential women were more likely to advance under the sponsorship of a highly placed sponsor within the organization who could advocate for them in terms of professional development opportunities and promotions (Carter & Silvia, 2010; Hewlett, Marshall, & Sherbin, 2011). A good sponsor is someone who is not only willing to put their reputation on the line for a protégé, but also actively takes responsibility for his or her protégé’s promotion (Carter & Silvia, 2010; Hewlett, Marshall, & Sherbin, 2011, pg. 132).

Figure 7 corroborates the leadership gap between the sexes. While women almost meet or exceed men in terms of educational and work demographics, they are still severely underrepresented in senior leadership positions.
Northouse (2010) opined that this leadership gap between men and women is the result of a “leadership labyrinth” that women must navigate comprised of three specific areas: human capital, gender differences, and prejudice, as Figure 8 depicts:

Today the issue is not that there are too few women in the leadership pipeline, but rather why is there a bottleneck of women in mid-level management?

Studies demonstrate that workplace flexibility is an integral component in retaining women in the workforce. When not offered, women may be forced to choose to
work below their skill level or opt out altogether. The “Paula principle” is a term used to explain a social phenomenon that most women work below their level of competence (Schuller, 2012). The converse of the “Peter principle” (i.e., people advance to their level of incompetence), the Paula principle suggests that there are five factors that force women to make these choices: (a) gender discrimination; (b) lack of structural support systems (e.g., affordable childcare and elder care); (c) lack of self-confidence in their abilities; (d) lack of vertical networks; and (e) conscious decision against advancement (e.g., “opting out” for quality of life issues) (Peter & Hull, 2011; Schuller, 2012). This principle is applicable to all women in the pipeline, from those in senior leadership positions, to others further down the chain (Schuller, 2012). This is important because it shows that women’s skills, talents, and abilities are not being tapped to their fullest potential. It also is representative of the notion that women are expected to adapt to the male work model, rather than employers adapting to the needs of their employees (e.g., offering alternative work arrangements). Workplace flexibility and alternative work arrangements (e.g., telecommuting, compressed work weeks, job sharing) help women who desire to pursue their careers the option to do so.

However, this flexibility can also have a negative side. “Flexibility stigma” is a phrase used to describe discrimination against those who opt for such arrangements and the accompanying informal penalization in the workplace (Stone & Hernandez, 2013; William et al., 2013). Since many more women than men are likely to take advantage of such options, flexibility stigma supports gender discrimination against women by allowing employers to view their female employees through the lens of “motherhood” making them appear less competent and committed to their work (Epstein, Seron,
Oglensky, & Saute, 1999; Stone & Hernandez, 2013). (It should be noted that men may be punished more severely for choosing to make use of such options (e.g., family leave) since it supports non-conforming gender behavior) (Epstein et al., 1999; Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Williams et al., 2013). Research shows that there are norms applicable to certain professions (i.e. attorneys and billable hours), which are evidence of an employee’s devotion to their work and competence (Epstein et al., 1999; Stone & Hernandez, 2013). These professional norms are meant to model individual characteristics valued in employees such as competence, ambition, and commitment (Epstein et al., 1999; Stone & Hernandez, 2013). Desiring flexible or alternative work arrangements can be viewed as deviant behavior and result in devalued status in the workplace (Epstein et al., 1999; Stone & Hernandez, 2013). Once this devaluation occurs, women are less likely to receive quality assignments, promotions, and find mentors/sponsors (Williams et al., 2013). When this occurs, many women choose to then opt out of their careers, which only serves to affirm gender norms and sexism in the workplace (Stone & Hernandez, 2013).

Some authors have argued that leaders are those individuals who are able not only to internalize a leadership identity, but also to develop a sense of purpose (Ibarra et al., 2013; Stelter-Flett, 2006). Leadership itself often begins tentatively and grows when an individual takes purposeful action that is affirmed by others. This emboldens leaders to step outside of their comfort zones and offer to accept new assignments and opportunities (Ibarra et al., 2013; Stellers, 2013; Stelter-Flett, 2006). This in turn grows an individual’s leadership capabilities, expanding the opportunities to further develop and demonstrate
leadership competencies. Over time, a leader’s reputation for potential grows…or not (Ibarra et al., 2013).

Studies have confirmed that leadership has been seen as a traditionally masculine role (Dennis & Kunkel, 2004; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Thelin, 2011; Woods, 2013). The perceiver’s sex plays an important role in that men’s views of leadership tend to favor male characteristics such as strength, ambition, success, independence, competitiveness, and logic, while women’s view of leadership are more gender neutral on characteristics (Dennis & Kunkel, 2004; Eagly & Karau, 2002). However, managerial hierarchies within an organization require different skill sets (Eagly & Karau, 2002; van Engen et al., 2001).

As noted earlier, management is equated with order and consistency, and leadership with change and movement (Northouse, 2010). Managerial positions require human relations skills which have a more “feminine” side, while senior positions require strategic thinking and entrepreneurial ability which are viewed as more “masculine” (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Symonds, 2008). Interestingly, women are more likely to have a female manager than men are. As a result of this lowered exposure to female style leadership, men are less likely to have a neutral view of it (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Newport 2011). Therefore, when women do assume leadership roles, the incongruity between feminine and masculine attributes results in prejudice against women leaders (Ballenger, 2010; Dennis & Kunkel; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Woods, 2013). This incongruence in turn leads to lack of fitness view in workplace roles.

Competency-based leadership identifies eight inherent characteristics or traits that make an individual an effective leader, discussed earlier. However, there are some
inherent issues with the competency perspective, one of which is that it assumes that every leader has the same traits. McShane and Von Glinow (2011) argue that no one set of defined competencies make someone an exceptional leader. Another issue is the relational nature of leadership itself. Effective leaders are often such because of the positive relationships they have with their subordinates (McShane & Von Glinow, 2011). Additionally, competencies are only an indicator of leadership potential, not actual performance (McShane & Von Glinow, 2011).

The literature is fraught with discussion of the double bind dilemma in which women aspiring to leadership position find themselves (Ballenger, 2010; Dennis & Kunkel, 2004; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Faludi, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2013; Fox-Cardimone & Wilson, 2010). In general, there are two “myths” which effect women who aspire to leadership positions. The first is the illusion of gender equality (Faludi, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2013). To suggest that there is opportunity for advancement does not in reality equate to the elimination of barriers (Acker, 2010; Faludi, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2013).

Second, women who lead must look and act a certain way (Faludi, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2013; Frankel, 2004). The workforce seeks diversity, yet is constrained by societal gender norms of leadership. Our male-dominated culture of leadership favors masculine traits (i.e., competitiveness, self-promotion) and assumes there exists no external demands on employees outside of work (i.e., family)—in other words, a male work model (Acker, 2010; Fitzgerald, 2013). The knowledge economy has emerged to demand an ever-increasing diverse workforce, yet masculine beliefs of quality, productivity, and performance continue to dominate, and men still occupy a majority of senior leadership positions (Acker, 2010; Ballenger, 2010; Dennis & Kunkel, 2004;
Eagly & Karau, 2002; Faludi, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2013; Fox-Cardimone & Wilson, 2010; Northouse, 2010). Many women still must become “one of the boys” to learn the “rules of the game” (Acker, 2010).

As women begin to “climb the corporate ladder,” attrition begins to take its toll. The issue of gender equality becomes a complex issue when the other gender controls the access to leadership positions. This leads to a quandary: there are fewer women leaders, but studies have shown that having women leaders in positions of corporate leadership had a positive return on the financial bottom line of the company (ADB, 2012; Bart & McQueen, 2013). For example having at least one woman board director:

- reduces a company’s chance of bankruptcy by 20%,
- increases return on equity, invested capital, and sales by an average of 50%,
- influences companies to adopt new governance practices that positively benefit women, and
- Better enables companies to anticipate the needs of women (Bart & McQueen, 2013, p. 95).

At the same time, the literature has addressed the high visibility of the position itself. To aspire to such a rank often requires that a woman be willing to become engaged and sometimes break bounds that may confine their careers and personal life (Barsh, Cranston, & Lewis, 2009; Haslam & Ryan, 2007). At times, this means speaking up and asking for what they want, and research has shown that women are less likely to do so (Barsh et al., 2009). Becoming engaged requires a woman to assume responsibility for her own personal development and being open to opportunity that may also involve risk (Barsh et al., 2009; Haslam & Ryan, 2007). By speaking up, women build not only their
leadership skills, but also their presence. Women typically shy away from attention believing that it means more if someone else notices them without them touting their accomplishments (Barsh et al., 2009; Haslam & Ryan, 2007). Some women believe they only have the right to speak if they have the correct answer; however, taking ownership of accomplishments and voicing what is important and needed by them is what gets them noticed (Barsh et al., 2009).

The term *glass cliff*, a term first coined by Haslam and Ryan (2007), refers to women who have broken through the glass ceiling only to assume precarious positions of senior leadership that have a high risk of failure (Barsh et al., 2009; Haslam & Ryan, 2007). The researchers hypothesize that the glass cliff is the result of hostile and benevolent sexism, group dynamics, change signals, and perceived quality of leadership options (Bruckmuller & Branscombe, 2011; Haslam & Ryan, 2007).

The glass cliff focuses on the spotlight in which women leaders are placed. Women who are promoted to positions of senior leadership are often subject to intense scrutiny and criticism by both men and women alike (Bruckmuller & Branscombe, 2011; Haslam & Ryan, 2007; Ibarra et al., 2013; Frankel, 2004). Some authors have argued that women are often placed in positions of leadership that are associated with greater risk of failure (Barsh et al., 2009; Bruckmuller & Branscombe, 2011; Haslam & Ryan, 2007).

For example, Yahoo CEO Melissa Mayer assumed the senior leadership role not only when she was pregnant, but also when Yahoo was suffering serious disorganization, loss of vision, and financial woes (Sellers, 2012; Vikery, 2013). The singularity of “think crisis = think female” suggests that some traits are beneficial in a time of crisis, such as
creativity and a cheerful disposition (more likely to be attributed to the feminine) which leads to women’s fitness for senior leadership positions actually increasing in times of organizational crisis (Bruckmuller & Branscombe, 2011; Haslam & Ryan, 2007). Women are more likely to be excluded from “safe” positions of leadership, as opposed to those that involve greater risk and challenge, and the glass cliff applies across the workforce irrespective of industry (Bruckmuller & Branscombe, 2011; Haslam & Ryan, 2007). Since women assume these risker leadership positions, they also tend to hold positions of senior leadership for half the time as do their male counterparts—4.8 versus 8.2 years (Haslam & Ryan, 2007, p. 557).

In spite of the literature available on the topic of women and leadership, the literature is incomplete in not addressing specifically women leaders at for-profit, online institutions of higher education. The emerging themes throughout this section demonstrate the illusion of gender equality in the workforce. Despite being on par with men professionally and educationally, senior leadership positions continue to elude women. Internal and external barriers take many forms: lack of mentoring, gendered leadership styles and traits, and promotion based on performance versus potential. While the literature may be applicable to women academic leaders at online for-profits, it does not specifically address this unique sector of higher education. How did these women rise to leadership at online for-profits, and why? What influenced them to choose to pursue a career in online education? This area warrants further study.

**Women as Leaders in Higher Education**

The focus of this study addresses women as leaders in a specific sector of the higher education industry: for-profit, online higher education. As stated earlier, there is
a deficiency in the literature in this exact area. Research to date has addressed women leaders at traditional institutions of higher education. To understand women at for-profits better, the study seeks to comprehend how women perceive themselves as leaders not only at for-profits, but also within higher education itself.

Similar to the general workforce, senior women leaders at the post-secondary level are in the minority. This phenomenon is referred to in the literature as “the higher the fewer” when analyzing women’s positions of leadership at academic institutions (Allan, 2011, p. 2). While it appears that women have made inroads in leadership positions in higher education, these advances appear to be confined to community colleges and administrative affairs (Allan, 2011). Women typically tend to preside over associate (i.e., community) colleges in greater numbers than they do over any other institutional type. Community colleges are the only place where women are on a par with men in the ranks of senior administrators (52%) in comparison with other institutions (34%) (Allan, 2011, p. 2). At traditional four-year institutions, the vast majority of women leaders tend to serve in leadership roles related to student, external, and administrative affairs, as opposed to department chairs and academic deans (Allan, 2011).

The literature indicates that the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) positions at colleges and universities continue to remain heavily dominated by men, with women only comprising approximately one quarter of the upper leadership echelons (ACE, 2012; Allan, 2011). While women did initially make great strides during the late twentieth century, their appointment to such positions has slowed considerably in the past decade (ACE, 2012; Allan, 2011). Of those in leadership-type positions, most come from
careers that provided them with senior executive experiences, such as chief academic officers, and other experiences outside of academe (ACE, 2012; Allan, 2011).

According to some authors, there are characteristics applicable to women university and college presidents that have enabled them to thrive on new positions and opportunities, and actively seek them out (Hibel & Madsen, 2013; Madsen, 2008; Madsen, 2006). They include the

- ability to learn quickly,
- desire to be challenged by their positions,
- ability to deal with criticism,
- skill in giving and accepting feedback,
- ability to disregard inaccurate criticism, and
- aptitude for developing long term professional relationships (Hibel & Madsen, 2013).

In order to better understand women academic leaders at for-profits, this study examines the literature from the perspective of both a corporation and higher education. To this end, the researcher examined the literature in an attempt to obtain a profile of women senior leaders in both types of institutions. Literature on these topics focused on women primarily in senior positions of leadership and is discussed in further detail below (ACE, 2012; Hibel & Madsen, 2013; Madsen, 2008; Sellers, 2013; Symonds, 2012).

**Profile: Female College & University Presidents.** While significant research has been done on women and leadership in general in higher education, the majority of the literature has focused on women leaders in presidency positions and women attempting to access roles of increasing responsibility (Fitzgerald, 2013; Hibel &
Madsen, 2013; Lewis, 2012; Madsen, 2008; Phillips, 2013). This may be in part due to the minority of women in high profile leadership positions. The American Council of Education (ACE) found in their *Errata: The American College President* (2012) that in 2011 women made up 26.4% of presidency positions, as compared to 23% in 2006 (p. 2). Of those 26.4% women presidents, 85% of them were currently married and had children (p. 2). The majority of them also had doctorates with an educational field of study, and prior to assuming their presidency, the majority position held was as Chief Academic Officer (ACE, 2012). Table 2 displays the characteristics of the general profile.

Table 2

**General Profile of American College Presidents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographics</strong></td>
<td>Currently Married</td>
<td>71.6%</td>
<td>90.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Has Children</td>
<td>72.1%</td>
<td>90.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Altered Career for Family</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>60.2 years</td>
<td>60.9 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td>PhD or EdD</td>
<td>82.7%</td>
<td>74.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Field of Study in Education or Higher Education</td>
<td>46.4%</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Career History</strong></td>
<td>Prior CAO/Provost</td>
<td>51.9%</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ever worked outside of higher education</td>
<td>48.2%</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(ACE, 2012, p. 2).

Women were also more likely to be presidents of public institutions, rather than private, regardless of institutional type (i.e., doctoral, masters, bachelors, etc.) (ACE, 2012). In addition, the overall majority of presidents were hired from within the institutions,
suggesting that institutions prefer to promote internally those with proven top-level administrative leadership experience (ACE, 2012).

**Profile: Women CEOs of Fortune 500 Companies.** In the corporate world, women occupy only 4% of CEO positions at Fortune 500 companies, and only one in five corporate board positions is held by a woman (Symonds, 2012). Women who have acceded to the C-suite have several traits in common, chief among them being (a) knowing themselves; (b) being able to fit the pieces of the motherhood/work puzzle together; (c) relying on outside help in their personal lives (e.g. house cleaners); (d) networking; (e) are proactive in seeking out accomplishment recognition; and (f) can negotiate (Symonds, 2012; WSJ, 2011).

There are 21 women CEOs at the helm of Fortune 500 companies as of June 2013 (CNN Money, 2013). Most of these female CEOs have analytical educational degrees in science, technology, mathematics, or engineering (Sellers, 2013). These women have several traits in common. As Table 3 shows, they are well-educated, have reinforced their education with varied experience, and have business and financial sense (Investopedia, 2012).

**Table 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has Child(ren)</td>
<td></td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Age</td>
<td></td>
<td>55.4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>College Degree</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate Degree</td>
<td>64.3 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(DVVYA, 2013)
For-Profit Online Higher Education: The Marriage of a Corporation and a University

For-profit, online institutions of higher education are unique in that they are a hybrid enterprise commingling the attributes of both a corporation and an academically focused university. For-profit educational institutions of higher education in the United States have been in existence for at least 200 years. The single biggest difference between traditional brick and mortar institutions and for-profits is the source of revenue (Bailey et al., 2001; Christensen et al., 2011; Habblitz, 2009; Tierney, 2011). Traditional institutions are reliant on several different sources of revenue, notably federal, state, and local governments, tuition and fees, and charitable donations. For-profits must rely on the revenue they generate solely through tuition and fees (Bailey et al., 2001; Christensen et al., 2011; Habblitz, 2009; Tierney, 2011). For-profit institutions apply a corporate business model to higher education and are focused on the needs of the consumer (i.e., the student) and the workforce. They measure their performance two ways: (a) in financial terms; and (b) retention and persistence (Bailey et al., 2001; Christensen et al., 2011; Habblitz, 2009; Tierney, 2011).

Literature on leadership at these institutions is almost non-existent. A study conducted by Habblitz (2009) explored the leadership characteristics of Chief Academic Officers (CAOs) at for-profit institutions. Among the results was evidence that leaders at these colleges and universities evidenced the following characteristics: the ability to embrace change, multitask, and have a high sense of urgency (Habblitz, 2009, p. 98). Their leadership styles also tended to be collaborative, collegial, and flatteringly (Habblitz, 2009). The issue with Habblitz’s (2009) study was that it was gender non-specific. The area of women leaders at for-profits is an area that requires further investigation given the
breadth of literature on how leadership styles can vary between men and women in general and the absence of any study or literature in this area on women in for-profit higher education.

The perspectives of women academic leaders at for-profits related to their careers, positions, and leadership was a heretofore unresearched niche of higher education. Using a feminist phenomenological method discussed in detail in Chapter 3, data was analyzed to develop not only a profile, but also to discover how these women negotiated their roles as academic leaders at for-profits. The literature on women and leadership in both the corporate and educational environments specifically addressed women’s experiences, leadership style and characteristics, and the impact of gender, yet it neglected to tackle the experience of women leaders at for-profits. As discussed throughout this paper, this subject matter merited investigation.
Chapter 3: Methodology

“I am a woman.” – Simone de Beauvoir

This qualitative study examined women academic leaders at for-profits perspectives on their careers, positions, leadership, and lives. A qualitative approach and focus was appropriate as it provided a holistic connection between the philosophical framework (feminism) and methodology (phenomenology). The overall method was necessarily phenomenological as the study explored a phenomenon as well as the social reality of the study participants. Combining the framework and method, the study utilized a feminist phenomenological approach to be further illuminated in this chapter.

The exploratory purpose of the study was to: (a) investigate a heretofore unresearched area; (b) cure a deficiency in the literature; (c) shape preliminary understanding; and (d) provide a framework for future research. The central research question addressed the perceptions of these women leaders reference to their leadership and personal and professional lives.

The research process and timeline was:
Collection of Data

Due to the qualitative nature of the study and the desire to gain an in-depth understanding, a small sample size was utilized. Study participants were limited to women academic leaders in the rank of dean or higher. This definition of academic leaders included assistant and associate deans, graduate and undergraduate deans, vice presidents, Chief Academic Officer (CAO), and provost. The women leaders were recruited via email through convenience sampling because of their specialized knowledge of for-profit, online, higher education. This resulted in the creation of a culturally cohesive sample who shared characteristics that addressed the research focus of this study (Hesse-Bieber & Leavy, 2011).

In total, 11 participants were recruited for the study. They spanned six for-profit, online institutions in seven different states across the country. These women academic
leaders took part in telephonic, semi-structured, in-depth interviews, the purpose of which was to examine their perspectives and lived experiences as women academic leaders at for-profits. The recruiting, selection, and interviewing participants are discussed in detail below.

**Recruiting, Selection, and Securing of Participants**

As mentioned previously, convenience sampling was used to select participants based upon specialized knowledge, availability, and willingness to participate (Hesse-Bieber & Leavy, 2011). Given the qualitative nature of the study, the researcher sought to keep the sample size small—between eight and 12 participants. The logic behind the small sample size was to examine better the meanings that study participants attributed to their particular social situation and lived experiences, rather than make generalizations (Hesse-Bieber & Leavy, 2011).

The recruiting of study participants began with a professional introduction by a colleague who is a member of the Women Leading in Proprietary Sector Higher Education (WLPSHE) organization. The WLPSHE is an organization comprised of women academic leaders in for-profit, higher education, and has presented at such conferences as the Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities (APSCU). At the beginning of the year, an introduction email was sent by the colleague to 18 members introducing the researcher and providing them with general information about researcher and the purpose of her study. The researcher followed up with an email to the women of WLPSHE and included two additional professional colleagues. The introductory email is included in Appendix A. In her email to the potential subjects, the researcher outlined the purpose of her study and solicited their participation, as well as providing her contact information.
information. The researcher contacted a male colleague who also works in for-profit higher education and solicited his help in forwarding an introduction and her email to any female professional colleagues of his who might be interested in participating.

As discussed earlier, participants were selectively recruited for their specific characteristics (e.g., women academic leaders in the rank of dean or higher at for-profit, online institutions of higher education). Of the 20 women contacted in the initial email, four initially responded that they were interested in participating. The respondents met the study participant selection criteria, and the researcher then individually emailed them the interview guide questions and the informed consent. In the interim, five women responded with interest from the researcher’s male colleague’s introduction, three of whom met the selection criteria. These women were also emailed the interview guide questions and informed consents. Receiving affirmation of their participation, the researcher scheduled 90 minute telephonic interviews with all participants. Lastly, after interviews with two participants, they put the researcher in contact with additional colleagues of theirs who met the selection criteria and would be interested in participating in the study. The researcher contacted these women with emails soliciting their participation. She secured four additional participants via this method for an end total of 11 study participants. The researcher followed the same protocols with all women in terms of solicitation, emailing of the interview guide and informed consent, as well as scheduling of telephonic interviews. All women who met the selection criteria and agreed to participate were forwarded the documents in Appendices A, B, and C.
Data Collection Method

The researcher began the participant selection process in January 2014 and concluded the study participant interviews in mid-March 2014. The initial email was sent on January 16, 2014, with the first interview scheduled on January 22, 2014. The interview of the final participant concluded on March 10, 2014. Interviews were recorded using an application on the researcher’s iPhone called Rev.com. The application is a transcription service that records the interview in an audio file that is then uploaded to the company’s secured website for transcription. Files were securely stored and transmitted using 128-bit SSL encryption. The transcription service secured the files and the information was only shared with their professional transcriptionists, who they require to sign strict confidentiality agreements with them. No automated transcription software was used in the process. Once the audio file was transcribed, the company sent the researcher the verbatim audio transcript in a word document via email. When the transcript of the interview was received, the researcher reviewed the conversation, and then sent it to individual study participants for their review and comment, if any, to ensure that the data collected was an accurate representation of their words, ideas, and experiences.

As previously noted, the participants comprised women at six different for-profit institutions who lived in seven different states across the country. Given the busy schedules of these women leaders and the logistic, time, and financial constraints of conducting in-person interviews, telephonic interviews were utilized for this study. All of the study participants were open to having the interviews conducted telephonically, rather than in person. This allowed for savings in terms of cost, time, and flexibility.
given the far-reaching geographical locations of the participants. It also permitted the researcher to examine a wide array of participants from a variety of different institutions who may not have otherwise been able to participate in the study (Opdenakker, 2006; Sweet, 2002). All study participants were interviewed at their place of business during their normal business hours. The interviews were not linked to a particular setting itself, but rather a prearranged setting by the interviewee.

Given the focus of the study, the researcher utilized in-depth interviews to concentrate on, as well as gain, exploratory and descriptive data, not only of participants’ social reality, but also their subjugated knowledge. This meant accessing the thoughts and memories of the participants. Interview questions were developed and built upon phenomenological research methods, as well as a review of the limited literature available. The conversations were medium structured and contained a mix of closed and open queries that would permit the study participants freedom to relate their perceptions and experiences as women leaders at for-profits. This was done by using “how,” “what,” and “why” questions. The “what” questions enabled the researcher to create demographic profiles for them, and the “how” questions permitted a deeper investigation into how the participants constructed the meaning of their positions and experiences both within the institution and within their personal lives and relationships (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The interview guide can be found in Appendix C.

The above outlined approach allowed the researcher the flexibility to utilize different questions and approaches for various participants as necessary. As discussed earlier, initial questions focused on obtaining personal information (e.g., marital status, educational background, age, etc.) to develop a demographic profile of participants.
Follow up questions were emailed to the participants when it was determined that additional explanations or insights into specific areas was required. Prior to the beginning of each conversation, the study participants were asked to read and sign a written informed consent after a conversational review of the material contained in the consent document (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

Of special note was the women’s willingness to participate and their support of the research on this topic. They all requested to be kept informed of the final product and a few put the researcher in contact with other doctoral students who had similar research interests. These women evidenced genuine support for doing their part to advance the knowledge and visibility of women leaders at for-profit institutions of higher education. Overall, the researcher’s experience, and subjective experience of these women’s interest, was highly positive.

**Description of the Feminist Phenomenological Method**

The overall methodology was a qualitative approach utilizing feminist phenomenology. The philosophy of phenomenology has its origins in the eighteenth century with a focus on how human beings experience consciousness; in other words, how individuals become aware of and perceive their lived experiences (Hesse-Biber & Levy, 2011). In general, the phenomenological approach attempts to explore and understand the lived experience of someone related to a specific research question. It seeks to identify phenomena through the insight of a certain individual within a specific context (S. R. Madsen, personal communication, October 12, 2013). For a researcher, this requires collection of in-depth data through conversations and various techniques (e.g., discussion, observation, reading background information) (S.R. Madsen, personal
communication, October 12, 2013). “In phenomenological research, the researcher is interested primarily with exploring the experience or experiences from the participants’ perspectives - not necessarily the researcher’s interpretation of the individual’s experience” (S.R. Madsen, personal communication, October 12, 2013). The key is to collect and analyze data free of personal assumptions and biases (S.R. Madsen, personal communication, October 12, 2013).

Rather than focusing on a right or wrong answer, the researcher allowed the experience of the female participants to be open to interpretation in an effort to both describe and explain a phenomenon. Experiences are open to interpretation based upon the context in which they occur, through the influence of society and dialogue. There is no “one reality” (Hesse-Biber & Levy, 2011). As Hesse-Biber and Levy (2011) pointed out, “Experience is perceived along a variety of dimensions: how experience is lived in time, space, and vis-à-vis our relationships with other, as well as bodily experience” (p. 19).

Feminist phenomenology is a relatively new method of research that has its origins in the mid-twentieth century (S. Stoller, personal communication October 17, 2013). However, it was not until the late twentieth century that feminist phenomenology emerged as its own field and became institutionalized (S. Stoller, personal communication, October 17, 2013). Originally brought to the forefront in the French existentialist Simone de Beauvoir’s (1949) book, The Second Sex (Le deuxieme), de Beauvoir sought to account for the separation of the human species along biological lines. She argued that the division of the sexes is sought at the outset and gender the most noticeable differentiator among humans as a whole and the lens through which
individuals experience their reality (de Beauvoir, 1949). In other words, “…to be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view towards the world,” and she believed that men and women live different experiences (Lennon, 2010).

The feminist phenomenological method is feminist-focused phenomenology (S. Stoller, personal communication, October 17, 2013). Feminist phenomenology is the application of the phenomenological method to feminist research. Enmeshed within the feminist phenomenological method is the belief that major research philosophical inquiries neither take into account gender differences nor attempt to explain them (van Leeuwen, 2012). Feminist phenomenology seeks to raise the issue of gender as a philosophical question and applies phenomenological methods of inquiry to feminist issues such as the division of domestic labor, the glass ceiling, and social inequality (van Leeuwen, 2012). Therefore, this method combines the feminist perspective and phenomenology. It seeks to draw a correlation between phenomenon and the external façade of gender (van Leeuwen, 2012).

The feminist phenomenological perspective was appropriate relative to the research problem, research questions, and overall purpose of the study in that feminist phenomenology focuses on gender itself as the topic of study, specifically the asymmetry between male and female, which forms the basis of inequality between the sexes (Stoller, 2005). This study sought to understand the lived experiences of women academic leaders at for-profits in an effort to better comprehend the social reality of these women. This perspective assumes that the asymmetry between the genders results in women being afforded neither the same opportunities nor treatment as men (Stoller, 2005). The
relationship between genders is based upon the premise that man cannot live a woman’s experience and vice versa (Stoller, 2005). Each gender experiences their social reality within their own sex and social place within society. Nevertheless, the focus of this study was not in relation to asymmetry being viewed with a negative connotation, but rather from an ontological category that emphasizes the positive difference between the two genders (Stoller, 2005).

The theoretical research paradigm is grounded in interpretation. This theoretical paradigm uses the epistemology of knowledge as verstehen (understanding) to explore how the study participants “think” about their experience(s) (Hesse-Biber & Levy, 2011). Prior studies conducted on women leaders have used qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods as a methodological design based upon the research questions being asked. Those attempting to explore and describe the actual experiences of participants have relied on qualitative, phenomenological models (Stelter-Flett, 2005). A qualitative, feminist phenomenological approach was appropriate to investigate the viewpoints and experiences of women leaders at for-profits since such information was noticeably absent in the literature.

**Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative research, it is important that the researcher be cognizant of the degree of influence he or she may have on the findings. This is particularly true in situations where the researcher and participant know one another. Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2011) defined reflexivity as the “…process through which researchers recognize, examine, and understand how their own social background and assumptions can intervene in the research process” (p.120). Researchers’ values, behaviors, and even their
very presence can affect interpretation of the data (Jootun, McGhee, & Marland, 2009). This is why reflexivity is a critical practice in qualitative research. Examples of common pitfalls in qualitative research are becoming enmeshed with the participants and pseudo-therapy between subject and researcher, both of which can result in the researcher experiencing the problematic issues of separating their own personal experiences from those of the study participants (Jootun et al., 2009).

Validity is always an issue when conducting research. Being aware of researcher bias, as well as conducting negative case analysis is important to the soundness of the study (Hesse-Biber & Levy, 2011). This means fully describing the researcher’s relationship to the study participants, using multiple means to document interviews, (i.e., written notes and recordings), keeping a journal, describing key informants, and using appropriate methods to document, cross-reference, and annotate information obtained during the study in rigorous detail (Hesse-Biber & Levy, 2011; Jootun et al., 2009). In phenomenology, the practice of “bracketing” is used to separate expectations and suspend judgment during the research collection and data analysis. Referencing Carter (2007), Chan, Fun, and Chien (2013) described bracketing as “a methodological device of phenomenological inquiry that requires deliberate putting aside one’s own belief about the phenomenon under investigation or what one already knows about the subject prior to and throughout the phenomenological investigation” (p. 1). All of these practices can be especially helpful when the researcher may have similar experiences as the participants, and help demonstrate the validity of the data collection and subsequent analysis by ensuring that “…the researcher’s own experiences…do not influence the participant’s understanding of the phenomenon” (Chan, Fun, & Chien, 2013, p. 1).
Influences and Biases of the Researcher

**Interviewer Bias:** Researcher has similar personal and professional characteristics of study participants (i.e. gender, profession, educational level, etc...); researcher’s personal values, beliefs, and experiences

**Selection Bias:** Participants chosen for convenience; personal relationship with study participants

**Response Bias:** Participants provide responses they believe researcher is expecting

*Figure 10.* Influences and biases of the researcher

It is important to acknowledge a researcher’s role and their influence on the collection and interpretation of data. Validity is always an issue when conducting research, and phenomenological research seeks to clarify the subjectivity of the researcher, rather than remove it from the process. In this current study, three types of biases presented risk: researcher, selection, and response. Jootun et al. (2009) stated that a researcher’s values, behaviors, and presence could influence the collection of data. Therefore, it is critically important to practice reflexivity in order to avoid enmeshing the researcher’s own personal experiences and beliefs with those of the study participant’s (Hesse-Bieber & Leavy, 2011; Jootun et al., 2009). In this study, a variety of techniques were used to minimize the impact on the collection and interpretation of data. Chief among these were multiple data collection techniques, reflexivity, memo-ing, and bracketing (Hesse-Biber & Levy, 2011; Jootun et al., 2009).
Prior to beginning the study, the researcher undertook a period of self-reflection for future use in an effort to distinguish between her own and the participant’s way of knowing. Senge (1990) noted that assumptions and generalizations are mental models which influence the world view and action of an individual. Using the bracketing technique, the researcher self-interviewed and examined her own experiences, values, behaviors, and beliefs, as well as the overall purpose of the study. By doing so, the researcher’s awareness of her own influences and biases were heightened. The results of this self-reflection are discussed in the following four paragraphs.

**Assumptions.** Four assumptions surrounding the interview questions and outline for this study conjured up personal feelings and experiences for the researcher. The first of these was the assumption that familial relationships impact personal development in terms of education and self-esteem. The researcher considered this in light of how family may influence the development of future leadership traits during childhood and how parental expectations influenced educational attainment. The preconception the researcher had was based upon her own personal experiences with her parents and their expectations: that a growing up amidst supportive parents and positive expectations for educational attainment were the norm for women leaders with advanced degrees. The researcher believed it was important to acknowledge and bracket this belief to avoid leading questions and allow participants to relate their own childhood and familial experiences.

The second assumption was the majority of these women had what Fitzgerald (2013) coined as “invisible help” at home that allowed them to have both a career and family. An essential component of this was also the notion that women naturally want to
have career, family, and children, that being a woman automatically equated to
“motherhood” in the traditional sense. Awareness of this notion was important in making
sense of how these women leaders juggled their careers and personal lives, as well as the
choices they made in prioritizing them. By bracketing this presumption, the researcher
was able to allow the study participant’s own personal stories to unfold organically in an
environment free from judgment.

The third bias the researcher struggled with was the notion that all women have
experienced some form of gender harassment or discrimination in the workplace. The
literature is rampant with discussion of gender discrimination, intimidation, and
harassment (Acker, 2010; Ballenger, 2010; Bruder, 2012; Dennis & Kunkel, 2004; de
Vise, 2010; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Faludi, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2013; Fox-Cardimone &
Wilson, 2010; Goudreau, 2012; Ibarra et al., 2013; Jimenez, 2012; Mason, 2013a; Mason
mindful of this bias allowed the researcher to bracket this assumption and to collect
information fairly on this particular area from these women leaders’ experiences (i.e. that
being a woman did not naturally predispose one to gender discrimination, intimidation,
and harassment in the workplace).

The fourth assumption was that women leaders actively seek out positions of
leadership and professional development opportunities. The researcher became aware of
her bias in relation to interest in leadership and development assuming that other
professional women would too. Bracketing this assumption permitted the subjects to
relate their experiences and interests organically, whether or not they were in line with
my own personal interests. It allowed the participants to tell their own life stories and how they evolved as professional women in the for-profit sector.

An iterative process was used for data collection and analysis (Hesse-Biber & Levy, 2011). The researched utilized memo-ing to aid in the practice reflexivity and analyze the data as it is collected (Hesse-Biber & Levy, 2011). A practice developed by David Karp, memo-ing is the process whereby the researcher analyzes the research process while it is on-going—taking notes on emerging ideas and themes, changes in procedure, as well as negative cases that stood out (Hesse-Biber & Levy, 2011). This on-going process occurred simultaneously during data collection and analysis (Hesse-Biber & Levy, 2011). Being aware of these influences, biases, and preconceptions going into this study positively aided the researcher in remaining neutral and rooted during the data collection process. The bracketing and reflexivity methods allowed her to collect, analyze, and present the participant’s experiences authentically, permitting the results to speak for themselves with minimal to no researcher bias or influence.

Procedure

After the research committee approved the study proposal, the researcher submitted an application to the institution’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the end of November 2013. In the beginning of January 2014, the researcher received IRB approval. The researcher then began the process of recruiting and securing participants.

The researcher began the participant selection process in January 2014 and concluded the study participant interviews in mid-March 2014. The initial email was sent on January 16, 2014, with the first interview scheduled on January 22, 2014. As noted
earlier, the participants comprised women at six different for-profit institutions of higher learning who lived in seven different states across the United States.

Using a grounded theory approach, the researcher watched for the emergence of themes and codes during analysis of the data. The researcher coded during the collection and analysis phases. During the transition from data collection to analysis, the researcher developed descriptive codes, (e.g., “harassment”) based upon the core meaning she assigned to the data during examination of it. Throughout, she looked for patterns: similarities, differences, causation, etc. (Saldana, 2014). This required two cycles of recoding. The codes were then organized and categorized, and the researcher was able to link text segments with similar meanings and relate concepts to emerging theory as well as draw conclusions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

Analysis of the collected data included (a) transcription of the interviews, then a preliminary analysis to categorize interview response, (b) combined categorization of all related responses (i.e. childhood, education, work history, relationship events, etc…), (c) in-depth analysis of key ideas and phrases, and finally (d) theme generation. To validate accuracy, interviewees were provided their transcripts to review in an effort to collect the study participant’s true perceptions and experiences, as well as providing additional information if clarification as necessary (Madsen, 2008).

The following general interview categories emerged as a result of the data analysis:

- Demographics
- Childhood
- Youth
• Young adulthood (post college)
• Gender/Perception of Gender
• Professional positions and work experience
• Leadership philosophy
• Leadership advice (Madsen, 2008).

Limitations

This study may be limited due in part to several issues:

**Participant Selection.** The number of study participants (11), as well as to the highly specific requirements (i.e., women, academic leaders, for-profit, online institutions of higher education) resulted in a relatively small sample size. This means that the study may not be widely applicable to other leaders at more traditional institutions of post-secondary learning.

**Bias.** Discussed previously, this potential limitation could arise through interference from the researcher’s own personal beliefs, values, experiences, and subjectivity because the researcher shares similar characteristics to the women being studied. Since the researcher interpreted the data, there are inherent validity issues.

**Data Collection.** The majority of the in-depth interviews were conducted telephonically. The advantages of this medium were many, including time saving, low cost, flexibility, wide geographical access, synchronous communication, and the inclusion of participants who might otherwise be excluded (Opdenakker, 2006; Sweet, 2002). Disadvantages of the telephone included asynchronous communication of place, a reduction of social cues, a lack of situational standardization, and a possible influence on the ability to develop rapport (Opdenakker, 2006).
In general, use of the telephone in qualitative research may affect the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, either positively or negatively, depending on the situation. Participants may be inclined to give more expansive answers face-to-face; however, no definitive research supports this (Sweet, 2006). Research suggests “The quality and quantity of data between face-to-face and telephone interviews [is] not noticeably different” (Sweet, 2006, p. 63). The researcher found this to be the case in this study.

**Review of Data.** Participants reviewed their transcripts for accuracy, and this may have influenced the reliability of the data collection both positively and negatively in that participants were allowed to edit to their own transcripts. All changes to the original data were tracked using “track changes” in Microsoft Word, and compared against the original document.

Using a qualitative, feminist phenomenological approach the researcher examined a unique segment of leaders in higher education, specifically women’s experiences and lives as academic leaders at for-profits. By following standard procedures and being mindful of biases, the researcher generated themes that allowed her to discover an emerging model in a previously unresearched area of for-profit women academic leaders.
Chapter 4: Analysis and Results

Overview

The purpose of this study was to examine, describe, and develop an understanding of the life experiences and social reality of women academic leaders in for-profit online higher education, as well as develop a profile of these women leaders. Due to the phenomenological design of the study and the desire to gain an in-depth understanding, a small sample size was utilized. Study participants were limited to women leaders at online, for-profit universities in the rank of academic dean or higher within their organizations and their willingness to participate in the study. The women leaders were recruited via email through convenience sampling because of their specialized knowledge of for-profit, online, higher education. This resulted in the creation of a culturally cohesive sample that shared characteristics that addressed the research topic of this study (Hesse-Bieber & Leavy, 2011).

The researcher used the theoretical frameworks of spillover, role congruity, family systems, and traits during the analysis to develop the coding. These theories aided in organizing the data and linking it to the study’s research questions and overall purpose. The discussion of these theories is embedded within the presentation of the findings which follows.

As discussed in Chapter 3, a total of 11 participants were recruited for the study. They spanned six for-profit, online institutions in seven different states across the United States. These women academic leaders participated in 90-minute, telephonic, semi-structured, in-depth interviews, the purpose of which was to examine their perspectives
and lived experiences as women academic leaders at for-profit, online institutions of higher education. Feminist phenomenological methods were used to discover and describe the meaning and core themes from the study participant’s responses. These methods consisted of applying phenomenological methods of inquiry to feminist issues (e.g. domestic labor, glass ceiling, social inequality) in an effort to understand the gendered experiences and social reality of the study’s participants.

This chapter analyzes and interprets the meaning and themes discovered in the feminist phenomenological examination of the researcher’s conversations with the participants and their descriptions of their lived experiences as women academic leaders at for-profits. Thematic portrayal and verbatim narrative excerpts are used to depict the topics that emerged during the conversations. Using this method of analysis, five major themes and accompanying subthemes repeatedly emerged during the examination of the data:

1. Work and life balance
   a. Personal availability
   b. Motherhood and work
   c. “Me” time
   d. Impact of career and family as leaders

2. Support systems
   a. Spouse
   b. Family
   c. External help

3. Education
a. Love of learning
b. Stress on higher education
c. Impact of education

4. Women as leaders
   a. Mentorship and sponsorship
   b. Harassment and gender discrimination
   c. Career progression
d. Leadership style

5. Women academic leaders at for-profits
   a. Positive experiences
   b. Opportunity
c. Flexibility
d. Damage to career

These will be discussed in greater detail below.

Results of the Feminist Phenomenological Analysis

This section addresses the meaning and themes that emerged during the feminist phenomenological analysis of the data collection. The analysis was comprised of the transcripts of the interviews, mem-oing, and notes taken by the researcher during the interviews to provide a holistic view of the lived experiences of these women leaders. The 11 study participants came from a variety of professional backgrounds: chief academic officer/provost, academic vice presidents, campus presidents, and deans. Their overall demographics can be broken down as in Figure 11. (A more detailed breakdown of participant demographics can be found in Appendix D).
The collected data was initially coded using qualitative data analysis and research software called Altas.ti (www.atlas.ti.com). Atlas.ti is an analytical tool that allows for
individual analysis and management of a variety of data using a hermeneutic data editor (more detailed information can be found in Appendix E). The software allowed the information to be coded and then themes to be developed as an outcome of the coding.

The researcher utilized the Moustakas (1994) approach to apply phenomenology to the data. This method provided a structural framework for analyzing the collected information. The systematic steps in the Moustakas (1994) approach allowed the researcher to textural and structural definitions. The major steps in the method are outlined below. The researcher must:

- Determine whether the research subject is suitable to phenomenological inquiry
- Identify the specific phenomenon to be studied
- Bracket out researcher’s individual assumption/biases
- Ask broad, open-ended questions to collect data on the phenomenon
- Analyze the data for significant statements that allow for the creation of clusters of themes
- Use the themes and statements to write descriptions of the participants’ experiences
- Write composite descriptions of common experiences among the participants

*Figure 12. The Moustakas approach (Moustakas, 1994).*
Applying this approach, the researcher used a combination of thematic portrayal narrative excerpts from the coded data to present her findings discussed in further detail in this chapter that revolve around the main themes that emerged from the participant conversations.

During the coding and analysis process, five major themes emerged from the coding regarding the perspectives of women academic leaders at for-profit, online institutions of higher education on their careers, positions, leadership, and lives. These themes revolved around their work/life balance, career paths, profiles, and their experiences as women leaders at not only for-profits, but as leaders in higher education in general. Table 4 on the following page is indicative of the major codes that developed from the analysis.

As discussed earlier, the themes are (a) balancing career and personal life (i.e., work and life balance); (b) the significance of having a support system (i.e., external/invisible help); (c) the importance of higher education; (d) women as leaders in higher education; and (d) their experiences as women leaders at for-profits.
Table 4

Coding and Theme Association

Work-Life Balance: Managing Multiple Competing Responsibilities.

Generally, work and life balance is a term used to refer to the demands of multiple competing responsibilities at home and at work. It reflects the both the organization’s and individual’s need to be responsive not only to the demands of the workplace, but societal expectations as well. This is especially true in today’s family sphere given the rise of single parent households, as well as the number of dual working parent families. As discussed earlier in the literature review, women bear the majority of the burden of when it comes to household and child rearing responsibilities (Fitzgerald, 2013; Sandberg, 2013).

To analyze the data related to work and life balance, a theoretical framework of the spillover theory was used. Hill, Ferris, and Martinson (2003) posit that the competing demands of one’s personal and professional life can have positive or negative implications depending upon the individual’s ability to integrate and overlap one with the other. Work flexibility is essential in responding to various time and space demands, and can lead to a healthy balance of the two (Hill, Ferris & Martinson, 2003).

The women academic leaders in this study discussed their personal and professional lives, and the competing demands placed on them by both areas. Eighty-two percent of the study participants had children of various ages and 73% were currently married (see Figure 11 above). All alluded to the desire for greater flexibility in their professional and personal lives as the primary reason for initially seeking employment in the for-profit sector. The women found great satisfaction in their careers and the intellectual stimulation it provided them, yet at the same time, they wanted to have a family. They felt that traditional higher education did not provide the same level of
flexibility and opportunities for advancement that the for-profit sector did. Those who did not have children made the conscious decision not to and chose instead to focus on their careers, feeling that they were incapable of managing both a career and family simultaneously. As one said, “I don’t know how people do it with kids” in reflecting on why she chose to focus on her career rather than try to balance it with a family. She went on to elaborate that her work consumed most of her time, and that she was very active in her church, leaving little time for anything else. The dropping off and picking up of her dog from daycare resulted in enough daily upheaval for her en route to and coming home from work each day.

Within the overall core theme of work and life balance, many subthemes emerged. These related to availability, “me” time, motherhood, and their connection to their work. These are discussed separately below.

**Availability.** Concerning availability, the participants went into detail about the choices they have to make in their day-to-day lives. One participant stated, “You know, I just miss a lot of things…” when describing commitments in her personal life related to family and friends. Another participant stated, “…a lot of women are stay-at-home moms, but they’re the kind of at-home moms that forgive my working schedule and still invite me to everything” when describing her personal relationships. She went on to say:

I’ve gotten really good at long distance relationships and they’re the easiest to maintain for me. I have girlfriends that I know I can call…after much time passes and I know they call me when they have need or desire to reconnect for whatever reason they’re feeling low or whatever. So I treasure those kinds of relationships. I focus too much on my work and I’m too much of an introvert sometimes that the surfacey, light, day-to-day maintenance of relationships I’m no good at.
The women leaders valued their time and relied on the understanding of others in terms of the choices they sometimes had to make between their personal and professional lives, subtly acknowledging their limitations in terms of time and availability. It forced them to organize, prioritize, and acknowledge that they are not “super women” with unlimited time and energy. Viewed within the framework of the spillover theory, the choices made by the study participants could be the result of a more rigidly structured time and space requirements. Hill, Ferris, & Martinson (2003) suggest this rigidity can have a negative impact on healthy work and family balance.

**Motherhood and Work.** The women acknowledged how much they loved their careers and needed the intellectual stimulation it provided them. They received a great deal of personal satisfaction from their work and accomplishments. A few of the study participants chose to be stay-at-home moms for a few years while their child(ren) were young, but confessed their strong desire for mental activity, personal drive, and financial incentive drove them to rejoin the workforce. Another, when describing her role as a working mom said, “…I have lived authentically in front of my children. They saw me at my worst…but they came with me through my own personal development….”

From a parental perspective, while acknowledging they loved their children and stating they had what they considered close, personal relationships with them, the women also admitted they were not involved in the day-to-day minutiae of their child(ren)’s lives. When asked to describe her involvement at home, one participant conveyed:

I think the biggest sacrifice has been that while I can be present, I’m not present…that I’m there, but I’m mentally not there…stressed out about work or other obligations related to work. You know, so while I’m watching a soccer game, I’m thinking about other stuff.

Another related her experience as
…you know, I didn’t play blocks with my kids. I liked them more as they got older…I just didn’t relish and like those zero to six, whereas I felt some of my friends doing that for sure…I just didn’t have that same love for sitting and playing and doing all that…my ex-husband had, because he loved that.

“Me” Time. When it came to “me” time—time the researcher defined it as the time people take just for themselves—there seemed to be very little left for the women after fulfilling work and family obligations. Many of the women referred to “me” time as time spent either (a) studying for school; (b) exercising; or (c) making a conscious effort to set aside time to do something like taking a vacation. Some of the women leaders admitted making time for themselves was not a priority and that they consciously chose to put this on the back burner. In addition, the majority of women stated that they did exercise on a regular basis to help them cope with the stresses in their lives, and maintain their personal health. One woman leader described exercise as “…it’s the one thing I do for me.”

All of the study participants worked full-time while pursuing their masters and doctoral degrees. Many viewed their educational pursuits as “me” time because the enjoyment they received from learning. The learning served not only to bolster their professional careers, but also to expand their intellectual learning.

…I don’t know that I found a lot of time for me outside of the fact that when I was at school and I was in the library or at the math lab doing my homework. That was “me” time and leading study groups was “me” time. So it wasn’t, you know, I wasn’t at the spa. I wasn’t getting my nails done or anything like that.

Another described her experience in this way: “[I]nterestingly, my doctorate was really my mental release, believe it or not, you know? It was forced time away from work, so I enjoyed it because I worked probably less than I normally would …”
Of the 11 women leaders, 46% were single parents at some point during their careers—made so by either divorce or widowhood—of young children while they were pursuing their doctorates. One participant with three young children under the age of twelve years old is currently married and pursuing her doctorate. Of the group, only one woman leader married and finished her doctorate prior to having a child.

The commitment and sacrifices made for the prioritization of the study participants’ educational goals was evident in their stories as they related the physical, mental, and financial stresses they experienced trying to balance their work, schooling, and personal life. They appeared to thrive off the pace and competing demands because their educational attainments positively affected their careers, which in turn provided more financial stability in their personal lives. When asked to describe how she managed multiple demands, one participant stated:

I honestly don't know. I don't know how I do it. I wake up every day – I'm exhausted. Go to bed - I'm exhausted, you know. I'm tired… I think that there's this churn and you just step into the churn and you do it and you do it and you do it until you collapse and that's it.

**Impact of career and family as leaders.** The result of all of the sacrifices, challenges, and experiences balancing work and home made the women believe it made them more empathetic in the workplace as leaders. During their careers, some of the women had great experiences with leaders who accommodated their personal situations and challenges, while others experienced the opposite effect. Therefore the women were hypersensitive to others facing similar challenges, especially other women. This was especially true of those who had young children. As one woman leader described it:

I am very sensitive to people's personal circumstances and their professional circumstances, and I try to always consider others when I'm setting meetings, or, asking for deliverables, whereas some people are just like “I want what
I want when I want it, and, whatever you have to do, make it happen, make it so. And if you have other things that, you know, are doing, or learning, then, it's not my problem, just get it done.” That's not my approach. I've worked with people like that. I'm not that way. I'm always, okay, “I want to schedule a meeting, but if I do it at this time, then so-and-so is going to be ‘that's a bad time, and such and such and such’” and, that kind of thing. I will move meetings for others. I won’t move them for myself, but I will move for others. I'm very considerate of people. I don't shoot the messenger. People make mistakes.

The researcher noted that the women seemed to consciously accept that they were not “super woman” needing to be everything to everyone. They readily acknowledged their limitations and shortcomings both personally and professionally. This acknowledgement was tempered by the acceptance that they did the best they could in both areas, suggesting that their aim was less about seeking to strike an even balance between the two rather than about making sure neither part of their lives overtook the other. However, having both a family and career created a level of satisfaction that sustained them as both an individual and leader.

The textural description of the participants’ statements and the sub-themes that emerged from the work and life balance theme are indicative of the challenges women face balancing professional and personal obligations. In it the women described not always being physically and emotionally present, as well as the physical and emotional toll balancing work, pursuing their education, and personal lives can have on them. Words used by the participants in describing their experiences such as “exhaustion,” “stressed out,” and “distance” serve to reinforce the impact on women managing multiple, often times competing, commitments. The women experienced these not only within the structure of being women academic leaders in for-profit higher education; but also during the pursuit of educational and professional opportunities that increased their
status within the work environment. The dichotomy between the demands of home and work was in marked contrast to the positive influence the women felt each sphere had on their development as leaders. It forced them to manage their time, prioritize, and have a greater awareness of those facing similar challenges.

The study participants shared common experiences. Among them, not always being available to family and friends, prioritizing their attention (sometimes it was work, other times their personal lives), and letting go control of the day-to-day minutiae given the finite hours in a day. They consciously chose what to give their time and attention to. The working mothers acknowledged the great satisfaction they gained from their careers, while openly accepting that some of the responsibilities of motherhood held less appeal for them. The researcher observed that the women seemed unapologetic about their feelings in this area. Perhaps this was due to their assumption of more masculine gendered roles as the “breadwinner” within their personal lives that enabled them to prioritize work over family (Grose, 2014; Groysberg & Abrahams, 2014). The researcher noted in several conversations the women were or had been at some point during their careers largely responsible for the financial welfare of their families.

Overall, the study participant’s issues related to work and life balance appeared to be mostly the result of time based conflict. Time based conflict occurs when one role makes it difficult to participate or comply with the expectations of another role (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). The finite lack of time forced the women leaders to make conscious choices both at work and at home about what they were willing to devote their time. The researcher argues that these choices are the result of the demands and culture the women encounter both at home and work (Guest, 2002). Research shows that
environment, support systems, and relationships greatly influence work and life balance (Crooker, Smith, & Tabak, 2002; Voydanoff, 2005).

**Support Systems.** To analyze the data related to support systems, the theoretical framework of the family systems theory was used. Research has shown that this theory is applicable in studying women leaders (Madsen, 2006). The family systems theory supports the concept that in order to understand an individual, their relationship with their family must be considered (Bowen, n.d.; Madsen, 2006). Familial relationships can positively influence an individual’s life in terms of identity, competence, values, and drive (Bowen, n.d.; Madsen, 2006).

In studying the women leaders, the researcher examined the women leaders’ relationships with their families (e.g., parents, siblings, spouses, children). From this, emerged the theme of support systems provided within these relationships. The majority of study participants had “invisible help” at some point during their educational pursuits and careers. Fitzgerald (2013) first coined the term “invisible help” to refer to a built in support system that married men have in their wives or partners who shoulder the majority of the home responsibilities allowing them to focus on their careers. For the women leaders in this study, invisible help refers to the support systems they established in their own lives to make them successful. As one woman leader described:

I do the stuff I enjoy around the house. And the other stuff I hire people to do. I don't have much of a choice at work in doing the things I don't enjoy doing, I mean, it's part of the job. There's some parts of your job that you don't like, so, I make those choices at home because I have a choice in those things. So, I balance it out by, you know, making sure that I create a support system for myself to be successful. So, if I don't like doing things, instead of avoiding it and avoiding it and letting it pile up and then there's
stress. I just do whatever I need to do, whether it's extreme budgeting in one place to make sure I can outsource those things.

Invisible help for the study participants encompassed parents, siblings, spouses, friends, other working mothers, childcare providers, pet sitters, housecleaners, and lawn service. For those women leaders with young children or who were chasing their careers when their children were young, the majority – single and married - relied heavily on the support of their parents and siblings for emotional and physical support. For example:

I was a single parent at that point so [my parents] each took a night of the week to pick up my girls from school. So one night a week was grandma night, one night a week was grandpa night, and that helped me save money from having to do after school care. They were so young, 6 and 7 year old girls, and so my family played a critically important role. That's just the physical stuff; emotionally, we would have family meetings every other week where I would just talk about what I was going through and what I needed and I would ask them for advice and help make decisions from should I buy a new car right now, to should I start my doctorate program to everything in between.

Another women leader explained the influence of her mother in supporting her this way: “My mom came…and it was a Godsend, because she was always there. She was playing monopoly with [my daughter] when I didn't have time to play monopoly - and didn't want to play monopoly - but my mom did.”

For those women leaders who were married, their spouses played an integral role in their careers. They relayed during our conversations the conscious decision their spouses made to support and cultivate their educational and professional ambitions, and make the women’s careers a priority in their relationship. Rather than just tolerating their careers, their spouses actively supported them. It is interesting to note that for the women leaders in the study who are married, the majority of their spouses work in the information technology field, and have jobs that give them a great deal of flexibility in
terms of location and work schedule. This flexibility allows the women leaders to work longer hours, accept positions in other parts of the country, and focus on their education and work, in other words “lean into” their careers. The spouses did a significant amount of work in terms of providing logistical and emotional support to their wife’s career. This is supports literature on the mental, physical, social, and logistical support of women executives by their spouses discussed in earlier the literature review (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2008; Rao et al., 2003). At no time was it ever relayed to the researcher that their spouse felt resentment over this arrangement. In all cases the women had attained higher degrees than their spouses.

That is not to say that these women forwent their familial obligations; simply that they did not have to do so alone. Many readily acknowledged they would have been unable to have risen to their current positions had it not been for their invisible help. Their success was a team effort. At the same time, the women strove to fit the model when they were able to of what being a “mother” is – attending parent/teacher conference, school field trips, staying home with sick children, and soccer practice/games, etc…. All the women with children felt that the for-profit sector provided them the flexibility they needed to “have it all” in terms of career and family by providing them flexibility and alternative work arrangements to the traditional model of higher education.

It appeared to the researcher from the data collected that majority of women rose through the ranks in the for-profit sector while working at a distance. The work-life flexibility that telecommuting enabled them to blend their personal and professional lives in a positive way (i.e., spillover theory). This finding was contrary to research showing
that flexibility and alternative work arrangements can result in informal penalization in the work place against those who opt for such arrangement (i.e. “flexibility stigma”) (Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013). The communication and technical infrastructure of the virtual environment served to empower them as women and accomplish things in their professional lives they may have otherwise been unable to. The researcher argues that offering flexible work arrangements is a positive attractor for the for-profit sector enabling it to attract and obtain talent they might not otherwise have access to.

What was interesting to note, is that the women were less sensitive to their male colleague’s work-home life balance issues, especially if they were married:

It's always the women who are leaving the office last and they have bags and bags over their shoulder - their laptops, the work they are going to bring home. Men are out the door. I have watched it. At every place I have been, men are out the door earlier, they maybe have a cell phone in their hand. I think most men have a lot more help at home, quite frankly. I think they don't have to make the appointments in the middle of the day or talk to this kid's doctor in the middle of the day or put the kids on a bus in the morning or ... I think they just have a freer mind and when they are at work, they are at work.

In fact there was an underlying resentment towards what was perceived by the researcher as the additional burdens and societal gender expectations that women in general often encounter. In other words, that there is a societal expectation that women should still shoulder the majority of the burden related to children and the household. This did not seem to come from their families or spouses, but rather from colleagues, supervisors, and society at large. Whether this was real or simply their own perception based on their lived experiences is unknown. What is known, however, was that in their own lives, these women chose not to be defined and limited by a societal imposed identity. In many
cases, these women leader’s first marriages ended as a result of these expectations, and based upon these negatives experiences, the women chose, what appeared to the researcher, to be much more accepting and supportive partners for their second marriages or make a conscious decision to remain single.

To illustrate this point, only two of the 11 participants were still married to their original spouses. Five were in second marriages, one widowed and still single, one twice divorced and still single, and one participant that had made a mindful choice to marry later in life and forgo a traditional family with children. This appears to be in line with research on general demographics of male and female business executives which discovered that 88% of male executives were likely to be married; while only 70% of women were (Grose, 2014; Groysberg & Abrahams, 2014). In comparison to traditional higher education, research discovered that 70% of male tenured faculty were married, compared to 44% of women (Mason et.al., 2013). In making the choice to remain single, one woman acknowledged that she knew her personal limitations and was unable to manage her career and a personal relationship. She said, “I sometimes think, you know, if I [would just] devote 10% of what I put into my professional life - if I devote just 10% of that to my personal life - I would have someone in my life, but I haven't carved out that 10%.”

The significant statements set forth throughout the above section reference support systems and are evidence of how the women experienced the phenomenon of being women academic leaders, and the duties, expectations requirements, and responsibilities that go along with it. The participants experienced the price of their choices, whether in terms of limited availability of their time, financial sacrifices, or
impact on personal relationships. The women, however, viewed the choices in a positive light in that their individual choices throughout their lives had set them on a path to leadership and served as a foundational element in their development as leaders. The researcher noted during the conversations that these choices were almost viewed as the “cost of doing” business for women aspiring to positions of leadership.

In terms of common experiences, the women universally created an environment of eclectic support systems customized to their individual needs. They acknowledged the need to rely on others to maintain the personal facts of their lives – whether through spousal/partner, family, and friend networks, or outsourcing areas on the home front (e.g. child care, lawn and cleaning services). The support required by the women commonly focused on physical, rather than emotional or financial support. The researcher observed this meant letting go some span of control within their personal lives. Words like “options” and “choices” reflect this. The women for the most part were able to choose what area they wanted to opt out of in the personal lives, when the same could not be said of their professional.

**Education.** Several conceptual theories were used to analyze the emergent theme of education: spillover, family systems, and trait. The spillover theory in relation to balancing their education, work, and home responsibilities; family systems from the influence of their families in terms of educational expectations and support; and trait theory regarding specific personal characteristics that motivated their educational attainment (Hill, Ferris, & Martinson, 2003; Madsen, 2006; McShane & Von Glinow, 2011).
The study participants came from low to middle class socioeconomic backgrounds. Nine of 11 women leaders were raised in dual parent households with mothers who assumed a more traditional role in the marriage. One was raised by a single mother, and another by her grandparents.

![Childhood Household Parental Composition](image)

*Figure 13.* Childhood household parental composition

Only half of the women leaders’ parents had a college degree. That being said, there was an underlying theme throughout all of the interviews that their parents and guardians instilled the expectation while they were growing up that they would go to college and supported the pursuit of learning. The emphasis placed on education was a powerful motivator for these women. To the researcher there did not appear to be a question of “if” only “when.” There was never any question that the study participants would go to college. All parents instilled in their children that education was a means to a better life. One woman leader conveyed:

My mother worked ... My mother always wanted to get her degree and she never had an opportunity to do that. She had children early on in her career,
so she never had a chance to finish school. She got a job at the post office and she worked there for most of her life. I think that the fact that she worked a job that she hated and she was in a situation that she hated - she constantly, at a very young, I mean, elementary school, told us how we weren't going to do that...we were going to be able to have choices in life because we were going to be well educated. We would not ever have to go and suffer the things she suffered because we would create all these opportunities. We weren't going to have children when we were young. We were going to establish ourselves in a career because it's best to do that so you can give your children more. These are things that were impressed upon us at a very young age. So, I think the drive just comes from when those things your parents’ value when you have those conversations and you have those aspirations that align you with your parents’ values, you get positive feedback.

Another related:

I remember my father saying never bring home a C; a C is average. Either bring home an A or B or bring home a F. Either go for it all the way or fail. Don't be average and so I personally translated that to strive for the best in hard work and education - including hard work to become educated – [that it] was my ticket to something big. I had no idea what big meant.

In terms of “hands on” activity by their parents in their education, this varied throughout the participants. Some took an active role in the college search and application process, while others left their children to take the initiative on their own, while being supportive of the overall process. All of the women worked while they were pursuing their bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees to pay for their education, thus making them non-traditional students. Their jobs ranged from part-time campus work-study at the undergraduate level, to full-time work positions while seeking their masters and doctorates. The majority of women on average completed their undergraduate degrees in four years; their masters in two; and their doctorates in three. All of the women took time off from their educational pursuits at each degree level and worked for a period of time before starting on their next degree. In addition, 45% percent of the women pursued and obtained their advanced degrees at institutions that offered online
programs because it was the only way they could incorporate advancing themselves educationally into their already hectic lives.

Within this theme of importance of education, was also a love of learning. All of the women described themselves as very good students and expressed their enjoyment of learning from their early primary years through their graduate degrees. Phrases like “I was the achieving child,” “I was an excellent student,” “I happened to be a little more scholarly than [my siblings],” and “I didn’t cause any problems for my parents,” were used to describe themselves growing up.

Despite their academic successes, the women in general appeared to have suffered from low self-worth when it came to their academic abilities at the post-secondary level. Many did not believe they were capable of pursuing more advanced degrees despite their early academic prowess in classroom. In describing this perception of herself, one woman related, “…I said, ‘I’m smarter than I give myself credit for. I think I can go to college.’ And that was another defining moment in my life where I thought, ‘Okay, I know I can do this’.” Yet another stated, “I didn't realize that I was smarter than I ever acknowledged…. ” This lack of self-confidence in their academic abilities reflects research on college students that females are more likely to set internal high standards and link academic ability and success to their individual self-worth, as well as be evidence of the confidence gap between men and women (Kay & Shipman, 2014; Rothblum et al., 1986).

Interestingly, only one of the women leaders majored in education at the undergraduate level. Political administration, psychology, and business administration were the choice of the majority of the women leaders. A focus on education began to
emerge at the master’s level, but was not fully realized until their doctoral studies. This may have been in part due to the fact that the majority of women worked for several years outside of the educational sector in the workforce before entering the realm of higher education as a career. Below is a table of the various degrees by discipline received by the women leaders:

Table 5

*Women Leader’s Degrees by Discipline*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bachelor’s</th>
<th>Master’s</th>
<th>Doctorate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>Ph.D. Political Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Counseling</td>
<td>Ed.D. Higher Education Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary Studies</td>
<td>Curriculum &amp; Instructional Technology</td>
<td>Ph.D. National Security Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>Public Policy</td>
<td>Ph.D. Human Behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>Ed.D. Education/Organizational Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Administration</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Ph.D. Clinical Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Labor Studies/Information Technology</td>
<td>D.M. Doctorate of Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adult Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Applied Linguistics</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sixty-four percent of the study participants chose to pursue practitioner doctoral degrees (e.g. Ed.D. or D.M.) with a professional, as opposed to research, focus. Almost all of the
women started their careers in for-profit higher education as adjuncts, and then over time began to assume increasing roles within the organization based upon their performance.

![Study Participant’s First Jobs at For-Profits](image)

*Figure 14. Study participants’ first jobs at for-profits*

With three exceptions, the women leaders acknowledged the need to pursue their doctorate increased as they assumed greater leadership positions to lend professional credibility to their positions in higher education administration. These women also conveyed the importance their doctorates provided them in terms of having the right credentials and flexibility in such a way that positively impacted their personal lives and career opportunities:

So, I knew I had a masters and I knew I had instincts in business, but you can’t raise a child fighting corporate battle, that at least not in the world where you are a woman and you’re really trying to break glass ceiling and wouldn’t … [we’re] talking, this is in the 90s. So it was quite overwhelming and what I decided was that I needed more education because now I needed to be, have education for me to [take care of my daughter]….the corporate world, was not going to fit with what I could do, then I certainly could teach people about the corporate world especially women. So I went back for my doctorate in education and the reason I picked education was because of the flexibility in education…

The three exceptions to this already had their doctorates prior to transitioning to positions at for-profits.
The women grew up within the context of having families that prioritized education. This influenced them to value the pursuit of higher education, and in turn, prioritize it in their own lives. Education was something that added to the women’s lives and provided them with financial stability, as well as increased their marketability in the workforce. Although highly successful both academically and professionally, the researcher observed that majority of the women suffered from self-confidence in their knowledge, skills, and abilities.

The common experiences of these women education-wise was that of non-traditional students (i.e. working adults). All of the women worked full-time while pursuing advanced degrees. They enjoyed the pursuit of learning, and related the profound influence their parents had on their views on the importance of hard work and education. They believed that the combination of those two was their “ticket to something big.” The researcher noted and opines that the women took pride in their achievements and self-sacrifices, wanting to show others what could be accomplished by commitment, sacrifice, and hard work. In other words, they were neither looking nor expecting handouts.

**Women as Leaders.** To analyze the data related to leadership, the theoretical framework of the trait and role congruity were utilized. As discussed earlier in the literature review, trait theory has been studied in detail as it relates to leadership. It suggests that there are several core competencies related to leadership; chief among them are: drive, emotional intelligence, cognitive and practical intelligence, motivation, business acumen, and personality (McShane & Von Glinow, 2011; Northouse, 2010). In addition, role congruity theory of prejudice provided the contextual basis in examining
the women leader’s lived experiences with gender based harassment and discrimination (Eagly & Karau, 2002; van Engen et al., 2001; van der Leeden, & Willemsen, 2001).

**Leadership Style and Career Progression.** Throughout the conversations with the participants, one theme that prominently emerged was the desire and willingness to be “in charge” in a variety of situations. It appeared to the researcher to be almost an innate need to be in control and emerged from an early age. There was a feeling among the participants that “someone needed to be in charge” and they felt an overwhelming sense of responsibility for what went on around them. One woman related:

I have a recollection of when my leadership abilities or experience as a leader came out and that is when I was five years old, and my mother signed me up for this after school dance group... when it came time for the recital we were, my dance class and I were all standing in the lanes waiting to go on, and I was helping adjust everyone's costume. You know, I just felt proud my mother had made them and helping all the other little girls. We were all five years old. And so our teacher tells us to go onto the stage and we go onto the stage and immediately I noticed that there are a couple of girls who aren't standing in line. They weren't lined up where we were supposed to be so I told my teacher, “don't start the music yet,” and I walked over to those two girls and I put them where they needed to be and I then told them to smile because their mommies were watching them. Then I got back in place, and I remember feeling a sense of “all right, now we are all ready and our parents are going to love this,” and then I told the teacher start the music. I [was] five so I think there is something about this innate understanding about what's around you and what's the goal and why and how do we do the best we can do. Um, someone has to.

The study participants assumed active roles in their own lives from an early age, making conscious choices in terms of the professional and personal lives. They took risks both personally and professionally (e.g. switching professions, going back to school), and even when their choices turned out to be mistakes (e.g. marrying the wrong person), rather than allow it to unravel them, they readjusted and move forward. Sometimes this meant ending relationships, deaths, life-threatening illnesses, financial
hardships, moving to a different part of the country, leaving a position, or going back to
school. What is important to note, is that while these challenges influenced them as
individuals, they did not allow it to ultimately define them. For example, one women
leader escaped a physically abusive marriage with her young children when she was in
her twenties; another was left by her husband after he discovered she was pregnant. Both
women went on to go back to school and eventually receive their doctorates, all while
working full-time and being single parents. The innate drive within these women was
evident with many of them working, going to school full-time, raising children, and
dealing with these issues simultaneously. During these periods of stress, they focused on
their work and education to see them through these difficult periods. Through their
struggles, the women leaders in this study evidenced masculine traits such as strength,
ambition, independence, and success. This finding contradicted the role congruity theory
of prejudice in that these women leaders did not appear to be seen less favorably as
potential occupants of leadership roles because they were women; however, because of
their gender, many of them related experiences with sexual harassment. These
experiences are discussed in further detail in the following subsection.

Throughout their careers a minority of the women actively sought out leadership
roles. More often they were sought out for the leadership positions by others and
encouraged to apply or actively recruited by organizations. In positions where they did
seek them out, it was in situations where they felt stagnant professionally, were trying to
make the leap to very senior administrative positions like Chief Academic
Officer/Provost or in cases where they felt they had limited growth opportunities within
their current organizations.
With regards to describing their leadership styles, the study participants used words like collaborative, team building, transformational, communicative, intentional, and directive. The women were keenly aware of the leadership example they needed to set not only for other women in the ranks below them, but also as leaders in the for-profit sector among traditional institutions of higher education. In other words, they knew they were being watched. Many of the women commented on the need for a more directive approach in the for-profit sector contrasted with the more consensus building approach utilized in traditional academe. The reason for this was the fast pace and pressure of performance, which required quick thinking and reaction to respond to market conditions. Only three of the six organizations that study participants were affiliated with offered some kind of formal leadership training to them. One specifically had an internal program in place to develop women leaders within their organization. Outside of those, the women took it upon themselves to seek out leadership development training on their own through outside channels via organizations like the Higher Education Resource Service (HERS), the Institution for Emerging Leaders of Online Learning (IELOL), the Harvard Graduate School of Education’s Institute for Management and Leadership in Education (MLE), attending workshops and conferences on leadership, professional readings on the topic, and mentors. When queried about their professional development, the women strongly asserted the desire and need for such active development, but felt that they had mostly be left to their own to “figure it out.”

**Harassment & Gender Discrimination.** In terms of their gender influencing them and their experiences as leaders in the workplace, the women had mixed experiences. Eighty-one percent experienced overt gender discrimination and/or
harassment in higher education. For those who had, issues revolved around pay disparity and sexist comments and/or advances. Relating her experience, one woman leader stated:

[I] was promoted to a regional dean role where I managed that group of peers and every man on that team was making 30K more than me. Even as their new manager…it was infuriating and you can bet I worked them hard.

Another said:

[R]ecently [the chairman of the board] told me it would be great if I could wear a skirt to the board meeting…There was another female that was in my role and it was probably a month into my job here. I was in the lobby area and [the chairman] was visiting from our other headquarters. He is not here very often but he was in the lobby talking to some people…and he shouts across the lobby, my name…[saying] “you are definitely smarter than the last woman that was in your job and by far better looking.” The first time, I experienced that from him, I felt small. I felt embarrassed. I was wondering who was hearing this. I felt like a little girl and I remember it in my head as being tongue tied, not knowing what to say.

Interestingly, the women who did experience some form of gender-based discrimination were under the age of fifty. They experienced discrimination from both men AND women, although discrimination from men took the form of sexist behavior, while that from women was more akin to bullying. It appeared to the researcher that the issues of intimidation were harder for the women to cope with since they came from an unexpected source – other women. The women who were bullies were in positions of authority over the study participant, and the victimization often left them demoralized and spending more time protecting themselves from the mental abuse, than concentrating on their positions. It also left them mentally and physically worn down and considering leaving their positions. In describing her experience, one woman leader said:

She'll tell you to do something and then she'll change her mind and lecture you, so she always looks for that opportunity to smack you down, tell you you're not doing a good job. The praise is fake anyway because you know what she says about other people, and how she can't stand them, and then
she's talking about how great they are….

This finding aligns with research on bullying in the workplace discussed in the literature review earlier in this study. While women comprise the bulk of victims, in the majority of situations they were the targets of other women’s harassment, intimidation, and humiliation (Drexler, 2013; WBI, 2014).

These experiences were in marked contrast to the minority of study participants who had not experienced harassment or discrimination. In analyzing her experiences, one study participant related her theory as to why she had never suffered discrimination:

You know, if you watch National Geographic and you see wild cats, lions, whatever, pursuing, you know, a group of gazelles, or, whatever the heck they're after. Which ones do they go for? They don't go for the middle of the pack where all the strong, males and females are. They look for the very young, or the very weak, or the very old. Throughout my career, I've never appeared to be the very weak or the very old. And I think people around me knew, just from my presence, that I would not tolerate any nonsense. So, I think, you know, to put it another way, I think I probably scared people half to death…while people around me might have suffered comments or what have you, I did not. I can only assume it's because of my presence and who I was and how I carried myself and so forth and so on. And, heaven knows, every position that I've worked in…I was usually either the only female, or the only African American, or, the only African American female. I mean, I was always the only.

Others who had not experienced overt discrimination attributed it to education being a profession where there were a lot of women in the field.

**Mentorship and Sponsorship.** When it came to navigating their professional lives, 81% of the study participants had mentors and/or sponsors. Both mentors and sponsors were experienced men and women in higher education who served as trusted advisers and advocates (Tolar, 2012). The sponsors were senior administrators who took
actively advocated for the study participants in the workplace (Carter & Silvia, 2010; Hewlett, Marshall, & Sherbin, 2011). Some of the women had several mentors and/or sponsors who guided and/or advocated for them in different areas of their lives during different periods. These relationships were built out of professional associations with these individuals and had initially developed informally. The mentors and sponsors were both in and outside of the women leader’s hierarchies at work.

The relationship between the mentors and mentees and sponsor and protégé was not always mentee or protégé driven. Oftentimes the mentor and sponsor provided unsolicited guidance on career issues to direct the mentee into more senior positions they may not have otherwise considered. It appeared to the researcher that the sponsors helped their protégés to assume greater, direct responsibility for their careers, rather than just allowing them to be on autopilot, while the mentors served as a safe sounding board in difficult situations (Tolar, 2012; Carter & Silvia, 2010; Hewlett et al., 2011). In addition, the sponsors served to provide these women with professional coaching in terms of navigating office politics. In describing the influence of her mentor and sponsor, one woman leader stated:

He said..."I hear you have a hell of a work ethic...would you be interested?" And I said, "With all due respect..." I said, "My background in paralegal and psychology, I don't know the first thing about higher ed. I certainly don't know anything about online education, which I think is a fad anyways." Yeah - it was fucking 98 right? So, what do I know? Being a young kid, I said, "Well, I don't know that I would be good for you." And he said, "Well," he said, "you've got a good business head," and he said, "you've got heart." He goes, "I can train you to do anything," and he said, "But I can't train you to have a heart." I said, "I'm willing to try something new, I guess, so let's figure it out." And, he was actually my mentor for 13 years until he recently passed away. So, that's how I got into higher ed. It was working with him. I think my first day on the job, he said, "...what are you going to do about your PhD?" and I said, "Well I guess I have to settle heads and I probably
need to do it."

Moreover, in assessing their strengths and weaknesses, the mentors not only helped to expand the women’s professional networks through introductions to other professionals in the field, but also challenged them to be intentional about the next step in their careers. All of the study participants who had sponsors described them as deeply influential in helping them climb (Carter & Silvia, 2010; Hewlett, Marshall, & Sherbin, 2011). This was especially true of women who had sponsors who were other women in for-profit higher education. These relationships provided the study participants with a mirror of their own ambitions – women who not only understood, but had walked a similar professional and personal path. At the same time, these mentor-mentee and sponsor-protégé relationships provided a window into what could be – that the study participants’ academic and personal ambitions could align with their professional ones, even if they could be difficult and messy at times. That their education and careers were not a contingency plan for their personal lives – they were the plan. These mentors and sponsors enabled the study participants to see the possibilities they did not even know existed. The female, for-profit mentors were not always in supervisory roles, sometimes they were colleagues or fellow graduate school students and faculty. One woman described its influence on her:

Well, I learned from them. I learned from watching them. Listening to them. Looking how they operate, and deciding what would be consistent with my style, what would not be, how would I kind of change it or modify their successful strategy so it fits more with me. You know, so. It's just a lot of observation. I'd watch them all.

The statements of significance discussed throughout the above section reflect the participants experiences related to the desire to be in charge, their professional
development, and the sometimes gender discriminatory laden terrain they were forced to navigate as women leaders. In many areas of their lives the women were very purposeful; this contrasted with the lack of focus, purposed, and direction when it came to addressing their own career progression or issues of harassment and parity in the workplace. When some of the women were faced with uncomfortable positions and choices, they often retreated to silence despite knowing that addressing the issue was the best course of action; it ultimately left them feeling small, embarrassed, and resentful.

The essence of the common experiences of these women was that when provided with guidance under a mentor or sponsor, the women willingly did as they were advised. They appeared to be seeking oftentimes unsolicited advice on how to navigate the leadership terrain. Only a few of the institutions they worked for provided formal professional development programs for their women leaders. Instead they were having to define themselves as leaders within a void, oftentimes modeling male characteristics such as drive, intelligence, motivation, business acumen, and personality. The researcher observed that the women had been successful in assuming male leadership styles, but perhaps this may have been the result of performance, rather than potential.

**Women Leaders’ Experience at For-Profits.** Three sub-themes dominated the women leader’s experience at for-profits: experience, opportunity, and impact on career.

**Experience.** With regards to their experience as women leaders at for-profit institutions of higher education, their responses were overwhelmingly positive. All of the women mentioned the overall experience and pace of the for-profit sector in positive terms. The non-union faculty environment, student focused mission, information
technology base, and adaption to consumer/regulatory concerns were all seen as contributing to the overall positive experience. The speed of the environment allowed the women to grow professionally:

Going to for-profit, that’s why I said it would be an opportunity that I want to continue to grow. Going to for-profit with that experience, we were able to move forward quickly. If it’s not working you don’t have to go to the union. You don’t have to go to the various departments.

And another:

I think if I were a traditional hire and had to deal with the traditional systems and tenure and faculty who…had no motivations whatsoever to be innovators and look out for the students…I think I’d tear my hair out.

**Opportunity.** Many of the women stayed in the for-profit sector because they found it extremely rewarding professionally, and personally rewarding in terms of allowing them to have both a career and a family life. The virtual environment enabled them to work their careers around their family obligations especially when their children were young.

I mean, it was teach a course a quarter, and then it was, you know, grew from there, but it was at night. It accommodated - my husband at the time worked days, and - small children, and I would do night and we would do the handoff, where it gave me more flexibility during the day.

It also permitted the women to accommodate their spouse’s career aspirations as well. Especially when it involved their spouse having to move for work. With flexibility a strong positive for making the leap to for-profit higher education from more traditional higher education or jobs in other sectors, opportunity for advancement was also a key reason. The women were oftentimes able to assume positions of leadership at for-profits by filling a void within the organization.
I saw the leadership gaps, and I saw people that were in leadership positions that they really, they shouldn't have been in leadership positions. They didn't care about the people, they didn't care about the goals. I didn't care about the title and the money. And I think you can figure the pattern in my life from probably not doing the positive things like doing the right thing. More often than not, that's what happens. I mean, it's, it's pretty rare that somebody, that starts off in an office [goes] on to the for-profit, and ends up being a VP within about seven years. But, I just, there was always the need with either, somebody wasn't doing something, or they were allowing something to happen that shouldn't happen. Or, nobody felt like there was somebody that cared, and they didn't have an advocate. And so, it was just, it was a leadership void all the way around.

**Impact on Career.** The women acknowledged the potential negative impact that working for a for-profit might have on their future career aspirations. This however, seemed somewhat mitigated given the greater acceptance of online education by traditional institutions. In addition, the increasing pressure on traditional higher education to decrease spending and increase efficiency, access, and accountability, has meant that many traditional institutions have begun exploring new business models beyond the historical reaction of raising tuition. Changing financial models, new student audiences, and offering online education are just some of the ways traditional higher education is attempting to increase their sustainability in the marketplace. What this has meant for the women leaders in the for-profit sector, is that the business experience they gained from the corporate model of for-profit higher education, has made them attractive in the non-profit sector. One woman leader described her experiences:

Yeah, I think that I have been recognized for my academic background [in for-profit higher education] - what I bring to the table from an academic perspective and a higher education perspective but not from a business perspective. And that is very different from when I was working at a non-profit after having for-profit experience. At the non-profit they valued by business savvy even more than my higher education leadership.
None of the women described their foray and experiences into for-profit higher education and leadership as having been premeditated. All was the result of necessary adaptation to both internal and external demands in the personal and professional lives. This adaption deeply influenced their overall development as women leaders at for-profit institutions of higher education. As the women described their lived experiences, rarely had the women actively sought out leadership roles; rather, they were either recognized for their performance, “volunteered” for various positions or filled a void. Almost all had the ability to recognize leadership gaps and took it upon themselves to fill the void. What resulted was an eclectic evolution of their leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities over time. The leadership experience they gained was more on the job, rather than formal training. The women were more interested in seeing a job done correctly, than the title itself. They felt a deep sense of personal responsibility and commitment to make things right. While they may have lacked self-confidence about their academic potential, it was not necessarily true about their professional abilities. Many of women leaders described their ability to do a better job than their male colleagues. In fact, they were very proud of their work ethic, professional and multi-tasking abilities, and personal commitment to the mission of their institutions.

The textural descriptions of the women’s lived experiences provided throughout this section are indicative of how the study participants experienced the phenomenon of being women academic leaders. The for-profit sector influenced their development by providing them with avenues and opportunities to assume leadership positions. The overall common experiences of the study participants in for-profit higher education was positive, although some expressed concern about the possible negative reputation of for-
profit higher education. However, this did not appear to daunt the women or deter them. In fact many stated they had little desire to return to traditional higher education after being exposed to the speed, opportunity, lack of tenure, as well as the access to innovation and technology that the for-profit sector offered.

**Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to analyze and interpret the collected data in response to the central research question set forth in the beginning of this study: What are the perspectives of women academic leaders at for-profit, online institutions of higher education on their careers, positions, leadership, and lives? Within this structure, the study sought to examine who these women are, differences in their profiles, their career paths, their work and life balance, and how they experienced their lives as women leaders at not only for-profits, but within higher education. The information presented in this chapter represents the analysis and description of the major themes and sub-themes uncovered during the feminist phenomenological examination of the study participant’s conversations using the Moustakas (1994) approach. This technique provided the researcher a framework for the applying phenomenological inquiry to the analysis of the data.

The data collected allowed a demographic profile of these women to be created. The data also revealed the women’s descriptions of their lives from a personal and professional standpoint, as well as their struggles to find balance between their need for professional fulfillment with their desire to meet the personal obligations to their families. If anything, it revealed they were neither superwomen nor perfect, just women
who were doing their best and living authentically. These women created a network of support through a myriad of different channels to allow themselves to have both a career and a family. This support was instrumental in their success, and this positively translated into both the professional and personal areas of their lives.

Moreover, the women leaders also described how important education was in their lives, as well as the perspectives, expectations, and behaviors that helped them to academically excel and pursue their advanced education over time. As individuals, the women related the influences of their childhoods, family, spouses, and mentors in being influential in their lives and in their development as leaders. All of these, in addition to the invisible help, had crucial influences on their entering the for-profit sector, their success within it, and their sense of confidence and self.

Lastly, the themes addressed above will be further explored and discussed in the chapter following. Chapter 5 will proffer conclusions based upon the analysis of the collected data, as well as make recommendations for possible future research.
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary

The purpose of this study was to obtain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of women academic leaders in for-profit, online higher education in an effort to gain insight into their careers, positions, leadership, and lives from a feminist phenomenological perspective. The study sought to improve practice by examining this new and emerging area of higher education, and create a profile of this unique niche of women academics with the intent to discover an emerging model of leadership. Due to the absence of literature on this specific subject, the earlier literature review examined information related not only to the emergence, success, and role of women leaders in higher education, but also the emergence, success, and role of women leaders in business. Historically, research on leadership and women has centered on exclusionary practices, access, and gender discrimination within this conventional, male-dominated environment. No attention has been paid to how for-profit women leaders consciously experience their roles, relationships, and development as women leaders within these institutions.

Information gathered through in-depth interviews revealed their development as women leaders in the for-profit sector was rarely intentional; rather a combination of necessity, adaptation, and on-the-job experiences. Their evolution as women leaders was grounded upon an attempt to integrate their personal and professional lives within a sector that has disrupted traditional academe over the past two decades. Within this
niche, the women were able support their professional ambitions and redefine what it means to be a working mother. This allowed them to go beyond themselves academically, professionally, and personally in terms of their own expectations and those of others.

The original research questions sought to explore not only the lived experiences of these women leaders, but also create profiles, explore their personal lives and struggles, and their practice of leadership. The research yielded that their development as leaders was mostly informal and happenstance gained through hands on experience. Very few of these women were involved in formal leadership development training programs, and even fewer worked for institutions who offered them. The women’s experiences show that their paths to leadership were unintentional and yet overall positive within the for-profit sector; mostly the result of sponsorship. Despite research to the contrary, the flexibility and alternative work arrangements available to them in the for-profit sector and virtual environment allowed them to not only maintain work and life balance, but also thrive professionally and academically. While historically women in higher education have struggled to ascend to positions of senior leadership, the for-profit women academic leaders are creating an emerging model of success.

Furthermore, the research discovered that the women leaders growing up came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and went on in all cases to exceed the professional and educational attainment levels of their parents. The women’s experiences also showed that they made conscious choices in their personal lives that actively supported their professional ones in terms of spouses or partners, children, household responsibilities, education, and even personal relationships. While these women may
have not taken an active role in managing their career progression, they certainly did so in their personal lives by building successful support systems. In the conversations, all of the women acknowledged the need to begin making more purposeful choices in their careers in order to continue their upward mobility.

What follows discusses the literature, theory, limitations, and overall conclusions of the study, as well as recommends opportunities for future research.

**Literature.** Historically, leadership in traditional higher education has been dominated by men (Ballenger & Austin, 2011; Solomon, 1985; Thelin, 2011; Woods, 2013). Research on leadership and women has centered on exclusionary practices, access, and gender discrimination within this conventional, male-dominated environment (Ballenger & Austin, 2011; Bruder, 2012; Cook 2004; Fox-Cardimone & Wilson, 2010; Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Gouldin, 1988; Mason, 2013a; Mason et al., 2013; Quinn et al., 2007; Solomon 1985; Woods, 2013). No attention has been paid to how for-profit women academic leaders consciously experience their roles, relationships, and development as women leaders within these institutions.

An examination of the literature touched several relevant domains, notably, leadership, the societal influence of gender, sex and bias against women, and inequality both at home and the workforce. Chapter 2 began with an examination of the personal and professional impact sex and gender have on women. Evidence in the research outlines the challenges women face trying to manage the competing demands of career and familial responsibilities (Ballenger, 2010; deVise, 2010; Fitzgerald, 2013; Kuperberg & Stone, 2008; Sandberg, 2013; Stone, 2013; Woods, 2013). Previous literature
suggested that these demands were the reason as to why there were so few women leaders in the upper echelons of organizations (U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995; Biernart & Wortman, 1991; Glazer-Raymo, 1999). However, more recent research appeared to contradict this earlier belief with the proposition that women “opt out” of their careers due to workplace issues (e.g., lack of support, mixed messaging), which were the result of societal gender expectations, related stereotypes, and biases against women (Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Stone, 2013). In addition, research discovered that women in leadership positions are subject to intense scrutiny by both men and women alike (Ibarra et al., 2013; Frankel, 2004). Unlike their male counterparts women leaders are appraised on their competence, likability, physical appearance, and movements; women who attempt to adopt more masculine forms of leadership are viewed in a negative light.

Today, discrimination and gender bias against women is rarely overt; discrimination is more subtle, nuanced, and clandestine (Goudreau, 2012; Ibarra et al., 2013; U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). There are a myriad of invisible hurdles facing women aspiring to leadership positions. “Glass” is a term used by many researchers in describing these habitual invisible barriers for women—glass ceilings, cliffs, and escalators (Bruckmuller & Branscombe, 2011; Goudreau, 2012; Haslam & Ryan, 2007). Moreover, second generation gender bias, a result of cultural assumptions and organizational structures, also serves as a glass obstacle course for women seeking leadership positions to navigate (Gourdreau, 2012).

The literature evidences that women are deeply influenced by their families in a variety of ways such as worth ethic, educational expectations, and support (Bowen
Positive familial relationships play a pivotal role in the creation and development of identity, self-esteem, competencies, and individual drive (Bowen Center, n.d.; Madsen, 2006). This is true of parent-child as well as spouse-spouse relationships. Within the marital relationships, women with demanding careers who had supportive spouses were more likely to be satisfied when their spouse physically contributed to the household responsibilities outside of traditional gender roles (Biernart & Wortman, 1991; Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2008; Rao et al., 2003; Sandberg, 2013).

The literature demonstrates that senior women leaders at the traditional, post-secondary level are in a minority (ACE, 2012; Mason, 2013a; Mason, 2013b). Positions like Chief Executive Officer are heavily dominated by men. In 2011 only a quarter of the presidential positions were held by women (ACE, 2012). The same is true of senior women leaders in the corporate world. Currently, less than five percent of Fortune 500 companies have women CEOs (Symonds, 2012). The world of for-profit higher education blends the corporate and educational sectors, and literature on leadership within these institutions is almost non-existent.

Theoretical Implications. Due to the absence in the literature on this topic, no one framework or theory was used in the study; rather the researcher chose to adopt an eclectic approach that cobbles together ideas and perspectives from multiple resources in an effort to build an emerging theory based upon the phenomenon of women academic leaders at for-profits. In analyzing the data and in the development of resulting themes, the researcher relied upon Glaser and Strauss’ (1999) general method of comparable analysis to allow the theories to emerge from the data rather than trying to force the data to fit a specific theory. The conceptual frameworks that emerged influenced the
researcher in the interpretation and development of the major themes from substantive codes. Rather than seeking to be completely devoid of influence, the researcher sought instead to be theoretically sensitive and have an open mind during data interpretation (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Using this approach, this study lays the groundwork for an integrative perspective of this unique niche of women leaders in higher education; however, as discussed later in this chapter, more research and a larger study participant pool is needed beyond the foundation provided by this researcher.

Using a diverse approach, the researcher grounded the study in four theories: spillover, role congruity, family systems, and traits. Within each of these theories, the researcher chose to examine and code the data from a feminist perspective, focusing on feminist issues related to the division of domestic labor, the portrayal and expectations placed on women by the media and society, as well as social inequality, invisible barriers, and double standards both at home and in the workplace by analyzing the study participants’ social roles and lived experiences. The literature review discussed the plethora of research on the above listed challenges women must navigate within their personal and professional lives on a daily basis. What follows is an examination of the influence of the theories used to inform the research. The emerging themes that resulted from the analysis of the data are discussed later in this chapter.

**Spillover Theory.** The spillover theory informed the research by providing a conceptual framework of the positive and negative aspects that time and place requirements can have on a healthy work and life balance (Hill, Ferris, & Martinson, 2003). The theory posits that the more flexibility an individual has to integrate and overlap their professional and personal lives, the more positive the balance between the
two (Hill et al., 2003). As discussed in Chapter 4, the researcher opines that the word “balance” might be less about trying to maintain an even distribution between work and home, but rather ensuring that no one part of an individual’s life overtakes the other. The researcher used the spillover theory to analyze not only the various time and space demands placed upon the women leaders in their social roles, but also their impact on their lived experiences. From within this framework emerged themes related to personal availability, motherhood and work, individual time, and the influence of having both a career and a family on leadership.

**Role Congruity.** The role congruity theory supplied the theoretical outline of the prejudice against women as a result of societal imposed gender norms. This theory speculates that incongruity between the roles of being a female and a leader results in bias against women (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Examining the literature on invisible barriers, societal gender norms, second gender bias, and hidden stereotypes, the researcher used the role congruity theory to examine the women’s lived experiences in terms of their education, career paths, sponsorship, and leadership (Acker, 2010; Ibarra et al., 2013; Fitzgerald, 2013; Eagly & Karau, 2002; van Engen et al., 2001; Woods, 2013).

The role congruity theory was somewhat enmeshed within the trait theory as leadership has traditionally been defined by society as a masculine trait, along with ambition, success, and competitiveness (Dennis & Kunkel, 2004; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Thelin, 2011; Woods, 2013). From within this theoretical outline emerged themes related to influence of mentor and/or sponsorship, harassment and gender discrimination, career progression, opportunity, and overall experiences as leaders within for-profits.
**Family Systems.** The family systems theory provided the abstract context for examination of the influence of family on women and leadership. Also known as the Bowen theory, the family systems theory postulates that family and the home environment influences the development of individuals. Madsen (2006) took this theory and applied it to her research on women leaders. In this study, the researcher collected data on the women leader’s childhood, families, and familial relationships in an effort to better understand their lived experiences. The researcher sought to gain insight into the women’s development both as individuals and leaders. Analyzing the data within this context resulted in the emergence of themes related to support systems, influence of families and spouses, and education.

**Traits.** Lastly, the trait theory provided an overall broad context in which to view the women leader’s experiences related to their lives, education, careers, and leadership. Discussed in greater detail in the literature review, this theory suggests that leadership is related to core competencies such as motivation, drive, personality, and intelligence (both practical and intellectual) (McShane & Von Glinow, 2011). The researcher used the trait theory to examine the data in terms of education, career progression, and work and life balance. This theory informed the research in terms of leadership development of these women, and provided a foundation from with which to view their lived experiences.

**Study Limitations.** Assumptions and limitations were discussed in greater specificity in Chapter 3. Issues revolved around participant selection, researcher biases and assumptions, the data collection method, and data analysis. In this section, the researcher will discuss how these limitations and assumption influenced the study.
Initially, the researcher had assumed the participant selection would be limited in terms of resources, institutional diversity, and geographical location. This meant that it would be difficult to find women academic leaders at for-profits who would be willing to participate in the study. It also meant that the women the researcher could recruit might be limited to two to three different for-profit institutions, and the researcher had assumed this would primarily be centered around institutions geographically on the East Coast and in the Midwest since that is where the majority of for-profit, online institutions are located. Before the study began, the researcher had assumed that these three areas would significantly limit the sample size. The final outcome of the study did not support this assumption.

Another limitation of concern for the researcher was that the outcomes of the study would be inapplicable to not only a larger population of for-profit, women academic leaders, but to women leaders in higher education as a whole. The overarching purpose of the study was to generate theory through an in-depth examination of the phenomenon of for-profit, women academic leaders’ experiences, rather than explain the occurrence of the phenomenon or suggest a statistically meaningful case. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, the exploratory and descriptive nature of the study was in tune with the sampling limitations and therefore less problematic and more of a proper constraint given the purpose and scope of the research. The ultimate findings of this study prove this concern to be without merit.

In addition, there were other assumptions made by the researcher in approaching this study. The first was that women academic leaders at for-profits had unique experiences and backgrounds that propelled them to leadership in the for-profit sector.
The study also assumed that the women had made conscious choices in their personal and professional lives to support success at work and at home. Such assumptions reinforce the research questions of the study participant’s lived experiences since the study assumes these women leaders are the result of the totality of their experiences and choices and that the competencies of leadership are not always the result of innately born skillsets. This assumption was discovered to be only partially correct in that the women leaders appeared to have the same struggles and challenges faced by women in both traditional higher education and the corporate environment in terms of work and life balance, gender stereotypes and expectations, and harassment and discrimination.

The third assumption the researcher made buttresses the purpose of the study, as well as the chosen methodology of feminist phenomenology. Assuming, a feminist stance in conversations with the women leaders about their experiences, the researcher assumed that the façade of gender played an integral role in women’s lived experiences in terms of social inequality both at home and in the workplace. This assumption grounded the social framework that gender is a noticeable differentiator among humans—that men and women are subjected to different lived experiences—thus allowing the researcher to authentically portray the women’s lived social reality; this assumption also proved to be founded. This position guarded against the application and generalizations of the literature on leadership that failed to take for-profit women leaders’ individual experiences into account. The following section examines the core themes discovered during the data analysis and sets the stage for recommendations for possible future study.
Discussion

Overview. As presented earlier in this study, five core themes emerged from the data as a result of the feminist phenomenological analysis using the Moustakas (1994) approach. This section explores these themes as they relate to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, and provides discussion topics for future research into the phenomenon of for-profit, women academic leaders.

Several of the sub-questions embedded within the central research question in this study centered around developing a profile of women academic leaders at for-profits. Their purpose was to establish not only a profile, but also to determine (a) if differences in the profiles existed and (b) the career paths of the study participants. With these aims, the questions posed during the conversations were designed to elicit this demographic information.
Participant Profiles. As discussed earlier in Chapter 1, several sub-questions were embedded into central research question. Chief among them was to develop a demographic profile of these women leaders to determine if differences in their profiles existed. To this end, the researcher sought at the beginning of each conversation to collect data related to the personal, familial, educational, and career demographics. This information revealed that the average age of the women leaders was fifty years old and that they had been in their current leadership position on average less than two years. Seventy-three percent of the women had entered the for-profit sector between the ages of 27 and 43 with the average age being 40.1 (see Appendix D). These women typically entered the sector initially for the flexibility that the virtual environment provided them in terms of geographical location and child rearing. These issues were in line with the research on women in both the workforce and higher education.

The literature is abundant with the challenges women face attempting to integrate both professional and familial responsibilities within a traditional work environment (Ballenger, 2010; deVise, 2010; Kuperberg & Stone, 2008; Stone, 2013). Eighty-two percent of the study participants had children and 73% were currently married (see Figure 11). This was different from Mason’s (2013a) research on tenured faculty, where only 44% of tenured female faculty were married. This is especially true in the academy where forming and having a family for women pursuing a tenure track position can have a negative impact on their academic careers (Mason, 2013a; Cook, 2004; Mason, 2012; Quinn et al., 2007; Mason et al., 2013). By working in a non-traditional sector, the for-profit women academic leaders appeared to have side-stepped the “baby penalty” that can affect traditional academics (Cook, 2004; Mason, 2013b).
The majority of the women leaders were middle children in terms of birth order and all of the women were raised in what they viewed as middle to lower socioeconomic class households (see Appendix D). Furthermore, the majority of woman interviewed had what they considered to be good relationships with their immediate families – especially their mothers whom they described as being very influential in terms of self-esteem and inspiration. This data reflects and is consistent with the family systems theory that forms one of the theoretical frameworks for the overall study. The data revealed the strong influence of the women leader’s parents on them. The women described the parental influence on their personal and professional development in terms of expectations, identity, and drive. The drive was especially evident in the desire to be in charge and do things “correctly.” As one participant described it:

I never thought, well, my goal is to be the provost, you know…I just did it; I just don't have those goals… I don't know if it's like a personality thing, and I actually like being in charge because I don't like other people telling me what to do or I just like to fix things, you know, and people can be incompetent.

The women’s lived childhood experiences were a powerful influence on their lives and perceptions. The overall findings align with research on positive influence parents and siblings can have on the development of women leaders (Madsen, 2006). Similar to the childhood experiences of the women leaders in Madsen’s (2006) study, the women leaders in this study were raised in two parent households, had siblings, relatively happy childhoods, and mothers who were homemakers while they were young. However, unlike Madsen’s (2006) study participants, the majority of these for-profit women leaders were middle children in terms of birth order hierarchy. Recent research on middle children and leadership discovered that more than half of United States
presidents were middle children (Salmon & Schuman, 2012). Middle children tend to evidence qualities such as negotiation, risk taking, and being team players - traits that can make them effective leaders (Salmon & Schuman, 2012).

In terms of education, the majority of women were evenly divided between Ph.D.s and Ed.D.s in their doctoral degrees (see Figure 10). All of the women had worked full-time while pursuing their advanced degree—many with young children—with the majority completing their doctorates within three years. The women described these experiences as part of their work-life balance which will be discussed further in the section that follows.

**Work-Life Balance and Invisible Help.** As discussed earlier in this chapter, the spillover theory provided the theoretical framework for evaluating the time and space constraints placed on the women within their personal and professional lives (Hill et al., 2003). The women leaders reflected on the challenges they experienced in balancing their personal and professional lives. This theme was intertwined with that of invisible help.

For the purposes of this study, the researcher defined work and life balance as the ability to manage multiple competing responsibilities in one’s professional and personal life. The women in this study clearly valued both their careers and families. Rather than attempting, as the literature posits, to become superwomen, reduce their performance at work, or self-select out of leadership positions in an effort to balance their lives, these women chose to do the opposite (Northouse, 2010). Early research suggested that it was this struggle to balance work and family that caused many women to “opt out” of their careers during childbearing years. Recent studies, however, challenged these
assumptions arguing that the real reason why women opt out of their careers is due to lack of support both in the workplace and at home (Ballenger, 2010; de Vise, 2010; Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Mason, 2013a; Mason 2013b; Stone, 2013). The results of the current study seem to support the more current research—that if women have support both at home and at work, they are likely to pursue their careers. The study participants all noted having or creating support systems within their own lives to help them be successful. Such “invisible help” took many forms, including immediate family to external, contracted help like cleaners, lawn services, and childcare. In her research, Fitzgerald (2013) discussed how invisible help enables men to be successful by having a partner or spouse who oversees the household and child rearing responsibilities. The importance and impact of invisible help was evident in this the study participants’ lives and aligned with research on this subject.

Embedded within the family systems theory are the qualities (e.g. values, goals, drives, integrity) developed as a result of familial values and expectations (Bowen Center, n.d.; Madsen, 2006). The same is true for the support system many of these women leader’s families played in their lives during the pursuit of their education and careers. Many of the women discussed the positive and active roles their parents, spouses, siblings, and extended family took in forms of emotional, physical, and financial support while they pursued their education. Their relationships with their families provided them a safety net that gave them room to pursue their careers without worrying about the familial related logistics and minutiae.

The study participants chose to assume jobs in a non-traditional sector of higher education that provided them flexibility. They did not have to reduce their hours or
performance to meet traditional expectations of being at a place of business from nine a.m. to five p.m. Rather, in the for-profit environment they were able to overlap their personal and work lives in a way that allowed them to be successful at work, which in turn led to positions of leadership within their organizations. This supports not only the positive aspects of the spillover theory which postulates that a fluidity and integration between work and home responsibilities results in a positive, healthy work and life balance, but also is contrary to the literature that suggests that flexibility and alternative work arrangements can result in negative stigmas in the workplace (Hill, Ferris, & Martinson, 2003; Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013). As a result of their descriptions, it appeared to the researcher that the for-profit environment let these women know they were valued employees, not making them chose their careers over their families. The researcher opines this may be due to the technological nature of online learning where the professional norms of the industry make such arrangements acceptable (Epstein et al., 1999).

In addition, for study participants who had spouses and children, the support of the spouse in their careers played a critical role. As set forth in Chapter 4, the women leaders noted that their spouses were supportive of their careers in terms of inherent gender roles within marriage. This is supported by discussions in the literature that found successful, professional women tended to have spouses or partners who recognized and supported their careers being a priority (Ezzedeen & Ritchey 2008). The division of labor at home tended to be more egalitarian or the spouse shouldered more of the household duties and child rearing responsibilities outside of traditional marital gender roles. This finding aligns with research that professional women who had support at
home were more satisfied in their careers (Sandberg, 2013; Fitzgerald, 2013; Biernart & Wortman, 1991; Hertz, 1989). One surprise finding of the current study was that many of the women leader’s spouses worked in the information technology field. The researcher argues that there are two hypotheses for future research from this: (a) the for-profit, online sector is information technology based, and as such the women would come into contact with men who work in such a field, and (b) the information technology field provides the men with greater flexibility in providing logistical support to their wives’ careers.

Lastly, reflecting the spillover and family systems theories, a common thread running throughout the study participant’s description of their lived experiences was the choices they made on a daily basis, both at work and at home. They were acutely aware of the finite amount of time in their days. What time they did have was given to their education, job, and their families—there was little time for themselves. In their descriptions, the women acknowledged making these conscious choices with little regret. This finding contradicts recent research that argues that women tend to suffer more guilt over work and life balance than men (Groysberg & Abrahams, 2014; Grose, 2014). The researcher hypothesizes that these for-profit women leaders may have suffered less guilty feelings because they had good support systems and had more egalitarian marriages than traditional gendered roles of “wife” and “mother.” While they did acknowledge some feelings of guilt, they believed their choices positively influenced their personal growth which in turn resulted in them being a better professional, wife, and mother.

One hundred percent of the study participants felt that their choices ultimately positively influenced their development as individuals and leaders. They believed that
having both a family and career made them better leaders because it made them more empathetic and understanding of the challenges facing others. This confirms trait theory literature that posits emotional intelligence to be one of the characteristics of leadership (McShane & Von Glinow, 2011; Goleman 1998). Research by Goleman (1998) suggests that there are a wide-array of competencies that influence leadership development. In his research, Goleman (1998) proposed a mixed model of emotional intelligence qualities that impact leadership: self-awareness, self-regulation, social skill, empathy, and motivation. The women believed that having both a career and family positively influenced their organizational and multi-tasking abilities in the workplace.

**The Importance of Education.** Of significant note was the emphasis on educational attainment starting in childhood for the study participants. During the conversations, the women leaders described the influence of their parents on their education—despite only a minority of parents’ having post-secondary degrees themselves. This was evidence of the impact of the family systems theory in terms of values, drives, and goals. The value and expectation of their daughters going to college was a given, and were instilled in them at a young age. The expectation that education was the ticket to a sure thing—to possibilities and success—was evident throughout the conversations. The parents of the women leaders were low to middle class. Notwithstanding, they ensured that their children were academically prepared and supported them in their pursuit of learning.

The women leaders in the study described their lived experience of feelings of low-self confidence in terms of academic abilities, regardless of the fact that they all defined themselves as good students. It appeared to the researcher they were unable to
see in themselves their academic potential in terms of educational accomplishments despite attaining doctoral degrees. Their descriptions of this lack of confidence identified through the data analysis arose outside of direct questioning and were at direct odds with their professional and academic achievements.

This anomaly may be important in that supports the notion that while the women leaders were highly competent, they may lack confidence (Kay & Shipman, 2014). Recent literature suggests that despite of women’s educational and professional achievements over the past century, they are still a minority in senior leadership positions which may be the result of a confidence gap between men and women; studies show that leadership requires both competence and confidence (Kay & Shipman, 2014). The researcher did not expect to find this and theorizes whether this lack of self-confidence may in some way subconsciously holds these women back in terms of applying for jobs and promotions (although the women’s descriptions of other lived experiences did not uncover this subjugated belief). As discussed in Chapter 2, women leaders’ development can be described in three phases: (a) compliant novice; (b) competence seekers; and (c) change agents (Bierema, 1999). Given the short amount of time all of the women had been in their current leadership positions, they may have still been in the compliant novice phase whereby they undervalue their knowledge, skills, and abilities – possibly explaining their lack of confidence in their academic abilities despite their educational achievements. However, this lack of confidence did not appear to equate to lack of leadership skill or potential in their professional lives.

Women as Leaders. The researcher examined the professional development of the participants as leaders. The women leaders used words like collaborative, team
building, transformational, communicative, intentional, and directive in describing their leadership style. Analysis of the data yielded that the development of their leadership style was the result of a natural evolution of a myriad of outside influences such as mentors, sponsorship, on-the-job training, professional development opportunities, and observation. The women explained that while their leadership approach had remained mostly static over the years, it had become refined as a result of professional interactions. While the women described their style as more relationship-oriented, they did note a need to be more directive at times in the for-profit environment given the increased speed, response, and performance expectations within the sector.

Research on leadership and gender supports the women’s overall relationship-oriented approach (Bierema, 1999; Acker 2010; Fitzgerald 2013; Hibel & Madsen, 2013). Analysis of the conversations revealed the women leaders had the ability to learn quickly, desired to be challenged by their positions, and were open to giving and accepting feedback. It also revealed they had a high level of adaptability, as well as emotional and practical intelligence (Hibel & Madsen, 2013). While the literature evidences there is little consensus on this issue, all of these characteristics are competencies of leadership and the applicability of the trait theory to this study (McShane & Von Glinow, 2011).

The influence of mentors and sponsors on these women leaders cannot be minimized. While the women described their experiences as “mentorships,” in reality many of them were sponsorships or both. As discussed in the literature review, sponsorship differs from mentorship in that sponsors actively advocate for their protégés. The women described the influence that mentors and sponsors had on them in terms of educational and professional attainment (Carter & Silvia, 2010; Hewlett, Marshall, &
Sherbin, 2011; Sandberg, 2013). The mentors provided personal and professional guidance that enabled them to aspire to higher positions. Their sponsors also did this, but also advocated for them within the organization, paving the way to leadership through promotions. One participant related the influence of her mentor:

> Well, [X] was, I think, a fairly important mentor to me because she opened doors for me and exposed me to things professionally, that I wouldn't have… she brought me to Brussels to work on some projects that were closely aligned with my field. So I was exposed to that environment. And, you know, I only had to mention her name, as my dissertation chair and my advisor, and I got, just exposed to just so many professionals that were in my field that I am still, connected to today, that are in, um, they’re in important positions in government and such, and so, that one's really important, professionally, at least I have her as a mentor.

Another participant described how her sponsor helped her obtain a position at her institution:

> [B]efore I moved to Illinois interestingly, I had built a relationship with the president of X College. She was a part of an organization that represented the college for which I worked at the time, that was the [X] Career College Association. And the president of our college didn't like to go to those things so he sent me in his stead and I had great experiences meeting these college owners and presidents. And, so X, the president of [X College] looked over my resume before we moved and met me for lunch and chatted about opportunities in Illinois. And she said, "When you move back to [X] and I know you're going to move back to [X], when you move back, you call me first." So when we moved back, I called her first.

The mentors also served to connect them with others within the field, thus expanding their network of professional connections. Research on the impact of mentors and the importance of sponsors supports the positive impact these two can have on women’s leadership development (Carter & Silvia, 2010; Hewlett, Marshall, & Sherbin, 2011; Tolar, 2012; Armenti, 2004; Catalyst, 2007; Gibson, 2005; Sandberg, 2013).
The researcher utilized the role congruity theory to analyze the lived experiences of feelings marginalization due to gender discrimination and harassment in the workplace by examining whether the study participants had experienced any prejudice as a result of the incongruity between their gender and leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The women leader’s experiences of these issues spoke to an experienced divide between women and men in terms of performance expectations, pay, and harassment. Three interesting items of note on this subject were that (a) the women leaders were less understanding and sympathetic towards their male colleagues in terms of work-life balance, especially if they had spouses or partners; that (b) sexual harassment was geared towards the younger women leaders of the group from older men in positions of authority above them (i.e. 55% of the women leaders related experiences of sexual harassment. The women were all under the age of 47 at the time of the alleged incidents); and that (c) many women felt undervalued for their work in terms of having to meet higher performance expectations because of their gender coupled with being paid less than their male counterparts for the same or more work (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Pearsall, 2013). The women’s lived experiences with the aforementioned were examined in Chapter 4.

The woman all asserted they worked longer and harder than their male counterparts did. These study participants also perceived an inability in their male counterparts to assimilate information quickly and deliver on projects as they did. This resentment may have stemmed from the perception of the women that their male colleagues were not held to the same societal gender expectations that they were regarding career and familial responsibilities. Describing her social reality and lived experiences vis-à-vis the experiences related above, one woman leader said:
There is no man that I work with that ever sits in a three-hour meeting and worries that when he stands up, the chair is going to be bloody… There is an expectation that when the kids are sick it is I who is home. And, so I feel as though I have things to hide sometimes [at work] which is not right and I don't think necessarily indicative of a healthy culture or work environment, but if I have a sick kid, I wouldn't always say that I have a sick kid. I might say that I have furniture coming (laughs).

These experiences are supported by the literature on the topic of the impact of gender stereotypes, biases, double standards, and societal gender expectations that women experience (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fitzgerald, 2013; Frankel, 2004; Ibarra et al., 2013; Rhodes, n.d.; Woods, 2013).

Lastly, leadership development of these for-profit academic leaders was mostly informal. In describing their leadership development, the majority had had no formal leadership training. Rather, their leadership abilities and style were the result of an eclectic mix of self-help actions comprised of leadership reading and/or courses they enrolled in on their own, observation of other leaders, and mentor guidance. These women leaders were essentially developing themselves as leaders as they went along. Literature on women’s career development has shown that such lack of formal leadership training can negatively affect a woman leader’s development vis-à-vis work identity, self-efficacy, and career progression (Wong et al., 2001; Zunker, 2002). The researcher argues that formally developing women leaders through mentoring, education, and networking could increase retention of women leaders, aid in the transition of women from manager to leader, and help develop leaders who not only act strategically, but also think globally—thus positively benefiting the organizations for which they work.

**Women Academic Leaders’ Experiences at For-Profits.** The researcher analyzed the women’s experiences at for-profits through three different frameworks:
spillover, role congruity, and traits. The women overwhelmingly described their experience as academic leaders at for-profits in a positive light. Many noted that this sector of higher education provided them with opportunities for advancement in a non-traditional manner that would have been unavailable to them in the traditional workforce and higher education. The flexibility and pace of the for-profit sector appealed to their need for mental stimulation. Few of the women saw themselves transitioning outside the sector in the next five years. The study participants described their love of their institutions missions, student focus, lack of faculty unions, and innovation as reasons why they chose to stay. The literature supports the disruptive impact the for-profits sector has had on the landscape of traditional academy because of its innovations in course format and delivery, which have displaced conventional teaching methods (Christensen et al., 2011).

For those who contemplated leaving, there was some concern over the stigma that working in the for-profit sector might have on their professional reputations and future employment, especially since for-profits have been under intense scrutiny for the past few years. However, this appears to have been mitigated somewhat by the business savvy and skill sets the women developed while working for a for-profit - skill sets that are becoming increasingly valuable in the traditional sector. Of interest is that while for-profits appeared to seek out individuals with the proper academic credentials to lend credibility to their mission, traditional higher education seemed more interested in the skill sets and business tactics and how it could be applied to their own colleges and universities. Furthermore, with the heightened scrutiny of higher education in general in
terms of access, affordability, workforce development, competency-based education, quality, and assessment all institutions have to respond to these timely issues.

**Reflections of the researcher**

Due to the qualitative and feminist phenomenological nature of the inquiry, the researcher finds it appropriate to include a section on her personal reflections as they relate to data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Without a doubt, the researcher’s own experiences within the for-profit sector and leadership development—as a for-profit, academic leader herself—may have influenced her during the study. As Jootun et al. (2009) recognized, the researcher’s values and behaviors can affect the interpretation of the data. Every attempt was made by the researcher during the study to enhance its validity by practicing reflexivity. By doing so, the researcher sought to raise the issue of gender in relation to feminist issues (e.g., domestic labor, glass ceiling, social inequality). She was interested in exploring the experience of the women leaders’ individual perspectives, rather than the researcher’s interpretation of the study participant’s experiences.

One of the main reactions to the study’s results surrounded the lack of purposeful action of the women leader’s leadership development. There was little mindfulness in their career development or plans for future further career progression. The researcher’s reaction was concern for how this might influence the future of women leaders in higher education in general given the looming leadership crisis. With the average age of college and university presidents today being 61 years old, there is an urgent need to develop future leaders to fill the void (ACE, 2012). Given the current high enrollment and graduation of women at the post-secondary level, higher education as a whole needs to cultivate leadership in women - otherwise the women will be ill prepared and unequipped
to assume senior positions of leadership. This could have a disastrous effect on not only higher education in general, but the purposeful gains made during the past century in furthering and supporting women’s rights and representation in society and the workforce.

Additionally, the researcher felt a strong reaction to the study participants’ descriptions of the challenges they faced balancing their professional and personal lives. Her response stemmed from concern for the culture within the organizations related to professional leadership development as well as issues related to gender discrimination, harassment, and inequitable pay. The researcher’s concern for the experiences of the women leaders in this study was that they might have long-term negative repercussions on their professional development. It is difficult to fathom that in the twenty-first century gender pay inequity still exists. When women are expected to perform the same work as men, yet receive less money for it, what results is the subtle devaluation of women’s contribution to the workforce; a subliminal form of gender discrimination. This can have a negative impact on not only the morale of women aspiring to leadership positions, but influence them to opt out altogether.

Going forward, the researcher trusts that this study and her own reactions to it will positively affect her not only as a woman, but also as a leader by being purposeful in her own professional development and create a personal awareness to the more subtle forms of gender discrimination. The researcher believes that being mindful and open to developing other women and creating career opportunities outside of traditional routes will encourage the creation of networks and social support systems that can positively benefit future women leaders. If women can continue to progress in leadership roles, it
will challenge and redefine societal imposed gender norms in a positive manner. It is the researcher’s hope that one day women will be afforded the same opportunities as men, and be judged on the merit of their contributions, not on their gender.

**Recommendations for Research and Action**

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences and social realities of women leaders at for-profits. To this end, the researcher interviewed 11 women academic leaders at for-profits and collected data on their experiences related to their careers, positions, leadership, and lives. One of the goals of the study was to provide a foundation for future research on this heretofore unexamined area of higher education leaders. Given the small sample size of this qualitative study, the researcher recommends future research expand upon the number of study participants to further the study of this phenomenon. The researcher also lauds the value of a longitudinal study of these women leaders to further examine their careers and leadership evolution. Lastly, the researcher opines that a broader study of the for-profit sector is needed all together to understand its full impact on not only leadership, but higher education as a whole.

**Future Research.** The for-profit sector en bloc warrants further study given the glaring absence in the literature of not just leadership at these institutions, but of women leaders related to their experiences and development. The organizational and individual leadership development of persons who work for for-profits could be explored. For example, how does the hybrid nature of this sector influence the development of both male and female leaders? How does the top down rather than faculty-driven governance positively or negatively influence the development leaders and innovation within these organizations? Within each of the themes discussed throughout this research paper, more
specific questions could be developed related to the experiences described, as well as how prevalent those experiences are. This also means exploring the women’s experiences from a more inductive, rather than deductive perspective. Expanding this further even beyond gender, research could be done into the influence of demographic variables related to culture, age, and sexual orientation. The recommendations above increase in their relevance as more and more institutions begin to launch programs within the online environment.

Another recommendation for future research revolves around the management of for-profit, virtual teams by women leaders in higher education. How these women lead from a distance, their virtual style of leadership, the impact of technological communication innovations (e.g., Microsoft Lync, Skype, email, texting, instant messaging) in building teams, and strategies that lead to success or failure warrant exploration. Additionally, how for-profit, women academic leaders develop their strategic vision, as well as the positive or negative impact that working at a distance has on their development as leaders and the institution as a whole are other areas for future examination.

Lastly, the final recommendation comes as a result of information that was collected during conversations with the study participants; specifically, leadership development within these organizations. The majority of women leaders had little to no formal leadership development training. This noticeable gap in terms of leadership development did appear to have a negative impact on the women. Its influence on the organization as a whole is unknown. A few of the women also commented on the fact that within the for-profit sector, there is little networking or connection to similarly
situated women academic leaders at different institutions; that networking is mostly only occurs between senior executives. Future study could focus attention to this absence in leadership development and its possible impact on the career development of women academic leaders at for-profits.

The researcher speculates that part of the issue in obtaining information on these organizations has been the result of their proprietary and competitive nature inherent in the sector. However, given the importance of the financial bottom line at for-profits, it appears to the researcher to be important to investigate and address issues that may affect their leaders, impact quality, and improve performance.

**Actionable Ideas.** Since the researcher approached the study from a feminist perspective, she thought it appropriate to recommend action-oriented ideas in an effort to contribute positively to the development of women leaders in for-profit, higher education. While the focus of this study was qualitative and phenomenological to derive the social reality and lived experiences of women academic leaders at for-profits, specific and operational recommendations, discussed earlier, warrant further study. However, because of this study’s findings, the researcher recommends that for-profit institutions formally develop and implement leadership training programs for their women leaders. Moreover, the current female, for-profit leadership should focus its efforts on connecting their women leaders at a variety of different levels within this segment of higher education. This can be done in a myriad of different ways, chief among them would be sponsorship of a conference only for for-profit women academic leaders. This would permit not only opportunities for networking among these women, but also could provide presentations and/or seminars on professional development for this unique segment of
leaders. Lastly, this study successfully argues that providing women opportunities and options outside of traditional avenues can have positive impacts on their careers as leaders. These non-traditional opportunities and options should be thoroughly examined and incorporated into higher education in its entirety to positively influence the development of future leaders among women across all sectors of higher education.

Conclusions

So why are these women leaders and this study important? What is its impact? This study is important because it cures a deficiency in the literature on women and leadership. Chapter 1 examined the background of women, leadership, and equality from a historical, societal, institutional, and legislative perspective. As discussed in Chapter 2, the literature abounds with research on the issues facing women aspiring to leadership in both the workforce and higher education. In the past 200 years women have made enormous strides educationally and in the workforce, yet there still exists a noticeable absence in women’s representation in senior leadership positions. Why? As this study evidenced, there is no single answer. The answer is a complex result of ingrained societal imposed gender norms and biological constraints that create unrealistic and unfair expectations which serve to subtly undermine women’s leadership aspirations. The majority of women are expected to adapt to a masculine work model, rather than the work model adapting to the specialized needs of women. This study shows that the overlap and integration of work and home enables women to be successful and assume positions of leadership. It also evidences that when women create successful support systems in their lives, they are successful educationally, professionally, and personally.
As discussed in detail throughout this study, the study of women leaders in for-profit higher education has been heretofore ignored. Little is known about this segment of leadership in higher education in terms of demographics, lived experiences, and career development. It is also unknown what effect individual characteristics of these women leaders have not only in their development as leaders, but also to the organizational success of the institutions that employ them. This study has been successful not only in creating a profile of these women, but in also describing their lived experiences from a feminist perspective. By concentrating on, exploring, and describing the study participant’s lived experiences within the context of their social reality as women, it provides insight into understanding the choices, challenges, development, and experiences of this relatively unknown segment of leaders in higher education. Better insight into these women leaders can positively affect the development of women leaders in higher education as a whole.

In the end, the researcher is hopeful that this study represents the beginning of an in-depth exploration of the complex field of women’s leadership development in for-profit higher education. If higher education pursues such a course, it can evaluate the social and organizational practices within the academy to further refine and support greater opportunities for the advancement of women into leadership positions. Especially since much of what was discovered within this study aligns with literature on women’s experiences and the challenges they face in aspiring to positions of leadership. This specialized niche of women leaders had never before been examined through this lens. As such it provides perspective into continued progress towards navigating the influence of gender on leadership by helping women traverse and overcome the impact of societal
imposed gender norms and biases. Although this qualitative study was limited to a small number of participants, the in-depth exploration of their experiences in their personal and professional lives en route to leadership positions provides the audience with additional opportunities and an invitation to inquire further into the subtle and habitual barriers women contend with on a daily basis. What was discovered and presented in this study not only aligns with literature on feminist issues, but also provides hope that they may one day be overcome in favor of parity in the realm of leadership.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES
You are invited to participate in research which explores how women in situations of academic leadership at for-profit, online colleges and universities consciously experience their roles, relationships, and development as women leaders at such institutions.

Thank you Karan, for the introduction. My name is Constance St. Germain and I am a doctoral candidate in Higher Education and Organizational Change at Benedictine University, Lisle, Illinois, and the HSIRB Project Number is 20131226. I am conducting a qualitative study which seeks to examine the perspectives of women academic leaders at for-profit, online institutions of higher education on their careers, positions, leadership, and lives. Karan is my dissertation director and has introduced me to you as someone who may be interested in this study.

If you willing and agree to participate in this study please send me an email indicating your interest. Upon receipt, selected participants (meeting my research and institutional representation diversity criteria) will be sent an informed consent form that will outline the purpose of the study, the nature of the research, how the data will be used, and a reminder that participants have the right to withdraw at any time. Your participation is voluntary and you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to. If at any time you do not wish to continue with the interview, you may decline.

After I receive the informed consent form, participants will be asked to participate in an interview (over telephone, FaceTime, Skype, or other such method) during which you will be asked questions regarding your perspectives of your career, position, leadership, and life. This interview will last approximately 90 - 120 minutes. To help in your preparation, you will be given a list of questions for you to reflect upon prior to the interview; the questions will serve as a semi-structured interview guide. These interviews will be audio recorded to ensure the accuracy of the collected information and all interviews will be transcribed into a written record which you will have the opportunity to review for accuracy. You will be able to ask the interviewer to turn off the audio recording equipment at any time during the interview.

Your participation is very much appreciated. If you have any further questions regarding the research, please feel free to contact me at (643) 513-3069 (cell) or via email: csgermain@apus.edu. You may also contact Dr. Aldra Weller-Clarke, Chair of the Institutional Review Board of Benedictine University, at (630) 829-6295.

Again, thank you very much for your help!
APPENDIX B

Informed Consent

To:  
From: Constance St. Germain-Driscoll  
Subject: Informed Consent to Participate in Study  
Date:___

Dear _____________:

My name is Constance St. Germain-Driscoll, and I am an Ed.D. student at Benedictine University. I am researching women academic leaders at for-profit, online institutions of higher education. I am particularly interested in understanding the perspectives of women academic leaders at for-profit, online institutions of higher education on their careers, positions, leadership, and lives.

This research will (1) investigate a heretofore unresearched area; (2) cure a deficiency in the literature; (3) shape preliminary understanding; and (4) provide a framework for future research.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in the interview. Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If at any time you do not want to continue with the interview, you may decline. Your time and involvement is profoundly appreciated. The entire interview will take approximately 90-120 minutes. To maintain the essence of your words for the research, I will record the information. After our conversation has been transcribed, I will provide it to you to review for accuracy. At any time you may request to see or hear the information I collect. I will email or call you within 3 days to set up a convenient time for the phone interview.

The interview will be tape-recorded and I will take notes. This is done for data analysis. The tape will be transcribed and kept confidential on a password-protected computer, in a password protected document. All individual identification will be removed from the hard copy of the transcript. Participant identity and confidentiality will be concealed using coding procedures. For legal purposes, data will be transcribed on to thumb drive and transmitted to a Benedictine University faculty member for secure and ultimate disposal after a period of seven (7) years. Dr. Julie Bjorkman, my dissertation committee...
chair, is the Benedictine University faculty member who will secure and ultimately dispose of the information. Her information is at the end of this form. The researcher will also maintain a copy of the data on a password-protected computer.

Excerpts from the interview may be included in the final dissertation report or other later publications. However, under no circumstances will your name or identifying characteristics appear in these writings. If, at a subsequent date, biographical data were relevant to a publication, a separate release form would be sent to you.

I would be grateful if you would sign this form on the line provided below to show that you have read and agree with the contents. Please return it by email to me at cstgermain@apus.edu. An electronic signature is acceptable.

____________________________________________________
Signature
(If you have problems with the electronic signature please email, call, or text me at (843) 513-3069.)

This study is being conducted in part to fulfill requirements for my Higher Education and Organization Development Ed.D. degree in the College of Education and Health Services Center for Higher Education and Organizational Change graduate program of Benedictine University in Lisle, Illinois.

The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of Benedictine University; HSIRB Project Number 20131226. The Chair of Benedictine University’s Institutional Review Board is Dr. Alandra Weller-Clarke. She can be reached at (630) 829-6295 and her email address is aclarke@ben.edu. The chairperson of this dissertation is Dr. Julie Bjorkman, and her email address is jbjorkman@ben.edu. She can be reached at (630)829-6394 for further questions or concerns about the project/research.

Sincerely,

Constance St. Germain-Driscoll, Esq.
Doctoral Candidate | Benedictine University
APPENDIX C

Interview Guide

Name:_____________________________  Current Position:____________________

Current Institution:________________  Length in Current Position:___________

Age:______________________________  # of years in Higher Education:_______

History/Background of Participant:

1. Please provide me a biographical background related to your age, marital status, child(ren), and childhood family composition:
   a. Describe for me your family unit growing up.
   b. Describe for me your childhood.
   c. Were you ever married? If currently married, were you ever previously divorced?
   d. How did you meet your (current) spouse/partner?
   e. Do you have children? If so, what is/are the ages of your child(ren)?
   f. Describe your relationship with your parents/siblings.
   g. Was your childhood static or transient (i.e. did you move around)? If so, when? Describe the impact on you?
   h. What was your age at the time you worked at a for-profit (age at time of the position)?
      i. How long were you in the position?

2. Please provide me information related to your educational background:
a. Did you go to public or private primary/secondary/post-secondary schools?

b. Describe yourself as a student? (i.e. good/bad/indifferent)

c. Where did you go to college?
   i. What did you major in? Tell me how you chose your major.
   ii. Describe your college experience.
   iii. How long did it take you to complete your undergraduate degree?
   iv. Were you a full or part-time student?

d. Did you go to graduate school?
   i. Where?
   ii. What did you study? How did you decide what discipline(s) to study?
   iii. Describe your graduate experience(s).
   iv. Were you a full-time or part-time graduate student?
   v. How long did it take you to complete your graduate degree(s)?

Women’s Lives

3. Do(es) your child(ren) currently reside with you?

4. Describe yourself as a parent.

5. Describe the division of childcare and household responsibilities between yourself and your spouse/partner.

6. What type of external help, if any, do you have with childcare and household responsibilities?
7. Tell me how you balance the demands of your current position with your family responsibilities and/or personal life.

8. What, if anything have you had to give up in:
   a. your personal life for your career?
   b. your career for your personal life?

9. What did you gain anything by having both a career and family?

10. Describe any experiences you have had with being mentored in your professional life.
    a. How did it influence you?
    b. What impact did it make?

11. Tell me your experiences with harassment, discrimination, or intimidation during your career. Describe what happened.
    a. How did you respond to it?
    b. What was the resolution?

12. What experiences have you had in your career do you think are different from those of your male colleagues?

13. Reconstruct for me an average day in your life as a woman leader in a for-profit institution of higher education from the time you wake up in the morning, to going to sleep at night.

**Higher Education/Leadership**

14. Tell me how you came to work in for-profit higher education.
    a. What influenced your decision to leave traditional higher education? OR
b. What influenced your decision to leave the civilian workforce sector?

15. Have you held positions of leadership in traditional higher education? Describe for me your experiences.

16. Describe for me your experiences with being a woman in a leadership position in for-profit higher education.

   a. How, if at all, does it differ from traditional higher education?

17. Why did you choose to assume the position(s) of leadership?

18. Describe your leadership style.

19. What has influenced your leadership style? Has it changed? If so, how?

20. Describe any type of professional leadership development training you have received over your career. What was its impact on you?

21. What, if anything, have you given up in pursuing your career in the for-profit sector?

22. How would you describe your overall experience in for-profit higher education?

23. How is working in for-profit higher education different than traditional higher education?

   a. What is positive?

   b. What is negative?

24. Given where you are now and what you currently know, if you could go back into the past and change it, is there anything you would do differently in terms of:

   a. your career?

   b. your personal/family life?

25. What are your future plans? Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Length of Time in Current Position</th>
<th>Length of Time in USHE</th>
<th>Age Started Working for For-Profit?</th>
<th>Birth Order</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Child(ren)?</th>
<th>UG Degree</th>
<th>Master's</th>
<th>Doctorate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22012014</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Middle Child</td>
<td>Married (1st)</td>
<td>Y (12 y.o. boy)</td>
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<td>PhD Political Science</td>
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<td>30012014</td>
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<td>15 years</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Middle Child</td>
<td>Married (2nd)</td>
<td>Y (20+ y.o. girls)</td>
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<td>Counseling</td>
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<td>14 years</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Oldest Child</td>
<td>Married (1st)</td>
<td>Y adults</td>
<td>Interdisciplinary Studies</td>
<td>Curriculum and Instructional Technology</td>
<td>EdD Higher Education Administration (in progress)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>30 years</td>
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<td>Public Policy</td>
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<td>15 years</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<td>Married (2nd)</td>
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<td>English</td>
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<td>PhD Advanced Studies of Human Behaviour (in progress)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>22 years</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Middle Child</td>
<td>Married (2nd)</td>
<td>Y (2 male adults)</td>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>EdD Education/Organizational Leadership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Years</td>
<td>Child Status</td>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Degree</td>
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<td>2 years</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>Only Child</td>
<td>Married</td>
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<td>6 years</td>
<td>Middle Child (3rd)</td>
<td>Single</td>
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<td>Labor Studies/IT DM - Doctorate of Mgmt</td>
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<td>6 months</td>
<td>21 years</td>
<td>Youngest Child</td>
<td>Married (2nd)</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>1 adult daughter; 14 y.o. son</td>
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<td>35 years</td>
<td>Oldest Child</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>1 daughter (adult)</td>
<td>EdD - Higher Education Administration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3102014</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Married (2nd)</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>2 male adults</td>
<td>PhD Interdisciplinary Studies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E

For more information: Atlas.ti Brochure
An overview of selected features
Strong reasons why ATLAS.ti is today’s premier QDA tool

- Interactive and automatic coding of rich text, image, audio and video materials
- Hypertext: create and navigate hyperlinks to analyze threads of conversation
- Full native PDF support (text, images and layout as-is, without conversion)
- Powerful search and retrieve functions with Boolean, semantic and proximity-based operators
- Rich Text support with embedded active objects (Excel™, images, etc.)
- Object Crawler: automatically find textual patterns in your project
- Powerful geo-coding capability through GoogleEarth™ integration
- SPSS™, HTML, XML or CSV exporting options
- On-board transcription and text-to-media synchronization
- East Asian and Middle East language support
- «Live» edit-ready documents with dynamic multi-project update
- Built-in XML / XSLT converter: create impressive presentations
- Fully interactive margin area with drag & drop linking, coding and merging
- Single compressed file project backup and migration
- Hierarchical views of your data with the Object Explorer
- Table-based bulk assignment of primary documents plus attributes («families»)
- Coded data analysis with the Co-occurrence Explorer
- Extensive teamwork support: project merge, packaging and migration, entity authorship, shared documents
- Visual model-building and «mind-mapping» with the graphical Network Editor
- QUESSY.ti: include database content, e.g. Oracle™ and MySQL, in your analysis (commercial and multi-user licenses)
- Theory building and reuse: create and transfer knowledge networks between projects
ATLAS.ti – two decades of German software engineering

ATLAS.ti was developed at the Technical University of Berlin as early as 1989. In 1993, Thomas Muhr released the first commercial version, marking the beginnings of Scientific Software Development – now ATLAS.ti GmbH. Hailed by such luminaries as renowned sociologist Anselm Strauss (who wrote the foreword to the software manual), ATLAS.ti quickly established itself as the de-facto standard QDA application.

Since then, we have stayed true to our principles of solid engineering, innovation and uncompromising dedication to quality. We remain on the cutting edge by working closely with practitioners, researchers and consultants all over the globe. And, as the world’s longest-running QDA software company, we have laid rock-solid foundations that guarantee our product’s reliability and quality for years to come – that’s what our hundreds of thousands of users worldwide have come to trust and appreciate.

ATLAS.ti works for you

ATLAS.ti continues to set new standards in QDA software. We deliver a tool that's as universally usable as it is uniquely capable. And because ATLAS.ti supports open standards such as XML, your data will be usable far into the future. Our mission is to give you the performance, the quality, and the flexibility you need to support the way you work. Novices and advanced users in all research areas get powerful results with ATLAS.ti – the only true Knowledge Workbench.