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AGENTS OF CHANGE?: UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN MENTORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

AGENTS OF CHANGE?:

UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN MENTORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Studies of college students' development indicate the collegiate experience can have a negative impact on undergraduate women's self-esteem (Zuckerman et al., 2016). Research also suggests mentorship programs that provide marginalized groups, such as undergraduate women, with faculty or administrative adult mentors have the potential to improve outcomes for the marginalized group (Crisp et al., 2017). However, it is important to consider the mentors may struggle against the same systemic marginalization they are working to help their undergraduate mentees successfully navigate.

The Brazilian philosopher, Paulo Freire, built the concept of "critical consciousness" to explain how those who are oppressed come to understand the systemic nature of their oppression and subsequently seek to change the factors that lead to it (Freire, 1970). This grounded theory study sought to understand if mentors develop a critical consciousness of their own oppression through their involvement in a mentorship program designed to combat the institutionalized oppression that undergraduate women face. Nineteen interviews and two focus groups of mentors who served in the program were conducted. The following research questions guided this study: (a) How do mentors perceive that their involvement in the Summit program has impacted their awareness and understanding of institutionalized sexism and its effects? (b) How do mentors perceive that their involvement in the Summit program has impacted their motivation

or ability to effect change related to institutionalized sexism? (c) In what ways have mentors enacted change on behalf of themselves or other women at the institution that they perceive to be connected to their involvement in Summit?

The theory constructed from the data suggests a varying effect of the impact of serving as a mentor in the mentorship program on participants' development of Critical Consciousness. Participants' progression through the components of Critical Consciousness was complex when they considered their own experiences as women at the institution. Data indicates the community of the mentorship program played a fundamental role in participants' development of Critical Consciousness of institutional sexism at the institution.

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Finally, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my grandfather, Thaddeus Wezdecki. Grandpa Ted always advocated for a constant pursuit of higher education and celebrated such accomplishments with tremendous generosity and joy. I know he is in heaven beaming with pride at this achievement.

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Agents of Change?: Understanding the Experiences of Women Mentors in Higher Education

Chapter 1

Researchers have examined gender differences in college students' development in the United States for decades and indicate that women encounter difficulty in successfully maneuvering through institutions of higher education (Zuckerman et al., 2016). Many articles and reports discuss the paradoxical finding that, despite women students excelling in the classroom, they generally report lower self-esteem than their male-identifying counterparts (Chin & Tekiela, 2016; Duke University, 2003; Princeton, 2011). There is a complicated web of intertwined issues that contribute to this gender gap in self-esteem, which include the desire to appear effortlessly perfect (Duke University, 2003), unrealistic societal beauty standards (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011), problematic peer culture (Wrye et al., 2017), high rates of sexual violence that disproportionately affect women (Gross et al., 2006), and struggles with mental health (Twenge, 2007). Collegiate women's lower self-esteem is a particularly troubling trend because it correlates with unhappiness, lack of persistence, lack of confidence in interpersonal relationships, and weak mental health and emotional instability (Twenge, 2007).

Feminist theory argues that these issues are rooted in structures of oppression (hooks, 2015). Gender is a principle organizing factor in the social order (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011) and women are systematically positioned as less than men. This systemic oppression inhibits women from achieving power and influence across many areas of U.S. society, such as business, politics, and higher education. Women are overrepresented in underpaid and undervalued roles, which I discuss further in Chapter 2. Simone de Beauvoir, contended women's human rights are violated by their dismissal to subordinate positions within society

simply based on their gender (de Beauvoir, 1953; de Beauvoir et al., 2010). Feminist theory provides a framework to unpack the historical constructions of gender hierarchy as well as the perpetual systematic oppression of women. By understanding the ways broad societal structures and narrow institutional organizations subjugate women, feminist theory helps to galvanize change and promote a deconstruction of said oppression (hooks, 2015).

Formal and informal mentoring of women has long been a way that institutions and organizations have tried to help women navigate, and in some instances overcome, the inequitable systems and structures that disadvantage them and cause psychological harm (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Crisp et al., 2017; Jacobi, 1991). Task forces, researchers, and practitioners have suggested mentoring as an antidote to institutional subjugation of women within higher education and as a tool to improve women's success (Chin & Tekiela, 2016; Duke University, 2003; Princeton, 2011). Mentoring of undergraduate women by faculty and staff who are also women has the potential to improve equity within higher education by providing underrepresented or marginalized groups with individualized support to help address their unique needs and to boost their academic and developmental success (Crisp et al., 2017). However, critics point to mentoring as a neoliberal attempt to help women adjust to problematic systems rather than to dismantle those systems (Brabazon & Schulz, 2020). In same-gender, woman-to-woman mentoring, the mentors also struggle against the same systems that they are attempting to help their mentees navigate given their own gender identity (Griffin & Reddick, 2011). Women mentors who are faculty members report experiencing oppression and marginalization based on their gender (Dubé & Silbert, 2021). Researchers have studied how this harassment and systemic devaluing of women faculty members' work negatively impacts their career progression (Dubé & Silbert, 2021; Parker & Funk, 2017; Stolzenberg et al., 2019). Women administrators also face

challenges advancing in their careers and despite earning advanced degrees at a higher rate than men, they continue to be underrepresented in positions of power in institutions, particularly the most prestigious (Dubé & Silbert, 2021; Gagliardi et al., 2017). Women mentors may participate in formal and informal mentoring for a variety of reasons, but one element deserving of particular investigation is the degree to which a Critical Consciousness of power systems and means of dismantling them is present in mentors' thinking.

The Brazilian philosopher Freire (1970) developed the term "Critical Consciousness" to explain how those who are oppressed come to understand the ways in which they are marginalized in order to change the conditions that lead to their oppression. Critical Consciousness emerges from an awareness or mindfulness of the social and political factors that create oppression, coupled with the motivation to work collaboratively with others to improve the world for all (Freire, 1970). A way this may be illustrated in a mentoring relationship is if a mentor is entering a relationship without that Critical Consciousness, serving as a mentor may help her recognize the way(s) in which she has accepted androcentric culture and her subordinate role within it. If she is entering the relationship critically conscious of the patriarchal systems that affect her mentee's experience, she may use her position to gain more information about the ways the current systems need to change in order to serve women students and potentially to increase the Critical Consciousness of those students. Regardless of the mentor's level of Critical Consciousness entering into a mentoring program, the experience of being a mentor might prompt her to determine the need for structural change in order to improve undergraduate women's experiences within institutions of higher education. Mentors may be in positions to understand the interplay between systems of institutionalized sexism and enact that change.

However, despite the fact that mentors have more power and influence than undergraduate women, their own gender marginalization may affect if and how they respond.

Problem Statement

Institutions of higher education continue to rely on mentorship as a tool to mitigate the impact of patriarchal structures on undergraduate women's experiences (Chin & Tekiela, 2016; Duke University, 2003; Princeton University, 2011). However, its effects on women's overarching self-esteem are still unclear (Twenge, 2007) and literature on mentoring relationships focus primarily on one-half of the equation: the mentee's experiences (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Crisp et al., 2017; Jacobi, 1991). Investigations into the role of women mentors are limited. However, until there is organized systemic change to create a more favorable environment for women, institutions will continually use mentorship as a means to mitigate the impact of the patriarchal structures on undergraduate women's experiences. Missing from the research is an examination of the role of the mentor in using her position and power to enact such change. At this point, it is unclear whether mentors understand the need for structural change and if that fuels their desire to mentor undergraduate women. Another question is if mentors are content to adjust women to the current systems, or if the very act of mentoring raises their consciousness to a level where they come to recognize oppressive institutional systems of which they were previously unaware. It is also unclear from the current literature if women mentors who reach a level of Critical Consciousness are motivated to initiate systemic change and/or if they have the power to do so.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to understand the effect of participating in a formal women's mentoring program on the women mentors' development of Critical Consciousness and

on their motivation to become agents of change within their institution of higher education. The following research questions guided the examination of this topic:

1. How, if at all, do mentors perceive that their involvement in the Summit program has impacted their awareness and understanding of institutionalized sexism and its effects?
2. How, if at all, do mentors perceive that their involvement in the Summit program has impacted their motivation or ability to effect change related to institutionalized sexism?
3. In what ways, if at all, have mentors enacted change on behalf of themselves or other women at the institution that they perceive to be connected in some way to their involvement in Summit?

Definitions of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following terms: mentorship (mentor/mentee) and woman/women are used as follows:

- *Mentorship.* Mentorship is a reciprocal, nonhierarchical relationship between individuals with differing levels of life experience, built on the foundation of mutual sharing, trust, and empowerment, with the goal of collaborative promotion of each other's goals (Gershenfeld, 2014; Zachary, 2002). The *mentor* holds more experience and likely is older but she facilitates those tenets of mentorship between herself and her less experienced and likely younger, *mentee*.
- I will use the terms *woman* and *women* rather than *female*. This is an intentional decision for a few reasons. First, *female* and *woman* mean different things. Female is a biological term defined as "of, relating to, or being the sex that typically has the

capacity to bear young or produce eggs" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) and therefore could be any animal with these qualities whereas *woman* is specifically a person. Some consider it pejorative and reductive to refer to women by their biological capabilities given that men and male are rarely used interchangeably (Fogarty, 2007; Newton-Small, 2016). The term *women* is also more inclusive as it considers individuals who are not biologically born female but who identity as women (Hay, 2019).

Research Design

My primary research focus is to understand the effect that participating in a formal women's mentoring program for undergraduate women has on the women mentor's development of Critical Consciousness and on their motivation and ability to enact structural change that would have an impact on undergraduate women's experiences and possibly their own experiences within their institution of higher education. In order to further my understanding and to uncover the mentors' thoughts and experiences, I conducted a qualitative study, using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I invited all mentors who participated in a particular formal mentor program for at least 1 full year between 2015–2020 to participate. The foundation of the mentor program is Relational Culture Theory (Miller, 1976; Miller & Stiver, 1997). This theory highlights the need for connection and focuses on the potential growth both mentees and mentors can gain through strong connection with each other (Jordan, 2013). The program is housed at a highly ranked, midsize, private, Catholic, northeast institution with a traditional college-age undergraduate population.

Assumptions/Frameworks

I enter my research with particular philosophical assumptions or interpretive frameworks based on my academic training and personal experiences that inform my research decisions and which I use to create meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These primary assumptions and key principles are rooted in feminist ideology, which I will unpack using Sielbeck-Bowen et al.'s (2002) and Brisolara et al.'s (2014) characteristics of feminist evaluation. First, feminist research is concerned with exploring gender inequities that lead to social injustice but also understands that gender oppression is intersectional (Brisolara et al., 2014; Sielbeck-Bowen et al., 2002). Gender oppression is tied to and exacerbated by other marginalized layers of identity such as race, sexual orientation, ability, and class. Second, this marginalization is entrenched in, and reinforced by, all facets of society such that it becomes almost invisible and understood as truth (Brisolara et al., 2014; Sielbeck-Bowen et al., 2002). According to Ward Hood and Cassaro (2002):

> At its core, feminism exposes the existence of male supremacy and how male domination is embedded in the fabric of our lives and our societal institutions. The aim of feminist theories is to problematize gender relations in order to make existing social inequalities cease to be viewed as a fact of nature. (p. 29)

Third, the role of the researcher is both personal and political. The researcher filters and interprets knowledge through their own lens, which inherently adds a bias that the researcher must be aware of and address (Brisolara et al., 2014; Sielbeck-Bowen et al., 2002). Fourth, knowledge is relative and it is rooted in time, culture, and location. In essence, a researcher cannot represent knowledge as truth given that truth is relative (Brisolara et al., 2014; Sielbeck-Bowen et al., 2002). Finally, society privileges some knowledge over other knowledge based on

the identity of the knower and feminist research seeks to give voice to those who have been silenced, recognizing that they are the only ones able to speak to their experiences (Brisolara et al., 2014; Sielbeck-Bowen et al., 2002). According to Brisolara et al. (2014), "With respect to methods, feminists have often (but not exclusively) advocated for the use of qualitative methods as an important means of unearthing unexamined perspectives, complex dynamics, and silenced voices" (p. 19). Feminist research is committed to building an understanding of the impact of patriarchy on the oppressed and marginalized, and by improving their experiences through centering them in research (Pillow, 2002). I am interested in using qualitative research to do just that; however, there are a wide variety of approaches to qualitative research. For this study, I pursued grounded theory research and I will discuss my reasoning for this choice in the forthcoming section.

Methodology

Given the lack of research on this particular topic, I conducted a grounded theory study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to "systematically observe a behavior or social process and to identify trends and patterns that suggest a tentative theory about the patterns" (Cherry, 2000, p. 52). Grounded theory creates a functional theory that can be applied to specific situations making it particularly useful for the subject I explored (Merriam, 2009). Although grounded theory is rooted in the fundamental exploration of social reality to create new knowledge, there are a variety of methodological perspectives and techniques. I employed a constructivist approach (Charmaz, 2009). Charmaz (2009) developed this approach by concluding that "theories are not so much 'discovered' or 'emerge' from the data but [are] constructed by researchers through their past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices" (p. 10). This approach connects directly to my feminist axiology and strong desire to

center and privilege the marginalized in order to work *with* them and learn *with* them to understand commonalities in their experiences and to develop strategies to enact change (Flowers & Hesse-Biber, 2018). Charmaz's (2009) approach also provided a foundation for me to think through, process, and understand the role my values and positionality play in my research, which I will further unpack in Chapter 3.

The target population of interest for this study is current and former women mentors in a formal mentoring program for undergraduate women in their senior year that is predicated on the feminist tenets of trust, vulnerability, equity, and lack of hierarchy. Participants develop strong relationships through reciprocal sharing of personal stories. I invited all 23 mentors who have served in the program at least 1 full year as of May 2020 to participate in the study and 19 of those individuals participated. Time and place bound the study because I interviewed mentors who have served in this particular program since its founding in 2015 until 2020.

I gathered data through intensive semi structured individual interviews of 40–60 minutes in length, covering the following topics: experience as a woman at the institution, reasons for initial program involvement, experience in the program and knowledge gained from involvement, and actions taken/changes related to involvement. I paid particular attention to participants' social location within the institution knowing that such environmental factors likely played a role in how participants make sense of their experience (Saldaña, 2016). This in-depth interview design helped me to understand the mentors' reason for joining the program, the knowledge and perspective they gained from that involvement, and what, if any, actions they took as a result of their involvement (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach allowed me the flexibility of asking predetermined open-ended questions, clarifying those questions if necessary,

and following up to ask participants to expand upon or explain their responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Early and ongoing transcription and coding encouraged me to think through and engage with the content throughout the data collection and provided me with leads and new questions to include in interviews with subsequent participants. I moved through constructivist grounded theory's three rounds of coding: initial, focused, and axial (Charmaz, 2014). I also engaged in analytic memoing throughout the coding process to document my research design and decisions and to begin to make connections between interview findings and ideas (Saldaña, 2016). In order to ensure the reliability and validity of my research I member checked the data to mitigate any issues related to possible bias in my interpretation of interview responses (Miles et al., 2017). I also tested my emerging theory/model with participants through focus groups and used participant feedback to improve my theory.

Limitations

Given the type of methodology that I used, grounded theory, my positionality does have an impact on my study. I gathered data, made interpretations and connections, and constructed a theory about a program in which I am intimately involved. My background knowledge of the program and my involvement in its creation and implementation held the potential to prevent me from being able to analyze the program objectively. I needed to make sure that I could process and mitigate this potential conflict of interest through a deep awareness of the assumptions that I bring to my work. I did this through continual memoing, member checking, and thoughtful reflection (Miles et al., 2017). I also provide an in-depth positionality statement in Chapter 3 to ensure that I am transparent about the multiple roles that I hold in the institution where I am conducted my research and more specifically with the program that is the focus of my work.

Another potential limitation is the generalizability of my study. I worked to build a theory around the impact that mentoring has on women mentors' Critical Consciousness in a specific institution with particular qualities at a definite point in time. Given this specificity, my theory is not universally applicable to other mentors in other mentor programs at other institutions. However, my hope is that it will provide a framework/model for other institutions to evaluate the potential relationship between women mentors and Critical Consciousness at their institutions. Finally, I used this study to construct a new theory; therefore, I am unable to simultaneously test or validate the theory.

Significance of the Study

This study expands the understanding of mentorship's potential to positively affect undergraduate women's experiences by building an awareness of the role that mentors can play in creating more positive systems and environments for undergraduate women. Past research on the impact of mentorship focuses primarily on the mentees' experience receiving mentorship or of the mentors' experience providing it, as will be evident in the upcoming literature review. The research does not necessarily focus on the knowledge mentors gain from serving as mentors and what they do with that knowledge. Given that so many institutions are pointing to mentoring as a way to improve undergraduate women's experiences, it is important to fully grasp its potential. Further investigation into this area provides insight into mentors' ability to enact systemic change to mitigate the negative gendered experiences that women undergraduates have in college. Alternatively, further investigation reveals the lack of power that women faculty and administrators hold to enact systemic change. This study provides important information to help those working to change undergraduate women's experiences in institutions of higher education.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

It has been 100 years since (White) women received the right to vote in the United States (Wagner & Steinem, 2019), 56 years since the government established Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited employment discrimination based on "race, color, religion, sex and national origin" (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1998), and 48 years since Congress issued the Title IX federal civil rights law that barred discrimination based on sex in any federally funded educational activity (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Despite the time that has elapsed since these milestones, women continue to be underrepresented in positions of power and influence throughout U.S. society and overrepresented in low-paying, underappreciated roles. Examples of this underrepresentation include the following: the 116th U.S. Congress was composed of only 23.7% women, 37% of whom identified as women of color (Center for American Women in Politics, 2020). Women make up only 37% of evening news broadcasters, 41% of print journalists, and 40% of internet content authors (Women's Media Center, 2019). Women lead only 5.8% of the Standard and Poor's 500 index companies and of those 29 women, only four identify as women of color (Catalyst, 2020). In terms of compensation, women earn 19% less than men on average, and that number increases when combined with intersecting oppressed identities, such as race, with Black and Latinx women earning up to 25% less than men (U.S. Department of Labor, 2018). Examples of such underrepresentation and lower compensation are present in most areas of U.S. society.

Based on the above examples of the ways in which women are generally marginalized and underrepresented in positions of power and influence in U.S. society, it is important to zoom in and to examine how this gender oppression manifests within the sphere of higher education.

This chapter is organized to first provide an overview of the gap between women undergraduates', administrators', and faculty's experiences compared to men's experiences in the field of higher education. Second, this chapter explores the concept of mentoring given that it is a common recommendation as a way to mitigate gender inequities in education. Third, this chapter defines the concept of Critical Consciousness (Freire, 1970) and the ways it can be used to galvanize mentors to leverage their power to enact structural change to improve the experiences of undergraduate women.

Women in Higher Education

Women Students

The history of the relationship between gender and higher education in the United States began with the initial development of systems of higher education. Women and people of color were not included in such systems as institutions were created for wealthy White men who could afford to spend time and money learning for their own intellectual development, not for a monetary return on their tuition investment (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). These marginalized groups have worked ceaselessly to carve out a place for themselves within higher education (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). This is evident in Harvard's history. Harvard, the first college in the United States, denied women entry for almost 200 years. A coordinate college for (White, upper-class) women called the "Harvard Annex" was established in 1879, received its official charter and became Radcliffe College 15 years later (Ulrich, 2018). Although Harvard professors instructed the Radcliffe students in the classroom and held these women to the same standards as their Harvard students (i.e., men), Harvard did not award degrees to Radcliffe graduates until 1963—even at that time the institutions jointly conferred the degrees (Ulrich, 2018). Following the decision to move to "sex-blind" admission in 1977, the four-to-one ratio of men to women at the

institution disappeared, indicating that women were just as strong, if not stronger, academic candidates as men (Ulrich, 2018).

Women have since made significant gains, now comprising more than half of all college and university bachelor's degree graduates and earning 54% of all doctorate of philosophy (PhD) degrees and 60% of all master's degrees (Dubé & Silbert, 2021). However, it is important to drill down into these numbers to recognize that women of color are still significantly underrepresented in these areas compared to their White peers. Black and Latina women graduate with an associate or bachelor's degree by the age of 29 at nearly half the rate of that of White women; 21% of Black women and 20% of Latina women compared to 39% of White women (AAUW, 2021). Black women earned 64% of all doctorate of philosophy degrees conferred to Black or African American students in the United States in 2019; however, that is only 4.54% of all PhDs that were awarded that year (National Science Foundation, 2019). Differences in degree attainment have an impact on future opportunities and earning potential (Social Security Administration, 2015).

Although women of all racial backgrounds have overcome challenges associated with gaining entry into institutions of higher education and despite excelling in the classroom upon matriculation, women students generally report lower self-esteem than students who are men (Chin & Tekiela, 2016; Duke University, 2003; Princeton, 2011). Data from the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), which is the oldest and largest empirical study of higher education, indicates that, on average, undergraduate women's academic self-confidence declines over their time at 4-year institutions and that women undergraduates report lower levels of overall wellness than men undergraduates (Fregoso & Lopez, 2020). Motivated to understand this trend, selective institutions of higher education have conducted internal studies of their

women undergraduates' experiences to learn more in hopes of mitigating this decline. In 2002, Duke University assembled "The Women's Initiative," a steering committee charged with studying and understanding the experiences of women at the institution. Through focus groups, surveys, and interviews the committee found that undergraduate women felt intense pressure to appear accomplished and in control of their academics, extracurricular activities, social groups, and physical appearance, all without any noticeable effort. According to Duke University (2003), "This environment enforces fairly stringent norms on undergraduate women, who feel pressure to wear fashionable (and often impractical) clothes and shoes, to diet and exercise excessively, and to hide their intelligence in order to succeed with their male peers" (p. 12). However, these rigid and unrealistic social expectations did not extend into holding leadership roles inside or outside of the classroom; undergraduate women were expected to surrender powerful positions to their male colleagues (Duke University, 2003).

Princeton University established an analogous committee, the "Steering Committee on Undergraduate Women's Leadership," in 2009 and uncovered similar trends: leadership positions were gendered with women clustered in lower profile positions and men concentrated in the more powerful, visible, and prominent positions (Keohane, 2012). The committee also found that undergraduate men speak more, volunteer their opinions faster, and take more credit for their ideas in classroom settings than women (Keohane, 2012) but that undergraduate women earn higher grade point averages and higher achievements of academic honors and high honors than men undergraduates earn (Princeton University, 2011).

These trends of women's low self-confidence despite academic success continue today as is evident in more recent institutional reports. Using data from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Office of Institutional Research, two women undergraduate students published a

report detailing the status of women at the institution. The report describes the strides women have made: holding proportional leadership positions, graduating at a slightly faster rate than their male colleagues, and earning higher grade point averages (Chin & Tekiela, 2016). However, it also calls attention to the fact that undergraduate women at the institution report feeling less confident and capable than their male colleagues do, and these feelings become stronger the longer they are at the institution (Chin & Tekiela, 2016). The differences in how women experience higher education extend outside of the undergraduate sphere into the experiences of faculty and administrators.

Women Faculty and Administrators

Women faculty and administrators at various locations and levels in colleges and universities report feeling and/or being marginalized specifically because they are women (Dubé & Silbert, 2021; Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999; Princeton University, 2003; Stolzenberg et al., 2019). Researchers have examined gender differences in the academy for decades and studies indicate that women faculty and administrators face overt and covert gender discrimination that prevents them from advancing in their careers at the same pace or to the same level as their male colleagues (Parker & Funk, 2017). The issues that contribute to this discrimination include gender-based harassment, feminization and subsequent devaluing of particular types of work, exclusion from leadership positions, unequal pay structures and access to resources, micro and macro aggressions, and limited access to power (American Association of University Professors [AAUP], 2019; Bliss 2019; Cantalupo & Kidder, 2018; Dubé & Silbert, 2021). Similar to the trend mentioned in a previous section, the magnitude of oppression increases once other layers of identity come into play. For example, for Black women, "[the] double minority status leads faculty and students to view Black scholars as less capable, leading

to fewer full-time tenured positions for Black women faculty, and assumptions of Black women graduate students as affirmative action recipients, incapable of graduate level work" (Walkington, 2017, p. 52).

Gender discrimination in the academy occurs as early as graduate school with 44.1% of women graduate students reporting experiencing gender-based assault or harassment by their male advisors or professors (AAUP, 2020). Such micro and macro aggressions disrupt the pipeline because some women choose to end their graduate work to escape the harassment and others choose to persist, but then move into the private sector in search of a more gender-inclusive and supportive environment after graduation (Cantalupo & Kidder, 2018). For those women who do continue their career in the academy, the work of professors is often gendered and academic pay structure unequal (AAUP, 2020; Bellas, 2016). Both teaching and service responsibilities are feminized activities and subsequently undervalued (Bellas, 2016). Women perform more of these duties, both of which are highly time consuming and demanding and require a large investment of emotional labor, which pulls women away from focusing on research work that is more heavily weighted when departments award tenure, promotions, and monetary rewards (Griffin & Reddick, 2011). Women faculty members' salaries are, on average, 18% less than male faculty members (AAUP, 2020). That number represents only a .4% positive change in the last decade, indicating a lack of progress toward equity (AAUP, 2020). These examples imply that even women in positions of influence (faculty and administrators) experience discrimination because they are women.

A series of reports from several elite institutions suggest that women faculty and administrators feel excluded from decision-making positions, particularly as they progress in their careers (Bliss, 2019; Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999; Princeton University,

2003). Respondents noted a number of different factors: unequal access to career resources, overexposure to gender micro aggressions, and a general gender bias (Bliss, 2019; MIT, 1999; Princeton University, 2003). As MIT (1999) noted, “Equal talent and accomplishment are viewed as unequal through the eyes of prejudice” (p. 6). When women do succeed, their success is not valued as highly as men’s success.

Women are also underrepresented in administrative positions of power across institutions (Dubé & Silbert, 2021). Only 30% of U.S. college and university presidents are women, and of those only 7% are women of color (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Women college presidents are most likely to serve at an associate level degree-granting institution and/or a public institution, which are both considered less prestigious than private institutions in the United States (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Women lead only 8% of doctorate degree granting institutions (Badalucco, 2017). These numbers suggest that the sexism and discrimination that is evident in other aspects of U.S. society exists in the systems and structures of higher education as well; however, women in higher education experience the repercussions of such discrimination in different ways depending on their positions. This inequity indicates that women may not have the power to enact change because they lack the power, resources, and access to do so (Dubé & Silbert, 2021).

Mentorship

As noted in the previous chapter, mentoring programs and mentoring relationships have been positioned as the antidote to the institutional gender oppression described above. Although researchers have gathered data on mentorship’s potential to address women’s unique needs and to position women for success by providing individualized support and strategies, critics claim that mentoring is a temporary solution that will not enact systemic change (Brabazon & Schulz, 2020). These critics argue that mentorship teaches women how to navigate current oppressive

systems rather than supporting women in deconstructing and rebuilding more equitable systems (Brabazon & Schulz, 2020; Crisp et al., 2017). Given the lack of power that women faculty and administrators hold in higher education institutions, they are not necessarily in positions to institute widespread change that could alter the structures and systems that allow sexism and discrimination to live in institutions of higher education. In order to unpack the potential of mentorship to address the inequity in women's experiences compared to men's experiences in higher education, it is important to first fully understand the concept of it through a review of the literature.

Based on a series of comprehensive literature reviews of the influence of mentoring on undergraduate students, beginning with Jacobi's (1991) introductory review of mentorship then moving to Crisp and Cruz's (2009) synthesis of the research between 1990 and 2007, and finally Crisp, et al.'s (2017) comprehensive report of the research between 2008 and 2016, there are two strong commonalities: mentoring is difficult to define and the impact is even more difficult to measure. The ambiguity of the definition and the subsequent problem quantifying its impact dilutes mentorship's ability to enact change (Jacobi, 1991). The reason for the varied, often conflicting, definitions is that mentoring is implemented in categorically different spheres ranging from higher education to business to nonprofit (Jacobi, 1991) with varied goals (Crisp et al., 2017). Mentoring must change in order to achieve the specific fundamental goals that vary across environments. The goals within the context of higher education typically fall into one of the following categories: mentoring to orient and retain students; mentorship to mitigate inequity; mentorship to provide peer support or perspective; and mentoring to advance academic or research skills (Crisp et al., 2017). Woman-to-woman mentorship is initiated most frequently

to address issues of justice related to gender and to provide a more equitable experience for women (Crisp et al., 2017).

It is unrealistic to formulate a universal definition of mentorship given that there are varied reasons for it and different environments in which it is implemented; however, it is important to identify the particular characteristics that make up a mentoring relationship (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). The following should be considered: the mentor's age and position relative to the mentee (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005); the formality of the relationship, whether it is initiated through an institutionalized program and organized by a party outside of the relationship or informally and organically formed outside of a prescribed structure (Crisp et al., 2017); the frequency of meeting and duration of the relationship; the level of reciprocal sharing; the number of individuals involved, whether it is a one-to-one relationship or a group program with one mentor and several mentees; and the different layers of identity of both the mentor and the mentee (see Table 1). Crisp et al. (2017) highlighted the four areas of consensus across the literature of mentorship in higher education:

1. Mentoring relationships are focused on the growth and development of students and can be constructed in various forms.
2. Mentoring experiences may include broad forms of support that include professional, career, and emotional support.
3. Mentoring relationships are personal and reciprocal.
4. Relative to their students, mentors have more experience, influence, or achievement within the educational environment. (p. 19)

Table 1

Variables Within the Concept of Mentorship (Crisp et al., 2017)

Aspects of mentoring relationship	Variables within aspects
Types of relationships	Natural, formal, identity-based, skill-based
Position of mentor	Faculty, staff, peer, graduate student
Goal of relationship	Adjustment, retention, involvement, career readiness, Emotional/psychological well-being, belonging, academic success, leadership development
Variables	Frequency of meetings, duration of relationship, perception of mentorship across racial group, institutional context, student motivations for seeking mentor

Mentoring has the potential to improve equity within higher education. Providing underrepresented or marginalized groups of students with individualized support to help address their needs and to ensure their academic and developmental success levels the playing field so those students can thrive (Crisp et al., 2017). Studies have examined the importance of mentorship on an array of outcomes and the measure of a successful mentorship relationship can vary greatly. Success can be any of the following: the increased sense of belonging of Black students at a predominately white institution due to mentoring (Dahlvig, 2010); enhanced academic achievement and subsequent persistence of a student as the result of a mentoring relationship with a faculty member (Humble et al., 2006); general career development (Wild et al., 2017); the positive earnings differential between the starting salary that a mentee negotiates versus the salary of a peer at the same company who has not been mentored (Randel et al., 2021); gains in leadership development (Campbell et al., 2012); or even the preservation or elevation of self-esteem of undergraduate women over the course of their academic career or the creation of a supportive network for women faculty and staff to help navigate the challenges associated with working within the field of higher education. I explored a particular type of

mentorship, that which is predicated on feminist tenets and relational cultural theory. I imagine mentorship that is built using this theoretical framework provides more of an opportunity for mentors to develop an understanding of injustice. I will describe this type of mentoring in the next section.

Mentorship Predicated on the Tenets of Relational Cultural Theory

Woman-to-woman mentorship programs or relationships capitalize on and center women's experiences and traits as a strength rather than view those differences as setbacks. A group of women mental health clinicians in the 1970s believed the traditional and dominant psychological theories and practices at that time did not incorporate or did not understand women's experiences, and as a result developed relational cultural theory (RCT; Miller, 1976; Miller & Stiver, 1997). Relational cultural theory is the belief that all people grow through connection and toward relationships during their lifetime (Jordan, 2013). The group of founding theorists recognized the foundation of many developmental theories is the goal of separating oneself from others to be a fully functioning and healthy human being (Miller & Stiver, 1997). They argued this cultural assumption was not necessarily true, especially for women (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Using their experience as clinicians and contemplating their women clients' stories, they formulated a theory rooted in connection because connection is the "central organizing feature of women's development" (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 23). This change helped to recalibrate and reframe women's expertise in forming relationships from a deficit to a strength. I am interested in mentorship programs based on this theoretical framework as I believe relationships that are predicated on RCT have the greatest potential to create growth and change, for the individuals involved and possibly for broader systems.

Hammer et al. (2012) connected RCT to mentorship, specifically within the context of higher education. They do so by explaining the historic and systematic ways that the academy has discriminated against women and then argue for change, specifically though mentoring. They provide strategies for effective mentoring within the context of RCT and explain that building mentorship that is rooted in RCT is inherently feminist because relationships define women. Although their work primarily summarizes others' research, it is helpful because it creates a robust definition of RCT along with relevant examples of the application of the theory as the backdrop of mentoring relationships. The article's limitations rest in the fact that it does not mention the ways in which race or culture intersect with RCT.

Despite its theoretical shortcomings, institutions have applied RCT to foster diversity and collaboration specifically within mentoring relationships in higher education. Lewis and Olshansky (2016) explain that the academy of higher education has a history of prioritizing and centering White men. As stated previously, White men tend to hold the power within academic departments and, as a result, tenure track women faculty tend to have a difficult time finding mentors who look like them and who have had experiences similar to their experiences based on their gender. The authors present a compelling argument to move toward a more collaborative model of mentoring among academics specifically using RCT. The authors push mentorship within academia to focus on traditionally marginalized groups such as women or women of color using cross-cultural mentoring. They argue that doing so will allow for growth-fostering relationships that support both the mentor and mentee and result in a more diverse, representative, and productive faculty in the end. According to Lewis and Olshansky (2016), "The emphasis of RCT is on *power with* rather than *power over* in relationships and on individuals working together to achieve social change" (p. 387). They make this argument by

explaining the ways in which the structures of academic institutions systematically marginalize women and individuals of color and argue that RCT could reduce this marginalization by reframing and redirecting the system of higher education to capitalize on the strengths that these diverse populations bring.

Using a feminist narrative and phenomenological framework, Gammel and Rutstein (2016) followed six doctoral advisor/advisee pairs of women in one program to determine links between RCT and transformative learning, which is a perspective of transformation that influences one's beliefs and one's understanding of self. Although the population for this study differs from that of Lewis and Olshansky's (2016) and the goal of mentorship is different, there are many links between the two, most specifically the way in which both sets of researchers address power and effect. Gammel and Rutstein (2016) focused on the potential growth for mentors using relational mentoring; the premise is "growth that moves both parties to a new place whether it is greater academic productivity, academic and professional collaborations, or sharing of more personal and social aspects of each other's lives" (p. 28). This focus connects directly to Lewis and Olshansky's (2016) work because they argue that the mentor, the mentee, and the organization as a whole will benefit from growth-fostering relationships. It is important to note the limitations of generalizing Gammel and Rutstein's (2016) study given the small sample size and the fact that all participants came from a single doctoral program.

The Costs and Benefits of Mentorship

Challenges exist for building coalitions of women mentors to work with women mentees. As noted in the above reports on the status of women faculty members at leading institutions, those women face challenges in their own careers because of gender discrimination that may inhibit them from being able to serve female undergraduates (Chin & Tekiela, 2016; Duke

University, 2003; Princeton, 2011). Institutions evaluate faculty members primarily on their research productivity but expect faculty to teach and provide service to the university in other ways (Griffin & Reddick, 2011). Universities ask women to provide involved mentoring to undergraduate students to mitigate the challenges and discrimination that those students face because of their gender, which places more pressure on those women and takes them away from the research work that will most help them achieve tenure and move up in their careers (Griffin & Reddick, 2011). As a result, institutions could be further marginalizing the marginalized. This concept can be applied to women faculty members who are asked to serve as mentors to their junior women colleagues as well. Again, mentoring, when done well, takes time and energy and for faculty who are already strapped for both, given their teaching and research workloads, investing time in mentoring takes them away from their other work that their university uses to measure their performance (Eagan et al., 2011). It is important to note the tax of mentoring others who share one's identity is even more pronounced for women who hold multiple oppressed identities (Randel et al., 2021). According to Griffin and Reddick (2011), "Female scholars of color report students, faculty members, and administrators expecting them to be 'caretakers' for the academic community by serving in supportive roles unrelated to their tenure and advancement" (p. 1036).

Although Crisp et al. (2017) argued mentorship is a means to achieve greater equity between undergraduate students, they note the irony that students with varying minoritized identities do not enjoy the same access to mentoring as their majority group peers. Attachment theory states that individuals are more likely to gravitate to others who share similar aspects of identity (Mitchell et al., 2015). Given that White men are more heavily represented in positions of power within higher education, mentorship could inadvertently reinforce gender power

dynamics by providing support and resources to those who look like those who are already at the top of an institution. Women researchers' work is often less valued than that of men and male faculty may try to distance themselves from their women mentees so that their work is not devalued by association (Limbert, 1995). It is important to note that mentorship could just be an interim correction for inherent systems and structures of inequity that reside deep within the core of many colleges and universities. Such systems and structures may prioritize the success of specific types of identities and mentoring programs do not address the root of that discrimination and injustice (Benishek et al., 2004). Although mentorship has been recommended as a tool to mitigate the negative experiences of undergraduate women, there are still a variety of limitations of the concept that must be considered and addressed in order to ensure it is developed in an intentional way that capitalizes on its potential.

Despite the time and energy of serving as a mentor, mentors in higher education reap a variety of benefits from guiding, encouraging, teaching, and journeying with mentees. In conversations and discussions, information is not just one way; it is reciprocal with both parties providing insights to each other (Haber-Curran et al., 2017). As a result, mentors report gaining a new perspective into the lives of a different generation through conversations with their mentees (Zachary, 2002). Mentors also develop better listening and coaching skills that they can integrate into other areas of their professional lives and many report feeling more satisfied and engaged at work (Haber-Curran et al., 2017). Formal mentorship programs offer mentors the opportunity to develop better skills to serve students, as well as an opportunity to meet and build relationships with other mentors across the institution that have the potential to positively affect their work (Potter et al., 2009).

An additional benefit to serving as a mentor could be that the knowledge the mentor gains from interactions with her mentee could raise her level of Critical Consciousness about the systems within her institution that disadvantage women, undergraduate as well as professional. This knowledge gain could impact how the mentor interacts with the institution and if she advocates for change to mitigate gender oppression. I employed in-depth interviewing to understand mentors' reflection on issues of gender oppression, motivation to mitigate said oppression, and actual engagement, which I will discuss further in Chapter 3. The next section will provide an overview of the concept of Critical Consciousness as well as potential change that ensues when individuals or groups gain Critical Consciousness.

Critical Consciousness

Freire (1970) originally developed the concept of Critical Consciousness (CC) or conscientização to empower Brazilian peasants to learn to read and write, thus broadening their perspectives and understandings of their social status. Freire believed that education was a tool for liberation, that it helped the learner understand society and their place in it, and compelled oppressed members of society to enact change in the name of social justice (Watts, et al., 2011). Freire (1970) defined CC as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p. 19). Through literacy, the peasants with whom he worked began to recognize they were not voiceless, invisible, or impotent; rather, they learned their current social conditions marginalized and oppressed them into believing that they were (Diemer et al., 2016). Jemal (2017) noted:

> The under-recognized role of systemic inequity in individual and social problems, that is, the lack of CC, creates the necessary environment for oppression to rampantly spread

> through systems from the individual to the macro levels, causing massive, widespread system failure. (p. 604)

As these peasants began to critically reflect and to make this connection through awareness, they simultaneously shed their internalized oppression and developed agency and feelings of power to challenge and to change their current positions in society for their own benefit through critical action (Freire, 1970, 2000).

It is important to clearly define Freire's (1970, 2000) key components of CC: critical reflection, critical action, and agency, in order to understand how all three elements come together to form CC. Freire defines critical reflection as the deep awareness and examination of structural inequities that prevent individuals, groups, or organizations from reaching their full potential and the subsequent rejection of those inequities (Freire, 2000). It is the process of beginning to question what are considered unchangeable truths about the way societal structures exist and operate; specifically regarding the position of the oppressed within society (Diemer et al., 2016). Critical reflection also deepens individuals' understanding of the context, which relates to the historical and political components of their reality as well as ways in which different aspects of their identities interact with that reality (Landreman et al., 2007). Freire (2000) observed that as the marginalized began to develop this more nuanced understanding they began to realize they were not destined to live on the fringes of society, rather that there was potential for a different outcome.

This critical reflection leads to critical action; the individual or collective change to unfair systems and structures that perpetuate oppression (Freire, 2000). Action can take a variety of forms, such as exercising the right to vote and supporting a candidate whose policies align with oppressed people's desire to remove barriers that prevent them from thriving (Jemal, 2017).

Action can also take form outside of traditional political processes, such as protests or community organizing (Jemal, 2017). Freire (2000) theorized that CC consists of a circular or repetitive relationship between critical reflection and critical action with agency, or the idea that a person has the independence and free will to make choices, as the driver of both concepts.

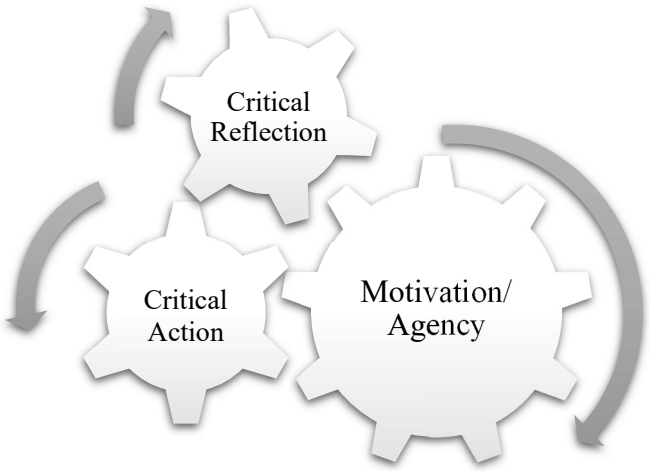
Freire (2000) defined motivation/agency by characteristics of what it is along with what it is not. There are four key characteristics of agency: Problematizing, Subject, Integration, and Dialogue (Freire, 2000). When a person achieves true agency, they learn to *problematize* rather than problem solve (Freire, 2000). Problematizing penetrates oppression by embedding the oppressed in the problem and motivating them to question knowledge and subsequent practices that have been deemed 'true' and 'normal' (Freire, 2000). Problematizing works to deconstruct what was previously understood as truth in order to facilitate the development of consciousness that will allow the oppressed to advocate for systemic change (Montero, 2009). This immersion allows the oppressed to begin to understand themes of their reality and through this understanding enables them to intervene and take an active rather than passive role in their own reality (Freire, 2000). Problematization helps to reveal that things can change; situations, people, rules, systems do not have to be the way they are (Montero, 2009). This is the opposite of problem solving, which distances the oppressed from the problem and permits them to analyze it from afar before proposing ways to solve it (Freire, 2000).

Problematizing connects directly to Freire's second characteristic of agency, *subject*. The process of problematizing an issue, situation, or circumstance transforms those who are oppressed from objects who are acted upon by outside conditions to subjects with the power to act upon those social conditions and to create change (Freire, 2000). Freire's third important component of agency is *integration*, which he defines by differentiating it from the concept of

adaptation. “Integration results from the capacity to adapt oneself to reality *plus* the critical capacity to make choices and to transform reality” (Freire, 2000, p. 4). Individuals who are integrated still hold power and control, whereas those who adapt possess no control of changing circumstances, rather they only change themselves (Freire, 1970, 2000). Finally, for oppressed people to gain agency, they must be in dialogue with others, which links to critical reflection and critical action. As Jemal (2017) noted, “Dialogue is of critical importance to conscientization [Critical Consciousness] because the symbolization that language makes possible allows dehumanized persons to reinterpret their experiences of themselves, others and their worlds” (p. 613). Oppressed individuals gain perspective and agency from conversing with others, asking questions, and examining what they previously believed as truths (Freire, 2000). They gain collective power that they did not previously hold (Jemal, 2017) and this communal act advances critical thinking, which, in combination with critical reflection, provides the foundation to act critically to mitigate the oppression. Change is only possible when people understand there is a need for it and they feel the power to make it (Watts et al., 2011); once they have this understanding and begin to act, the process perpetuates itself. Figure 1 is a visual representation of the reciprocal and interconnected relationship between critical action, critical reflection and subsequent agency to enact change.

Figure 1

Reciprocal Relationship Between Elements of Critical Consciousness (Freire, 1970)



Different Interpretations of the Construct of Critical Consciousness

Scholars have recognized Freire's work as foundational in cultivating a pedagogy predicated on education as a tool for liberation. His Critical Consciousness concept is applicable today and, as a result, researchers continue to build on his groundwork. Many of the changes that scholars have advocated for in various articles amount to semantical adjustments as opposed to conceptual modifications of the concept of CC (Jemal, 2017; Diemer et al., 2016; Watts et al., 2011; McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016). For example, scholars are divided on the components of the construct with some maintaining CC is made up of one component, while others determining it is an umbrella for three individual components as outlined above (Jemal, 2017; Diemer et al., 2016; Watts et al., 2011; McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016).

Those who interpret Critical Consciousness as a unidimensional construct understand it solely as *reflection* where consciousness is raised through cognitive investigatory processes

resulting in action (Diemer & Li, 2011; Watts et al., 2011; Shin et al., 2016). Other scholars contend that CC is made up of three parts: critical reflection, political efficacy (another way to label the concept of agency), and critical action (Diemer et al., 2016; Jemal, 2017; Watts et al., 2011), where political efficacy is the oppressed's perception of their personal and communal ability to effect change in conjunction with their belief that societal structures will respond to their call for change (Diemer et al., 2016; Watts et al., 2011). Regardless of the number of or names of the concepts, all assume the same result: as oppressed individuals or groups begin to analyze their current social conditions and recognize and understand the ways in which they are marginalized, they feel emboldened to enact change (Diemer et al., 2016; Freire, 2000; Jemal, 2017; Watts et al., 2011). Then, as these individuals achieve structural reform they develop a more refined understanding of the roots of systemic oppression and act in more sophisticated ways to deconstruct it and the cycle continues (Freire, 2000).

Critical Consciousness in Education

Education has been positioned as an equalizer and as a common good which promotes opportunity, innovation, and success in U.S. society (Goldin, 1999). However, education has also been used to reinforce privilege and oppressive societal structures (Stockdill & Danico, 2012). Scholars have studied the role of Critical Consciousness (CC) in advancing justice within educational settings. Much of that research focuses on building the CC of marginalized adolescents in educational settings to empower them to succeed in particular areas or enable them to enact change to alter the systems that oppress them in the first place (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Diemer et al., 2016; McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016). This research ranges from the study of Critical Consciousness and its impact on career development among urban youth (Diemer & Blustein, 2006), to the ways in which Critical Consciousness of inequity and racism impact

vocational development among Latinx high school students (McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016), to the application of Critical Consciousness to build high school students' level of political engagement (Au, 2012). However, some scholars have explained the ways in which educators or administrators, seemingly in positions of power, develop a CC about injustice that positively shapes the day-to-day interactions between those in power (faculty members/administrators) and those who are minoritized (particular groups of students) and drives internal systemic change (Landreman et al., 2007; Polkinghorne, 2004). Despite the various ways that CC is used in educational settings to promote change, there is one common thread: the pursuit of justice and equity. The upcoming section will provide a review of a selection of studies that investigate the impact of Critical Consciousness on change specifically in the area of higher education.

Critical Consciousness in Higher Education

Studies of Critical Consciousness in higher education, although limited, reveal a wider application of Freire's model. Freire argued that only those who have roots in the actual context of the oppression understand its cultural nuances enough to deconstruct it (Freire, 2000); however, scholars in higher education have expanded Critical Consciousness to be a tool to help people in positions of power to recognize the ways that educational systems can be inequitable and to advocate for change toward more just structures rather than to remain complicit in maintaining oppressive structures (Diemer et al., 2016). "Liberation requires true solidarity in which the oppressor not only fights on the side of the oppressed, but also takes a radical posture of empathy" (Jemal, 2017, p. 618). This is a significant shift given that Freire's work is based on the development of CC in marginalized communities to empower those groups to advocate for and enact change to improve their own lives (Freire, 2000). In this expansion, scholars study people in positions of power who develop a Critical Consciousness of the oppression of the

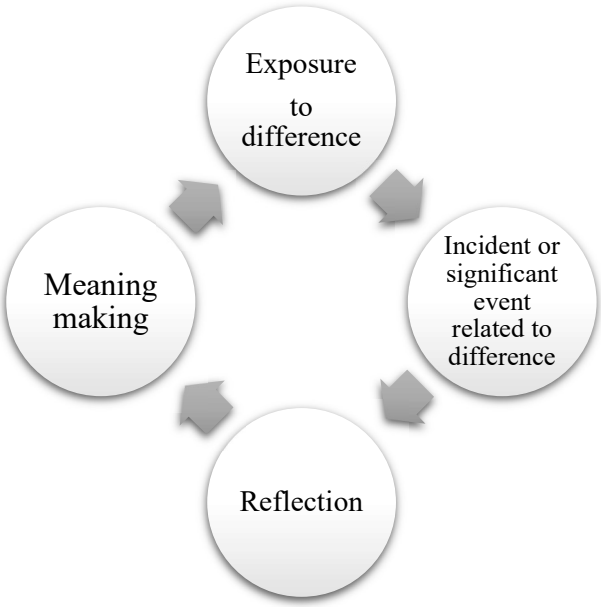
marginalized in conjunction with the ways in which they are complicit in that oppression because of their privilege (Diemer et al., 2016) This section will provide a review of a few key pieces that offer an important foundation to understand the development of CC specifically in higher education leaders.

Landreman et al.'s 2007 phenomenological study of the development of university educators' Critical Consciousness fleshes out a concrete cycle of development: awareness raising, critical incident, self-reflection, and an 'aha' moment (See Figure 2). Although the components of this cycle were informed by Freire's work, they do not align fully with Freire's elements of CC: critical reflection, critical action, and agency. Landreman et al. (2007) explain that awareness raising emerges from an encounter with difference in perspective or experience. This parallels Freire's work; however, the group or individual encountering difference is a person who holds power and the difference they are encountering is the way in which marginalized communities experience some aspect of the world less favorably than do those who are not marginalized (Landreman et al., 2007). Following the encounter, the person in power moves beyond that surface-level exposure of difference to a more meaningful relationship in order to prompt further change (Landreman et al., 2007). Through a critical incident or a significant event, the person in power is motivated to dig deeper into that initial exposure and engage in critical reflection and meaning making followed by self-reflection (Landreman et al., 2007). This coalesces in an 'aha' moment of clarity and movement toward Critical Consciousness that results in action taken to mitigate the oppression that becomes evident to the person in power (Landreman et al., 2007). This process can play out in a number of different ways. For example, some people quickly move through this cycle because they have overcome oppression and innately understand it. Others enter formal development programs or education

sessions in order to learn more about oppressed populations, while still others develop CC through a longer process consisting of reflection and understanding of the complex context of the institution, their own positionality and identity, and figuring out where and why the institution would be resistant to change (Bensimon et al., 2019; Landreman et al., 2007). Landreman et al. (2007) note that there is not an end point to this cycle; the more subjects work through these steps, the more critically conscious they become, resulting in the recognition of a need to further dismantle of systems of oppression and a close in gaps of inequity.

Figure 1

Ongoing Cycle of Critical Consciousness Development Among Faculty and Administrators (Landreman et al., 2007)



Peña (2012) conducted research using Landreman et al.'s work as a foundation to investigate how faculty develop Critical Consciousness. Her work provides an example of Landreman et al.'s cycle in action. Employing a case study approach, Peña gathered data about faculty members' experience developing an in-depth understanding of marginalized students

(students of color) at the institution where the study took place. She created an opportunity for faculty to engage with racially marginalized students through interviews in order to learn firsthand how they experienced the institution (exposure to difference/incident; Peña, 2012). Between interviews the faculty met as a group to process and to reflect on what they were learning from the students (reflection; Peña, 2012). Peña found that all faculty participants gained a richer perspective of racially marginalized students' experiences, however those who developed the most Critical Consciousness had the most to gain; namely, those who did not possess racially marginalized identities or experience oppression (making meaning; Peña, 2012). These participants learned a lot about how race impacts the way students are received by and interact with their institution as well as the broader society. As a result, all participants discussed ways that their newfound CC would impact how they designed their classrooms and operated as educators (Peña, 2012).

In a more recent study, Bensimon et al. (2019) further explore the relationship between Critical Consciousness and change in higher education. They introduce the term *institutional agents*, or "individuals who, having experienced or developed an understanding of institutionalized oppressiveness, use their knowledge to support minoritized student success" (p. 1692) and make a comparison between institutional agents and mentors. They argued institutional agents possess Critical Consciousness whereas mentors do not. This Critical Consciousness enables institutional agents to conceptualize the negative impacts of oppressive systems and work toward equity on a macro level which could "transform institutional contexts such that they function as well for minoritized students as they do for White [privileged] students" (Bensimon et al., 2019, p. 1692). Examples of such structural changes range from decolonizing admissions recruitment and selection practices that prioritize particular privileged

groups of applicants (Bensimon et al., 2019) to updating curriculums to ensure that students of oppressed backgrounds and identities feel seen to considering minoritized students' unique experiences and needs when creating institutional policies (Peña, 2012). They contend that mentors do not have the capacity to work on structural changes because they lack the understanding of what needs to change. Instead, mentors focus on micro changes that they can make in the context of relationships with students but those changes do not dismantle the systems that produce the need for mentorship in the first place. This piece is particularly important to my work because I explored whether serving as a mentor in a formal mentor program provides the opportunity to learn and to grow in an understanding of the ways that institutional systems and structures need to change in order to improve the experience for all women at the institution.

Measures of Critical Consciousness

A number of quantitative instruments have been introduced in the last several years to measure the acquisition or development of Critical Consciousness. Table 2 illustrates the characteristics of each as well as the differences between the measures.

These instruments as a group offer an important foundation for my research because together they contain simple, reliable, and valid questions to measure the abstract concept of Critical Consciousness (CC), which I used as a basis for creating my interview protocol. This group of instruments delineates and measures the components of Critical Consciousness: agency/motivation, reflection, and action. Reviewing the questions in each instrument and understanding how researchers developed those questions to address and measure components of CC helped me to conceptualize how I could do the same with my protocol. For example, Diemer et al. (2015) first defined agency as "one's ability to be an effective political actor" (p. 815) and

crafted questions to focus on “moral concern with inequity, motivation to address it, perceived ability to make a difference” (p. 815). The instruments approach the component of reflection by inquiring how people understand inequity, both personally and structurally (Diemer et al., 2015; Shin et al., 2016) and the instruments define the component of action as the actual change that an individual is involved or has been involved. Together, these five tools provided me with a map to build my interview protocol to ensure that I addressed each of the component parts of CC.

Table 2

Quantitative Instruments to Measure Critical Consciousness

Instrument	Intended participants	What the instrument measures	Level of measurement	Structure of instrument
Critical Consciousness Inventory (CCI) (Thomas et al., 2014)	Youth	Critical Consciousness (CC) as a unidimensional construct of gender, social, and racial inequities	Interpersonal	9-item scale
Measure of Adolescent Critical Consciousness (MACC) (McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016)	Latinx youth	Critical Consciousness (reflection, motivation/agency, action) to counter injustice.	Interpersonal	10-item scale
Contemporary Critical Consciousness Measure (CCCM) (Shin et al., 2016)	Adults living in United States	Critical Consciousness (awareness and attitudes) of racism, classism, heterosexism	Systemic/ Structural	19-item scale
Critical Consciousness Scale (CCS) (Diemer et al., 2017)	Marginalized youth and young adults	Critical consciousness (reflection and action) of gender, social and racial inequities	Structural	46-item scale
Short Critical Consciousness Scale (ShoCC), Diemer et al., 2020)	Marginalized youth/young adults	Critical consciousness (reflection, motivation, action) of gender, social and racial inequities	Structural	13-item scale

To illustrate why I am not employing one of these instruments to conduct my study, I unpack the limitations of each using the table headings as a guide. First, the majority of the instruments were designed for and tested on a specific population: youth/marginalized individuals. Although I understand researchers made this choice based on Freire's theoretical

development of CC as a concept for the marginalized, it does not align with the direction of my research. I am interested in understanding the Critical Consciousness of a group of adults who may or may not consider themselves systematically marginalized. Given my population is a group of adults the Contemporary Critical Consciousness Measure (Shin et al., 2016) could be a match to assist me in measuring the CC of my participants. However, despite the alignment of population, the instrument does not measure what I need it to measure. The instrument calculates "awareness and attitudes related to the systemic, institutionalized forms of discrimination associated with racism, classism, and heterosexism" (Shin et al., 2016, p. 213) but it does not gauge the action component of CC. The absence of action makes it incomplete and inappropriate for me to use for my study because I am conceptualizing CC as reflection, agency/motivation, and action. Considering the alignment between instrument measure and my desired measure, the Measure of Adolescent Critical Consciousness (McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016) and the Short Critical Consciousness Scale (Diemer et al., 2020) are both a match, however their target population is youth, which does not align with mine. The Critical Consciousness Inventory (Thomas et al., 2014) measures Critical Consciousness as a unidimensional measure, therefore eliminating the opportunity to separate and understand the components parts of reflection, action, and agency/motivation. For the purposes of my work, I want to understand and be able to tease out what is promoting or restricting the Critical Consciousness of my participants and in order to do so I need to break down the concept of CC into its three parts. I am also interested in considering both interpersonal CC as well as structural/systemic CC and none of the measures offer an opportunity to evaluate both simultaneously. I could use two different measures but I still not do believe that would provide enough data for me to analyze to build a theory around the development of Critical Consciousness of my study participants.

These scales, and quantitative measure more broadly, do not provide information on how or why Critical Consciousness develops, just if it does or not. This is a limitation because I am interested in understanding how mentors act as change agents, not just if they are learning from their experience. Also, I am interested in understanding if participants were attracted to the formal mentoring program because they had Critical Consciousness to begin with and saw mentoring as an opportunity to enact critical action. I need to be able to dig deeper than just the development/measure of CC, which is why I believe it is necessary to use qualitative measures. I will explain my interview protocol and the ways in which I employed these instruments to build my protocol in Chapter 3.

Summary

It is important to consider how change happens in systems of education given that U.S. society positions education as a means to achieve equity. Based on the research presented in this chapter, undergraduate women experience higher education differently and more negatively than undergraduate men. Many institutions have sought to address this divide by recommending mentorship programs to enable undergraduate women to connect with successful women in faculty and administrative positions who can help to successfully guide them through their collegiate experience. Many of these mentorship programs or individual relationships are focused on micro level changes rather than wider system changes. As a result, mentorship has done little to address the root causes of why women struggle to navigate institutions of higher education. Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of Critical Consciousness (CC) can be applied to mentorship to evaluate whether women become mentors because they have CC and want to impact change on a system level or whether they learn from their mentee to critically examine the systems that create the inequities for undergraduate women and if they use that new

understanding to advocate for wide spread change. Chapter 3 provides details for how I explored the connection between mentorship, Critical Consciousness, and change in one particular institution of higher education.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

As I discussed in Chapter 1, the primary focus of this study is the experience of mentors in a formal women's mentoring program for undergraduate women designed to provide agency and power to those marginalized because they are women. The program, which I refer to as *Summit*, operates out of the Division of Student Affairs at a highly ranked, midsize, private, Catholic, northeast institution with a traditional college-age undergraduate population, which I will refer to as *Apex University* (AU-pseudonym). I am interested in exploring the effect that serving as a mentor has on the women mentors' development of Critical Consciousness and on their motivation and ability to enact structural change that would have a positive impact on undergraduate women's experiences within the institution. I am not studying the effect of the program on the undergraduate mentees. Summit matches women faculty and administrator mentors with small groups of undergraduate women from the senior class to engage in shared storytelling and conversation to reflect on and unpack issues specific to the undergraduates' experience as women. The full program (about 100 undergraduates and 10 mentors) meets six times each spring semester over dinner; however, the mentors meet as a group separate from their mentees an additional eight times throughout the academic year. During such meetings, the mentors engage in formal and informal sharing of their experiences as mentors in the program as well as their general experiences as women at the institution, which has and continues to employ primarily men in positions of power (Dubé & Silbert, 2021).

I explored the mentors' experiences in Summit utilizing the following research questions:

1. How, if at all, do mentors perceive that their involvement in the Summit program has impacted their awareness and understanding of institutionalized sexism and its effects?
2. How, if at all, do mentors perceive that their involvement in the Summit program has impacted their motivation or ability to effect change related to institutionalized sexism?
3. In what ways, if at all, have mentors enacted change on behalf of themselves or other women at the institution that they perceive to be connected in some way to their involvement in Summit?

The following chapter details my approach to conducting this study. I begin with a brief overview of qualitative research then present a statement on my positionality coupled with my lens of feminist methodology. I explain and justify my methodological approach of constructivist grounded theory and the research paradigms that I used and then provide a detailed background of the institution where I am conducting my research. I conclude with my data collection and data analysis plans.

Rationale for Qualitative Research Approach

Qualitative research methodologies provide researchers with a foundation to understand, and in some cases, to change a complex social phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). The characteristics of qualitative research as described by Creswell and Poth (2018) align closely with my goals in a variety of ways. First, qualitative research situates the researcher within the research and highlights the important point that knowledge is produced through a particular lens; it is not neutral. This is crucial to my study given that I have a complex and multifaceted role in the program in which I am conducting research. I discuss this further in my forthcoming

positionality statement. Second, qualitative research provides the opportunity to center the voices of the research participants, in this case the mentors. The goal of the formal mentor program that I am investigating is to mitigate gender oppression at the institution, therefore qualitative research supports this by empowering mentors to voice and share their experiences. Third, qualitative researchers study things in their natural setting knowing that context plays a role in how people experience different phenomenon. Finally, Creswell and Poth (2018) explained qualitative researchers achieve this by interpreting data through deductive and inductive processes, valuing the complexity and working to build a complete. Based on the above discussion, the study that I conducted was best achieved through qualitative research methods.

Positionality

Based on the tenet of qualitative research that emphasizes the importance of the role of the researcher, it is imperative for me to unpack the multifarious role I play within the institution where I am conducting my research and within the specific program that I am studying. I am the director of the program that I am researching. I am also an alumna of the institution where I am collecting my research and I likely experience(d) the marginalization that I am attempting to understand. As Reinharz (1997) noted, “Because these ‘brought’ and ‘created’ selves are those that are relevant to the people being studied, they shape or obstruct the relationships that the researcher can form and hence the knowledge that can be obtained” (p. 4). I need to be hyperaware of the multifaceted space that I occupy on campus and subsequently, the complex relationships I have with different members of the university ranging from administrators to students to faculty. I accompany women students through their struggles at the institution and I work to address the institutional constructs that cause them to struggle in the first place. Anzaldúa (1999) presented the term “nos-otras” and explains that it captures both the role of the

oppressor and the oppressed. She argued the dash is systematically blurred or erased as the oppressor takes on the characteristics of the oppressed (Tuck, 2009). I am the blurred dash. I am in a unique position to both hear about oppressive gendered experiences and to identify the ways in which those experiences reflect the wider patriarchal culture of the institution. I lead a center predicated on feminist collaboration embedded in a division and institution that is inflexibly hierarchical. I am seen as an agitator and a disruptor of the status quo by my administrator colleagues while simultaneously viewed as an obedient pacifist by students and members of the faculty. I am a perpetrator of the institutional culture given my status as a paid employee and simultaneously a victim of it given my gender.

Some of the roles that I have are advantageous to begin to understand the complicated experience of professional women attempting to mentor undergraduate women to succeed in an oppressive environment in which those mentors are also situated. However, other roles could threaten the validity of my study. For example, I could inadvertently view results through the lens of an alumna of this institution. As the director of the mentorship program, I could unconsciously, or consciously, derive meaning from mentors' experiences because I am invested in the success of the program. In order to minimize this threat to my validity I constantly reflected on the ways in which my position in the world influences how I see the world and worked to explain that in my work, rather than ignore it (Charmaz, 2008).

In addition to unpacking my complex relationship with the institution where I am conducting my research, it is also important for me to recognize who I am not. I am not a person of color and I am not a queer person. I do not face microaggressions on a daily basis because of my race and sexuality. Naming this does not distance me from the intersectional oppression that women with these identities hold, rather it forces me to recognize that there are other factors that

some of my participants may be experiencing that compound and complicate the oppression that they face. Although these identities are not personal to me, they are equally as important and relevant to the research. As Falla (2000) noted:

> The location of the person conducting the research should be affected by the injustice of the world in such a way that his or her point of view and interpretation of the facts is the same as that of the persons subjected to the injustice. (p. 46)

My identities shaped my values and thus my beliefs about the world. To engage authentically with my research, I worked to recognize how these identities and values affected the way I approached my research, viewed my data, and prescribed recommendations (Fine, 2016).

Grounded Theory

To advance my understanding of the experiences of mentors within the Summit program and to unpack the connection between mentors' desire to be involved in the program and their Critical Consciousness, I pursued a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1965) is predicated on the idea that "systematic qualitative analysis has its own logic" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 7) and that theory can be developed directly from the field data and more specifically from the "actions, interactions, and social processes of people" (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 249). Glaser and Strauss founded this framework in 1967 to center the experiences of research participants and to "ground" the researcher's theory in the data and data analysis rather than applying a previously established theory that did not necessarily fully connect to the area being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Strauss and Glaser sought to deemphasize theory verification and instead focus on what new theoretical knowledge could be drawn from research, understanding the uniqueness of research participants, their identities, their circumstances, and

their experiences and the problematic nature of trying to fit that into a preestablished theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The theorists urged researchers to pursue inductive research; to enter studies without preconceived ideas or theories, rather to follow and uncover the experience of participants (Kenny & Fourie, 2014). Glazer and Strauss developed a set of techniques (theoretical sampling, coding, constant comparison, saturation, and memo writing) for executing grounded theory research that enable researchers to effectively collect, code, compare, and organize data into categories. I will explain these procedures in an upcoming section where I detail how I performed them in my study (Charmaz, 2014; Glazer & Strauss, 1967; Kenny & Fourie, 2014).

Grounded theory spread and changed as researchers in Glaser and Strauss' field of Sociology, and beyond, began to explore, use, and build on the methodology (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019; Kenny & Fourie, 2014). It became popular because of its focus on observation and experience rather than a reliance on theory and logic (Bryant, 2014). Glaser and Strauss each continued to push the method forward, but in different directions. Strauss developed a partnership with Juliet Corbin and together they worked to formalize the method and to prescribe specific steps designed to aid the researcher in deducing meaning from the data (Kenny & Fourie, 2014). Strauss and Corbin also moved away from classic grounded Theory by acknowledging the importance of understanding literature and theoretical frameworks of the population or area that is being studied rather than entering with no background (Kenny & Fourie, 2014). Glaser remained steadfast in the original conception of grounded theory, or classic grounded theory, arguing the importance of allowing the theory to completely emerge from the data (Glaser, 1992). He critiqued Strauss and Corbin's approach noting that it was the antithesis of what he intended grounded theory to be because he saw their deductive practices as forceful

and prescriptive (Glaser, 1992). The Straussian approach, which it later was named, was not the only variation to classic grounded theory. Charmaz, a former student of both Glaser and Strauss, introduced an additional variation called constructivist grounded theory (Kenny & Fourie, 2014).

Constructivist grounded theory (CGT) challenged classic grounded theory's primary claim that theory is *discovered*; rather, Charmaz argued that the researcher *constructs* theory. "Constructivist grounded theory adopts the inductive, comparative, emergent, and open-ended approach of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) original statement" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 12). Understanding grounded theory in this way challenges the researcher to build reflexivity and examine how their positionality, power, and privileges impact how they see and how they interpret the data (Charmaz, 2014). Given that the researcher is not value neutral, their engagement and meaning making with the data is based on their own experiences and assumptions (Priya, 2019). In CGT, the researcher also engages with participants to ensure an opportunity for them to share their own interpretations of the data. In these conversations, the researcher works to decenter themselves, their power, and their experiences and instead to prioritize the voices of participants in order to co-construct meaning (Priya, 2019).

Charmaz (2006) also moved away from Straussian grounded theory's systematic process and rules and toward a more flexible process that includes suggested guidelines rather than prescribed steps. Despite these intentional departures from Classic and Straussian grounded theory, constructivist grounded theory still subscribes to the original methodological practices of theoretical sampling, saturation, constant comparison, and memo writing (Charmaz, 2019). CGT also challenges the researcher to be open to a range of theoretical possibilities, to constantly reflect on their own beliefs and how those beliefs impact how they see the data, and to

understand that different participants may experience different situations or events or ideas differently (Charmaz, 2019).

I chose to use constructivist grounded theory because I believe the overarching values of the approach aligned with the research that I conducted. There are a number of strengths to pursuing CGT. CGT provided me with the opportunity to account for my complex and multilayered relationship with the program that I studied and to view my roles as beneficial to my research rather than detrimental (Bensimon, 2005). I had the opportunity to deepen the people in positions of power's understanding of the need for structural change for the benefit of the oppressed and motivated those people to initiate and support that change (Bensimon, 2005). CGT also highlights the idea of power and power differentials and strives to center the voices of participants. It also situates the data in its sociopolitical context, which I believe is incredible necessary given my area and location of research. CGT's interactive link between the researcher and participants connects to my critical-constructivist paradigm lens, which highlights the emancipatory potential of my research as well as the fact that it is constructing new knowledge and generalizing to theory (Mittwede, 2012). Given the connections between the fundamental tenets of grounded theory and my research goals, I believe it was the most appropriate avenue for me to conduct my research.

Research Setting

Background of Institution/Program

As noted above, I conducted my research at a highly ranked, midsize, predominately white, private, Catholic institution in the northeast with a traditional college-age undergraduate population, Apex University (AU). AU was established in the late 19th century to serve a marginalized population: Irish Catholic men. At the time of its creation, the founding religious

order sought to provide this oppressed group with an education and an opportunity for social mobility (Higgins, 2005). The institution remained committed to single-sex education for over half a century until it began a slow, 50-year climb to become a coeducational institution (Higgins, 2005).

The integration of women into Apex University was staggered, piecemeal, and could be viewed as self-serving of the institution. Some historians maintain that AU did not accept women as a way to fulfill its mission toward social justice; rather, the institution admitted women to sustain enrollment and increase revenue (Higgins, 2005; Miller-Bernal & Poulson, 2005). When AU began accepting women into specific professional schools, the administration, faculty, and male students expressed their disagreement to this change in a variety of ways. For example, the student newspaper penned numerous articles centering men's concerns that the stature of the institution would suffer due to its new coeducational identity, men on campus verbally harassed women students by catcalling them around campus, faculty members delegitimized women's roles as scholars in the classroom, and the AU administration prevented women students from participating in extracurricular activities such as writing for the student newspaper or the literary magazine, receiving student tickets for sporting events, participating in the glee club or even appearing in the school's yearbook (Higgins, 2005). In response to the awarding of the first woman a Master of Arts degree, the school bulletin declared the institution "for men only" (Higgins, 2005). From the beginning, Apex University was a difficult place for women to establish a sense of belonging.

There is no record of an intentional examination, analysis, or rebuilding of AU's institutional norms and structures to accommodate the arrival of women. According to Miller-Bernal and Poulson (2005), "It was as though women were expected to fit into the existing

situation without disturbing the status quo" (p. 312). The Dean of Women at AU from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s challenged women to "buil[d] where they could . . . a lot of it was discreet, waiting for the right time…one could not impose anything, and one worked within the system" (Higgins, 2005, p. 206). This indicates that women were operating within the previously established structures created by men to serve men, which likely did not identify nor support their unique needs. It also alludes to the notion that women could not be vocal or critical of the institution. Viewing this history through the lens of feminist theory, the lack of reconstruction of institutional systems to acknowledge, accommodate, and support women is a justice issue (Ward Hood & Cassaro, 2002). Women at AU were not, and perhaps are still not, fully seen or supported. It has been over 50 years since women began enrolling at AU and there has yet to be a reconstruction of institutional systems and structures to fully integrate women into the institution, which I will detail in the following section (Dubé & Silbert, 2021).

Present Status of Women at Apex University

An examination of recent statistics reveals that Apex University has still not fully integrated women into positions of influence and power. The institution's 2019–2020 factbook indicated although women make up 53% of the undergraduate student body, that representation does not extend into the faculty (43% of full-time faculty are women), the leadership (20% of university officers are women) or the academic administration (25% of school deans are women) (Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment, 2020).

It is important to recognize the way in which gender and racial oppression magnifies for women of color. Although the institution does not provide data on the number of women of color faculty, it does provide information on the number of women of color in leadership positions: 8%. As Hill Collins (2016) noted:

> When it comes to social inequity, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. (p. 2)

The implication of this organizational structure is that White men are the decision makers and hold the power. This places a high value on masculinity and whiteness and a much lower value on femininity and non-White racial identities (Vanderwoerd & Cheng, 1975). This dynamic, in conjunction with the institutional mission to "form all students" could create cognitive dissonance for women in various positions at the institution who implicitly feel the incompatibility of these perspectives.

Framing the Issue

As noted in Chapter 2, data from the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), which provides longitudinal information about the U.S. higher education system, indicates that on average, undergraduate women's academic self-confidence declines over their time at 4-year institutions (Fregoso & Lopez, 2020). HERI is able to make this connection by comparing data gathered from institutions through The Freshman Survey (TFS) and the College Senior Survey (CSS). These surveys collect information ranging from students' political views to values to career aspirations. Colleges and universities across the country implement TFS and CSS to gain information about students' experiences at their institution as well as to compare their data with other schools who also participate.

AU 1st-year women rate themselves lower than their male counterparts in 11 out of 16 self-concept areas despite admissions data that indicates that 1st-year women are more academically accomplished (Apex University, 2013). By their senior year, AU women rate

themselves lower than men rate themselves in 14 out of 16 self-concept areas despite grade point averages that indicate that senior women are more academically successful (Apex University, 2013). It is important to clarify the elements that make up the category of "self-concept." The following CIRP items comprise the category "Abilities and Skills": academic ability, computer skills, drive to achieve, leadership ability, mathematical ability, public speaking ability, self-confidence (intellectual), writing ability, creativity, cooperativeness, emotional health, physical health, self-understanding, self-confidence (social), spirituality, and understanding of others (Apex University, 2013). In 2012, AU's Office of Institutional Research Planning and Assessment convened focus groups to gain more of a narrative around how female students' experience the university to begin to understand the reasons for this decline in academic and intellectual self-perceptions. The focus groups brought together clusters of sophomore and senior women. The focus group facilitators shared the data of declining self-perceptions and invited participants to respond to that data. As Apex University (2013) stated, "Without any prompting from the facilitators, participants immediately connected female students' academic self-concept with the social activities and perceived culture found on the [Apex University] campus" (p. 16). Participants noted the following themes: women face significant social pressure and men hold the power in social settings, women feel a pressure to fit in, which produces a preoccupation with body image, and women felt an overall disrespect for their intelligence (Apex University, 2013). One member stated, "Personally I think my own self-esteem has declined a lot since I came to [AU]. I think it has completely just 100 percent to do with just the culture here" (Apex University, 2013, p. 18). Undergraduate students understand that a difference exists in the way in which men and women experience Apex University and they are pointing to the social culture as

the reason for that difference. However, it is unclear if the social culture and social dynamics could be the result of ingrained institutional sexism.

Women faculty and staff also experience AU differently than men in the same positions. Apex University collects feedback from staff and faculty through a regularly administered Faculty and Staff Experience Survey administered by its Office of Institutional Research and Planning (IRP). Mona Bliss (pseudonym), Assistant Director of IRP, provided data (see Table 3) from the most recent experience survey illustrating the difference between men and women faculty responses (M. Bliss, personal communication, June 22, 2020).

Table 3

Gender Differences in Responses to AU Faculty and Staff Experience Survey

Theme/area	Female faculty response	Male faculty response
Experienced unfair treatment because of gender.	46% responded affirmatively	5% responded affirmatively
The classroom climate for female faculty is at least as good as the classroom climate for male faculty	54% somewhat or strongly disagreed	30% somewhat or strongly disagreed
BC supports faculty members' ability to balance job and personal life	72% responded affirmatively	83% responded affirmatively

Although the above data only contains faculty members' experiences, a 2019 report from the Eos Foundation measured the gap between the administrative positions of power that men hold in higher education versus the positions of power that women hold in higher education in the state where Apex University resides. AU ranked 87th out of the 87 institutions in comprehensive gender leadership rankings (Dubé & Silbert, 2021). The ranking means that AU has the lowest representation of women on leadership teams, boards, and among the institution's

highest paid employees (Dubé & Silbert, 2021). AU also tied for last in the rankings of the number of women represented among the top ten most highly compensated employees at the institution, with zero (Dubé & Silbert, 2021). Based on this information, one could infer that women staff members at AU experience gender discrimination.

Overview of Summit

Summit was introduced as a possible intervention following the report of the longitudinal data and focus group feedback from AU's Office of Institutional Research and Planning in the Fall of 2015. I selected the first group of mentors based on their interest in gender equity issues at the institution as well as their reputation as strong informal mentors to either women students or administrators. The group was not formally trained, however there was an assumption based on their other roles at the institution, that they were well prepared and capable of serving as mentors and leading conversations among small group of undergraduate senior women. During that 1st year together, we built the foundation for the model that we still use today. This includes initial community building within the mentor cohort through monthly lunches during the fall semester, approximately 6 to 7 dinners with the student participants, each of which is followed by a lunch debrief with the mentors. Dinners begin with informal conversation and eating, followed by a formal introduction of the theme of the evening, a reflection, and storytelling delivered by mentors. Finally, we move into small groups where the mentors facilitate discussion about the stories and what students are grappling with based on the theme.

I continue to select each of the mentors for the program and I choose them based on their reputation as strong informal mentors at AU as well as recommendations from student program participants through an end of program assessment. The mentors still do not go through a formal training, rather I build a foundational community during the fall semester leading up to the

program through lunch sessions where mentors get to know each other and develop trust, and where they feel comfortable sharing pieces of their story with the group. There is still an assumption that mentors know how to lead a small group, however we do trouble shoot issues as they emerge. The most significant change we have made to the program has been moving from a yearlong experience with 6–7 dinners spread out over both semesters to a one semester program with 6–7 dinners folded into the spring semester. We made this change because some students were unable to participate during the spring semester because of class conflicts that they did not anticipate when signing up for the program because they had not made their spring class schedule by the time they committed to the program.

Study Participant Recruitment and Selection

This section will provide an overview of the actual research process the I employed. Grounded theory research recommends employing theoretical sampling to enhance data collection practices. Theoretical sampling is the collection of "pertinent data to elaborate and refine categories in your emerging theory" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 192). Such sampling provides an avenue to achieve data saturation, which is essentially the development of an exhaustive list of codes where additional data collection aligns with previously established codes rather than requiring the creation of additional codes (Glazer & Strauss, 1967). For the purposes of this study, I employed theoretical data collection but rather than identify a sample of the population, I invited all Summit mentors from 2015 through 2020 to engage in the project. I proceeded in this way because it is possible for me to interview the full population (23 mentors). I interviewed 19 of the 23 members of the population. I decided not to include mentors from academic year 2020–2021 because the structure of the program changed significantly to accommodate for COVID-19 restrictions. The program moved to a completely virtual format to adhere to university

guidelines, which could have had an impact on the way mentors connected with their groups, the conversations that they had, and the connections that they made. I wanted to avoid including an additional component in my study. Table 4 details the characteristics of the population.

Table 4

Population Characteristics

Category	Number of mentors	Percentage
Position		
Faculty	6	26
Administrator	15	65
Hybrid	2	9
Sphere of influence		
Low: Assistant Director, Associate Director, Assistant Professor	11	48
Medium: Director, Associate Vice President, Associate Professor (with no committee influence)	7	30
High: Vice President, Full Professor, Associate Provost, Associate Professor (with committee influence)	5	22
Number of years in the program		
1 year	6	26
2 years	13	57
3 plus years	4	17
Racial Identity		
White, non-Hispanic	14	61
Black	5	22
Asian	4	17
Current employment status (as of April 2021)		
Employed at the institution	16	70
Not employed at the institution	7	30

Data Collection Methods

Intensive Interviews

My data collection goal was to develop a 'thick' description (Geertz, 1973) that provides detailed and comprehensive information about participants' experiences, thoughts, actions, as well as a rich understanding of the context in which participants are operating (Charmaz, 2014). This type of comprehensive data collection provided me with the information necessary to understand the basic social processes at play and to construct strong, grounded theories that the data substantiated (Charmaz, 2014). To collect such data, I employed intensive interviewing as my primary collection technique. Intensive interviewing is a "gently-guided, one-sided conversation that explores research participants' perspective on their personal experience with the research topic" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 56). Constructivist intensive interviewing centers the participant and considers the participant's verbal response as well as their nonverbal cues (Charmaz, 2014).

Charmaz's (2014) key characteristics of intensive interviewing guided my process. As noted above, I invited participants with rich knowledge of the topic that I explored, the mentors. I asked them to answer open-ended questions to allow for a comprehensive examination of their experiences at Apex University more broadly and within the Summit program, more specifically. I followed these open-ended questions with more exploratory questions to ensure that I provided participants with opportunities to offer comprehensive details of their experiences and perspectives as well as how they interpret and make meaning out of both. These follow-up questions changed throughout the interview process so I returned to participants in a focus group setting to ensure that I provided all participants with the opportunity to answer the same questions that I developed later in the process. Throughout the data collection stage, I reflected

on and began to identify themes in participant responses and revisited participant conversations to ensure that I correctly understood and interpreted what they shared.

There are both strengths and weaknesses to intensive interviewing for grounded theory development. The strengths of the method include the ability of the researcher to be flexible and to pivot or to move in different directions to follow a lead that may uncover important data (Charmaz, 2014). The reciprocal and generative process of intensive interviewing can provide the participant with an opportunity to build connection or to make meaning (Dilley, 2000). It also minimizes power dynamics by positioning both the researcher and participants as knowledge contributors (Charmaz, 2014). In addition to these strengths, intensive interviewing has some limitations. Based on the structure of the process, interviews can be laden with bias (Charmaz, 2014). Researchers can insert their beliefs into interviews either by steering questions in a particular direction or by coopting responses. Interviews are fundamentally retrospective, which critics note may not present a true or full account of participants' experiences. Despite these weaknesses, intensive interviewing aligns well with constructivist grounded theory because like CGT, it is "open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 85). I am confident that I mitigated the weaknesses of this method by attending to my positionality throughout, noting my involvement in the program that I am gathering information about and encouraging participants to be honest about their experiences, and listening for openings to follow up with participants to give them space to provide their full perspectives.

Utilizing elements of the Critical Consciousness instruments discussed in Chapter 2, I created an interview protocol that enabled me to begin to understand participants' Critical Consciousness of gender issues prior to getting involved in Summit as well as ways in which the program may have contributed to their Critical Consciousness development. I have distinguished

pieces of my protocol to represent the three components of Critical Consciousness that I presented earlier: critical reflection/awareness, motivation/agency, and critical action. My goals during each interview were: to understand how aware the mentor was of undergraduate women's experiences at AU prior to joining the Summit program and to understand if she sought out the program as a way to enact change; to understand the level and frequency that she reflects on structural gender inequities at the institution and the ways in which they affect her and/or the broader community of women at AU; and to understand the ways that her awareness, motivations, and actions may have been reinforced or changed based on her involvement in Summit.

Interview Protocol

The valid and reliable quantitative instruments presented in Chapter 2 provide important insight into the ways that I can map questions to connect with each of the three major components of CC: reflection, action, and agency. Diemer et al. (2015) raised the point that there can be variability across the three components of CC, and "a student may be very aware of inequity but feel little agency for addressing it" (p. 810). This insight pushed me to recognize that I need to ensure that my interview protocol probes deeply into each area. In order to elicit information about reflection I created questions such as "When you think about the different environments that you navigate on campus, are you encountering those in a specific way because you are a woman?" Questions such as this provided the participant with an opportunity to demonstrate how they reflect on their experience as a woman both personally and structurally as well as how their gender identity shapes the way they interact with particular environments. I also wanted to understand if participants have agency, if they felt that they have the ability to act and create change. Examples of questions that helped me to unpack this component included:

"Do you see yourself contributing to enacting change? "If so, how?" "If not, what are the barriers that are preventing you from acting?" Finally, I wanted to understand the action element of CC to determine if participants consider the Summit program as a way to combat sexism and gender oppression. I did this by asking questions such as: "Has what you learned from Summit impacted your work outside of the program?" "If so, how?" "Has your approach to your professional role changed at all since your involvement in Summit?" Qualitative research provided me the opportunity to not only answer these questions but also to dig into participant responses if I feel they have additional information that would be helpful to contribute to my understanding of Critical Consciousness development in mentors.

Focus Groups

As noted prior, intensive interviewing is an iterative process that encourages the researcher to revisit participants after their first interview to pose follow up questions, to clarify particular points, and to test out thoughts on emerging ideas (Charmaz, 2014). Ideally, I would have set up multiple follow-up interviews with each participant; however, given their professional stature and subsequent busy schedules, rather than setting up multiple follow up interviews, I assembled participants into one of two follow up focus groups and conducted two individual interviews with participants who could not attend the focus groups. In these groups and interviews, I shared my emerging ideas and invited feedback that I considered as I constructed my theory. I also asked the additional questions that emerged during the initial interview process to those participants who I had interviewed before I revised said questions.

Memo Writing

An integral part of grounded theory data collection and data processing is memo construction. Memos are "narrated records of a theorist's analytic conversations with him/herself

about the research data; as such, they provide particular ways of knowing" (Lempert, 2007, p.247). Memos offer the researcher an informal space to wrestle meaning, try out ideas, clarify processes, and begin to differentiate themes into codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Memos record the iterative thought process of the researcher and bridge the gap between raw data and emergent theory (Lempert, 2007). I engaged in memo writing throughout the data collection and data analysis phases of my research project, not only as a way to make sense of my data but also as a way to understand and mitigate any bias that I may bring into the interview and interpretation processes.

Data Management/Analysis

Through my data collection process, I gathered a lot of information that I needed to organize. After I conducted each interview I transcribed it using Sonix.ai software. Although some data collection methods do not specify when to transcribe interviews, Grounded Theory notes the importance reviewing and wrestling with meanings early on in the collection process, recognizing that doing so may impact future interviews by alerting the researcher to new areas to probe in future interviews (Charmaz, 2014). I reviewed each transcription next to the audio recording to ensure accuracy and to correct any mistakes within the transcription. I stored both the interview recordings and interview transcriptions along with my memos on a secure, password protected server.

Throughout the interview process and upon its completion I worked to analyze my data. Data analysis essentially means making sense of the information that I collected by "moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation" (Merriam, 2009, p. 176). I accomplished this through coding, which provided the foundation for my theory development

(Charmaz, 2014). I began with initial line-by-line coding, which fully immersed me in the data and encouraged me to identify meanings or themes that I could otherwise miss (Charmaz, 2014). These initial themes corresponded with the three overarching components of Critical Consciousness. I then worked to identify data as action codes within those themes, which helped me to avoid coding data with basic labels or assigning preestablished codes to data (Charmaz, 2014). I built a codebook utilizing the program Dedoose to organize my codes and the changes I made to them throughout the coding process (Saldaña, 2016). Initial codes are impermanent, I expected them to change as I deepened my understanding of the data and gathered additional data to verify or disprove my initial impressions.

Following the initial coding I moved into focused coding, during which I explored and evaluated the initial codes. Focused coding requires a constant comparison between the codes and the supporting data (Charmaz, 2014). I employed Charmaz's (2014) focused coding questions to evaluate the strength of my codes:

- What do you find when you compare your initial codes with data?
- In which ways might your initial codes reveal patterns?
- Which of these codes best account for your data?
- Have you raised these codes to focused codes?
- What do your comparisons between codes indicate?
- Do your focused codes reveal gaps in data? (pp. 140–141)

Asking these questions helped me to make changes or adjustments as necessary and to ignore pieces of data that are not relevant to my research questions (Charmaz, 2014). Comparing codes to each other or to other pieces of data also allowed other codes or ideas to emerge.

Constructivist grounded theory does not necessarily require a third level of coding as Charmaz (2014) contends that a researcher can develop a theory utilizing initial and focused coding. Charmaz (2014) has also been reluctant to recommend axial coding specifically because she prefers emergent strategies for understanding data rather than prescribed procedures. Despite her preferences, I employed axial coding as a final level because, as a nascent researcher, I anticipated it would be helpful to have a frame to apply and a process to categorize my codes. Axial coding is the reconstruction of the focused codes into larger categories and the identification of interactions or links between those categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). After axial coding I built an initial model to visually represent participants' progression through Freire's components of Critical Consciousness. In order to ensure that I was accurately interpreting and representing participants' experiences I presented a draft of the model to groups of participants through focus groups. I explained the model, the individual codes, and the overarching theory and invited participants to respond and react. Participants provided thoughtful feedback and further examples of their experiences in Summit that I was able to code and use to support and further build out the grounded theory and model. Throughout this process I remained attentive to my positionality and the ways in which my experiences and biases impacted my code construction (Charmaz, 2014).

Trustworthiness

I worked to ensure validity and rigor in my data analysis in three specific ways: first, I continually checked in with my positionality and potential biases, second, I member checked my interview transcripts, and finally, I tested my initial codes and preliminary ideas with study participants through focus groups (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given I play a central role in the Summit program, it was critical that I minimized the possibility that my experiences of the

program, my investment in the program's success, or my own personal biases occupy a central role in my project. I used reflection and memo writing as tools to explore, assess, and mitigate my biases during both the data collection and data analysis phases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I member checked the data by inviting participants to review the transcript of their interview for accuracy and clarity, see Appendix C (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). I made alterations based on their feedback. Finally, I gathered participants in focus groups to assess how well my codes and the theory that I started to construct represents their experiences in Summit (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, I conducted two follow-up interviews with participants who were unable to attend the focus groups because of scheduling conflicts. Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended engaging in at least two validation strategies, which I believe provided a strong foundation to establish trustworthiness in my study.

Limitations

There are three primary limitations to this study: positionality, scope, and generalizability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As discussed earlier, I have a multidimensional relationship with the institution where I am conducting my research. The complexity of the different roles I play at the institution and within the program that I am studying had the potential to impact the way that I gathered or interpreted my data. It also could have impacted how my participants answered my interview questions or what they chose to share with me. In order to minimize these impacts or conflicts I engaged in memoing to identify and mitigate any possible biases and I encouraged my participants to share their true experiences with the program and not to share what they believe I wanted to hear (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). I also only studied one particular program at one particular institution, which limits the scope and the generalizability of my work (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Despite these limitations, I believe important information can be gathered that could

help other institutions even if not completely applicable. As indicated in the literature review portion of Chapter 2, many institutions prescribe mentoring as a means to mitigate negative outcomes for women students in a variety of area; therefore, it is important to understand ways that mentorship programs can help address institutional marginalization beyond individual mentoring relationships.

Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

Introduction

This study employed a qualitative approach to examine participants' perceptions of the ways in which their involvement in the Summit mentorship program at Apex University (AU) impacted their Critical Consciousness of institutionalized sexism. As discussed in Chapter 3, participants' interview transcripts were coded and the codes were then used as scaffolding for a theoretical model that illustrates the ways in which the awareness gained, relationships cultivated, and experiences shared in the program contributed to subsequent motivation, agency, and action to mitigate sexism at the institution. This model is shared in Chapter 5, whereas this chapter first provides an overview of how participants initially joined the Summit program, briefly recaps the components of Critical Consciousness, and finally delivers an in-depth exploration of the dominant themes that emerged from the interviews and were confirmed in member checking and focus groups. To provide additional context around participants' responses shared throughout this chapter, Table 5: *Participant Characteristics* offers general information about participants' positions and locations at the institution. I made the decision not to use pseudonyms and not to provide additional identifying information about my participants because they did not feel safe engaging in the study if their identities could be uncovered.

Table 5

Participant Characteristics

Identifier	Role: Administrator, Faculty, Hybrid	Level: Senior, Midlevel, Junior
Participant 1	Administrator	Junior
Participant 2	Faculty	Junior
Participant 3	Administrator	Junior
Participant 4	Administrator	Senior
Participant 5	Administrator	Senior
Participant 6	Hybrid	Senior
Participant 7	Hybrid	Midlevel
Participant 8	Administrator	Junior
Participant 9	Faculty	Senior
Participant 10	Administrator	Senior
Participant 11	Faculty	Midlevel
Participant 12	Administrator	Midlevel
Participant 13	Faculty	Midlevel
Participant 14	Hybrid	Midlevel
Participant 15	Administrator	Midlevel
Participant 16	Administrator	Junior
Participant 17	Administrator	Midlevel
Participant 18	Administrator	Senior
Participant 19	Administrator	Midlevel

Preparticipation Foundational Awareness of Undergraduate Women's Experiences

Many participants interviewed for this study discussed their awareness of undergraduate women's experiences of Apex University and the challenges those students faced as a result of their identity as women at the institution. Participants held this awareness prior to getting involved in Summit and noted their knowledge of the trend of AU undergraduate women graduating with lower self-esteem than when they enter the institution motivated them to get involved in Summit. They developed their understanding of this trend from one or a combination of the following sources: a study that was released by Apex University's Institutional Research Office, their own experiences interacting with undergraduate women, and learning from colleagues who had significant interactions with undergraduate women and who understood the student culture of AU. The forthcoming paragraphs detail each of these avenues of awareness development.

As noted in Chapter 3, the report that Apex University's Institutional Research Office produced was an overview and explanation of data collected by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI). The report compared student responses to *The Freshman Survey* and the *College Senior Surveys* and 1st-year undergraduate women at AU rated themselves lower than their male counterparts in 68% of the academic self-concept questions despite entering AU more academically accomplished than undergraduate men (Apex University, 2013). Undergraduate senior women at AU then rated themselves lower than their male counterparts on 87% of those same questions despite earning higher grade-point averages (GPAs) and being more involved in extracurricular activities (Apex University, 2013). Participant 10 shared how upset she was to learn this information:

> The data that we saw that spoke to women‘s self-perceptions during their time at [AU] and particularly sort of the downward trend of lowering of self-confidence and how they rated themselves over the course of the time at [AU]. I think for many of us [women faculty and staff] that was really upsetting. . . . As one of the few women in a senior leadership role, that was really upsetting. And knowing that our women, our female students, our undergrads were coming in with stronger academic backgrounds than male students.

Participant 1 explained her perception of that study and the impact that it had on her decision to join Summit:

> I think we talked so much at that time, in those years, about the self-esteem study and the self-esteem problem. And so, at the time of joining [Summit], I was on board, no one needed to convince me of the self-esteem problem. I knew.

Other mentors noted they came to see and to understand this difference in undergraduate women’s experiences of AU compared to undergraduate men’s experiences through their daily interactions with students, such as Participant 2:

> In the advising and in the mentoring that I was doing in my classes and my courses, in speaking to some of the junior and senior women, it was very clear that there was a trend on campus where they’d [undergraduate women] get to junior, senior year and feel like they didn’t know what was next or there was a lot of uncertainty or they felt like they weren‘t as confident as they were when they came in. And that was definitely something I was observing with some of my students. And so, I thought it was such an important, unfortunate pattern, especially because, like when you’re a senior in college, that should

> be the time that you're feeling most excited and most motivated and capable of being able to do things.

Participant 2 described not only her recognition of the trend reported through the institutional research office but also her belief that quite the opposite should be occurring for undergraduate senior women; they should be energized and inspired by the time they are seniors and such empowerment should help launch them confidently into the next phase of their lives.

Participant 11 explained she learned about the trend from a presentation delivered by some of her colleagues on the student affairs side of the institution. She shared her feelings of astonishment and disbelief upon learning about the data. She explained she was not the only one who was distressed about it:

> Somebody from student affairs came in and just told us the truth about the self-esteem issues for women and girls, concerns about sexual violence on campus, alcohol usage, that kind of thing. And by the time that conversation was over, I mean, I would say that everybody was just white knuckled, right? It was, it was shocking.

Although participants learned about undergraduate women's negative experiences at Apex University through different avenues, all agreed the trend was an issue. Participants described the trend of declining self-esteem of under graduate women as: "Really upsetting!" "a very unfortunate pattern," "shocking!" One participant noted, "We were all totally freaked out." It is clear the trend of declining self-esteem among undergraduate women had an impact on women faculty and staff at the institution.

After learning about the trend, participants examined cultural discrepancies leading to this decline and Participant 10 noted the following:

> So, it was how they were living elements of the [AU] culture that I think are double edged—this wonderful spirit, the sense of a collective mission, but [only] if you fit a particular mold. And that was for women: thin, beautiful, high achieving, heads of all organizations. And if you didn't fit that mold or you fell short in any way, how awful you felt and how much part of the [AU] culture was the mask, what you needed to carry forward, that you needed to be happy and shiny all the time.

Participant 10 captured the various ways the social and institutional cultures at Apex University create unrealistic and unachievable expectations of undergraduate women that inevitably negatively impact their self-esteem. This shared awareness led all participants to seek out ways to mitigate this decline in sense of self for undergraduate women.

Participants' Motivation to Become Involved in Summit

As a result of their understanding of undergraduate women's experiences at Apex University and the detrimental effect the culture has on undergraduate women's sense of self at such a critical time in their development, participants explained they were motivated to improve undergraduate women's experiences and joined Summit to as a way to actively contribute to that improvement. Participants discussed their different motivations that fell into one of the following four categories: (a) desire to be a part of something that would improve undergraduate women's experiences, (b) wanting to replicate their own mentorship experiences or provide opportunities that were not available to them, (c) motivation to model strong women in positions of leadership for undergraduate women, and (d) the desire to learn more about undergraduate women's lives and experiences in hopes of determining ways to improve those experiences. The following paragraphs detail each of these four classifications of responses.

Many participants discussed their desire to be a positive presence for undergraduate women in order to improve their experiences at AU. Participants felt they were well positioned as adults at the institution to support and to challenge undergraduate women to identify and to capitalize on their strengths. Participant 2 discussed her goal of pushing undergraduate women to recognize and to harness their own power, noting, "So, I think one of my primary goals was really to be able to motivate, inspire young women to go out and do what it is that they really wanted to do and to also be authentic to themselves." She explained how she sought to be a consistent affirming presence but also one who pushed undergraduate women to recognize and celebrate their success thus far. Participant 13 was motivated to enter more deeply into the lives of undergraduate women:

> And so, I was like, okay, maybe what I need to accomplish is to love these 10 women [in my Summit group], this very focused group of people. I need to love them well and let them know that they are valued or that they're more than whatever the culture is telling them.

The majority of participants discussed their own callings to serve, support, inspire, and love undergraduate women in order to improve their outcomes at AU.

Participants were also motivated by the presence or absence of mentorship in their own lives. A number of mentors wanted to provide mentorship experiences for these undergraduate women that strong women had given to them at different points in their development. Participant 11 described the benefits of having mentors in her life, particularly at the beginning of her career, and her subsequent commitment to serve others in the same way:

> When I was a young woman, a number of mentors really showed up for me. . . . And through that experience, I just came to understand how transformative it can be to have

> mentors who are willing to engage in your life. And I made a commitment to myself pretty early on that when I had the opportunity to be one, I would be one as well as I could as often as I could.

Although this sentiment illustrates some participants were encouraged to mentor others because of their positive experiences with mentors earlier in their development, this was not the case for all participants.

Others who did not have these types of mentoring experiences in their own lives wanted to fill the gap for these undergraduate women. Participant 9 discussed the absence of a mentor in her life and her desire to fill that void for undergraduate women: "[Summit] resonated with me because of my experience without a female mentor. . . . And when I began to think about it, I realized that in my entire undergrad and graduate [career] . . . I never had a woman professor." Although participants had different experiences with mentors in their own lives, the outcome was similar; they felt called to mentor younger women.

Participants were also influenced by their recognition of the need to model women's leadership. They felt strongly that giving their time to undergraduate women and modeling strong leadership would have an important impact. Participant 5 shared:

> One [motivation] was the hierarchy of Apex University is male, right, and it became very clear to me quickly on that there were very few women in positions of leadership. And so, I thought this is really important for college women today to see women in roles of leadership and to have an opportunity to engage with them in a variety of ways. And so, I thought I kind of had a responsibility as one of those few women to engage in that way.

She clearly understood her positionality on campus as one of very few women leaders and the responsibility she held to be visible to younger women to show them they were capable of serving in high positions.

Finally, participants were motivated to get involved by their desires to learn more about undergraduate women's experiences in order to be in a better position to help them outside the actual mentorship program. This motivation was prevalent among participants who were in leadership roles where they did not interact with students regularly, or only had the opportunity to interact with a narrow portion of the undergraduate population. Participant 6 wanted to understand what undergraduate women were thinking and how they were processing their experiences at AU: "I was curious about where their heads were . . . because I didn't have that much contact with undergrads." Participant 2 worked in a professional school on campus and as a result only interacted with a very narrow slice of the undergraduate population. She, like other participants in similar situations, was motivated to engage in a program that provided her with an opportunity to gain insight into a larger population of the student body, which would expand her understanding of the undergraduate student experience at AU. She shared:

> I definitely think the motivation was twofold. One, I felt a little bit like I was in my own sort of zone in [area] and I wasn't really being exposed to the student body. And so, this would give me a really good opportunity to meet other women across campus and especially students across campus and expand, sort of expand the student body that I was interacting with.

Participant 17 also expressed a desire to enter into undergraduate women's lives to understand their experiences better. She felt more nuanced insight into the life of an undergraduate woman at AU would provide her with the information she needed to help improve those experiences:

> I wanted to learn about these young women and learn about what sort of was on their minds, what kept them up at night, what worried them, connect them to each other, allow them to have a space to be vulnerable because there's not a ton of those spaces at [AU]. So just really, I just wanted to understand their lives and to be a facilitator for that more than anything.

Although all participants were motivated to do something based on their awareness of the issue of undergraduate women's experiences at AU, not all were completely confident in their ability to make a difference. Participant 18 vulnerably shared:

> What I wanted to accomplish is being able to have a positive impact on people. I didn't know what that impact would look like, and I was nervous about it because I felt like a fraud. So, I was just nervous, like, what am I going to be able to pour into their lives? I don't really have much to say.

Participant 18's concerns illustrated that the mentors were not entirely secure in who they were as leaders at the institution and questioned their abilities to change the trajectory of undergraduate women's paths at AU. Despite this insecurity, all participants sought to intervene and disrupt problematic trends negatively impacting AU women undergraduates.

Involvement in Summit as an Action to Improve Undergraduate Women's Experiences

As evidenced above, participants were aware of undergraduate women's inequitable and unjust experiences at AU and were motivated to do something to address said inequity. This section details how participants saw their involvement in the Summit program as a concrete action to address the oppression of undergraduate women at AU. Participant 10 provided an overview of ways she saw her involvement in the Summit program address the concerning trend:

> One of my major reasons for participating was knowing that there was a dire need to figure out a way to go at that issue and just go at it in a personal way not just a policy way, which we have been talking about, but really getting to know students and supporting their journey and the seniors as they were in that vulnerable transition time in their lives.

Participant 10 believed the Summit program could improve undergraduate women's experience at AU through personal connection with adult women mentors who could support them and who they could learn from. She hoped the Summit program was a transformative experience that would help launch more confident undergraduate women into the next step of their life journey. Participant 1 understood her involvement in Summit as directly connected to the initial data and an intervention to address that troubling trend of declining self-esteem, noting, "I thought [Summit] was a great idea, you know, something that at the time was sorely needed on our campus with everything that was clear about women's declining self-esteem at that time." Participant 15 viewed Summit in the same way:

> I heard about it . . . and I was also thrilled to hear that [AU] was doing something with the data that they had collected that women were coming in with more confidence than when they were leaving. And so that was something very intriguing to me.

Participant 19 explained her involvement in Summit as her way to challenge the problematic social culture at AU: "The reason that I came into [Summit] is if there's some small part that I can play in making this better for students, I want to be a part of that." These quotes illustrate strong commonalities between participants' reasons for joining the Summit program.

The prior section provides a very basic foundation of participants' involvement in the Summit program. To summarize and simplify, participants became aware of the declining sense

of self of undergraduate women at AU and felt called to improve this troubling trend, which led to their involvement in the Summit program as mentors to undergraduate women. Participants were not asked about other actions they took to address the self-esteem trend, as this study specifically focused on their involvement in Summit. This is just the starting point for this study; the in-depth, complex manifestation of Critical Consciousness emerged for participants within the work they did through the Summit program and what they came to learn about themselves, their own oppression at the institution, and the ways they could and could not address it.

Mentors Critical Consciousness Development

As discussed in Chapter 2, Brazilian philosopher Freire (1970) developed the idea of Critical Consciousness as a tool to liberate the oppressed. Freire argued marginalized groups will not question or challenge their positions in society unless they become aware they are victims of a larger system and their oppression is not individualized nor inevitable; rather it is systemic (Freire, 1970). Once those who are oppressed gain this awareness they develop a sense of agency or a motivation to change their position in society and then they act to carry out that change (Freire, 1970). This study identified participants possessed a foundational awareness of undergraduate women's inequitable experiences at AU, which motivated them to join the Summit program as mentors. Through their subsequent involvement in the Summit program participants developed a broader awareness of institutional subjugation of women at Apex University and discovered a much larger system that was marginalizing all women, including themselves. Participants explained their awareness of this institutionalized sexism motivated them to act to mitigate the inequity for not only undergraduate women but for themselves and for all women at the institution.

Awareness

Participants gained three layers or aspects of awareness of institutionalized sexism as a result of their involvement in Summit: awareness of undergraduate women's experiences, awareness of their own personal experiences as administrators and faculty, and awareness of women's experiences as a gender regardless of position/affiliation at the institution. This section details each of these layers.

Awareness of Undergraduate Women Experiences

As noted earlier, participants were very aware of data that illustrated the trend of the declining sense of self of undergraduate women at AU between their freshman year and their senior year, but the Summit program provided them with a narrative to attach to that data. The stories undergraduate women shared in the small group conversations each participant led during Summit dinners provided participants with concrete examples of how undergraduate women were experiencing AU differently and more negatively than men. Participant 6 explained, "So that was interesting to me that things that I knew about the undergraduate experience were really borne out at that table when we were meeting." She also explained that undergraduate women shared:

> One isn't just a student at [Apex University]. If one is a student at [AU], one is a woman student at [AU]. That's a particular signifier in the student experience . . . that the kind of drip, drip, drip of the fact that you walk across campus as a woman student, not just as a student.

Through conversations with her mentees, Participant 6 became more aware of the specific ways undergraduate women experienced AU that had a direct impact on their self-esteem. This

deepened her understanding as well as her compassion for undergraduate women in a way just viewing data from the original report did not.

Participant 17 also felt the theoretical data that motivated her to join Summit came to life through her conversations with her students in Summit:

> [Summit] kind of confirmed things that I already knew. But when you are able to have those conversations, it just brings some of the things that you suspect to life. So, I think that that is definitely, definitely the case.

Participant 2 also came to understand the undergraduate women's experience through her involvement in Summit, stating, "And there were a number of things that happened in [Summit] groups or as a result of [Summit] groups that I think made me much more aware of the difficulty of being a woman at [Apex University]." Participant 11 shared the toll the AU culture takes on undergraduate women:

> So, the first time I met all of the young women at our table together, more than half of them had either thought about or pursued transfer, and that was huge. That was one specific conversation I remember where I thought, oh, my God, we are failing right now.

Although many participants found it difficult to learn about these experiences, some found it helpful and motivating, such as Participant 14:

> There were things that I thought I knew about being a woman, a female student, at [AU] from that big report that came out about confidence and that we were all totally freaked out about. But, once I started talking to these groups of students nuances about what that really meant came forward for me, which was really helpful.

Participants found these insights from undergraduate women helpful because they could begin to untangle different cultural factors most affecting undergraduate women, which could eventually

lead to mitigating those factors. These factors included: social culture, academic environment, and an overall lack of mentors for undergraduate women, which I will unpack in the following subsections.

The Social Culture. Participants shared students in Summit described specific ways they experienced the social culture of AU as women. Participant 17 explained her understanding of the social culture's impact on undergraduate women:

> So, just the students describing the social pressure at [AU], the party scene, the gendered kind of approach hierarchies that were at the center of a lot of vulnerability with the women around appearance and sort of trying to fit in, but not really wanting to be that person who wants to fit in.

Participant 8 also discussed the pressures undergraduate women felt to succeed at AU and tied in the intersection between gender and racial marginalization in the social culture:

> There was a really intense pressure to look a particular way to have a particular type of body. I don't know that any overt body shaming was happening, but I know that that was a big part of the culture was staying fit and being that more idealized version of what they thought was beautiful. And at the same time, there were racial issues happening.

Participant 5 also noted the intersection of race and gender in oppression at AU: "I also think in conversations with students, so many young women feel marginalized and whether that's because of gender identity . . . [and] if you add race and ethnicity to that, that's a whole other piece."

Participant 5 compared undergraduate women's experience to undergraduate men's experiences at the institution:

> It's a tough place for young women. I don't think it's a tough place for young men, a completely different experience. Men are empowered at every level of the institution. And it's not the case for women, I'm talking about students.

Participant 3 also shared this same sentiment, noting, "Whether it's true or not—a lot of the mentees feeling like they're just in this race to try and be at baseline when their male counterparts are killing it." It was clear participants developed a deeper understanding of the differences in experiences for undergraduate men and women at AU.

The power differential undergraduate men hold at AU based on their gender manifests itself in problematic ways. Participant 3 discussed how she witnessed this come to fruition in interactions between men and women undergraduate students about future success:

> Some mentees talked about the way male students talk about how successful they are as males in this narrative, kind of like, "Oh, what are you going to do? It doesn't really matter. You're a woman." So, whether it's overt or not, this sense of continued messaging of what they're worth.

Participant 9 explained ways this power differential manifests in how men treat women and the subsequent effect of this treatment on women's self-esteem:

> I remember the very first [Summit], having a discussion at our table and . . . the women were telling me about how they were harassed verbally, which they didn't feel was reportable or it wasn't worth going through . . . they would be just innocently walking down the street, minding their own business and [AU] guys would be hanging out the windows, catcalling or worse, commenting on their shape or their weight or their hair in derogatory ways . . . you could tell it had an effect on them. You could tell that it was emotionally very difficult for them just telling the story.

Participant 2 shared a similar story about a student seeking out help from her following an experience of sexual violence perpetrated at AU and how much insight she gained about the undergraduate women's experience by journeying with that student through her healing process. She noted, "And I think without [Summit], I'm not sure that I would have had that personal insight into some of these situations." Undergraduate women carried these experiences with them and they impacted the way they moved through Apex University. Participant 3 explained that effect:

> It became very evident that many of the mentees, the women, the seniors, have experienced . . . feeling less than or less of a voice, maybe much more quiet because of the environment they are in or insecure when it came to membership. . . . I believe that that's very gender based.

It was clear participants acquired a much deeper understanding of the negative impact of the AU social culture on undergraduate women through their involvement in Summit.

The Academic Environment. Participants learned from students in Summit about ways the classroom environment is gendered and, in some cases, marginalizing for undergraduate women. Participant 16 was surprised by her Summit mentees' accounts of being dismissed or invisibilized in classes because they were women:

> They felt like they were not called on in class or felt that when they were called on and had an idea or had a thought, it was not necessarily fully acknowledged, but then a male counterpart would say the same thing and they would be praised for their idea or their comment.

The awareness of gender-based experiences in the classroom impacted how Participant 14 thought about women's actions in the classroom and her subsequent responsibility to create an equitable academic environment as a professor:

> I think prior to [Summit], I thought, well, in the classroom, women don't like to talk as much, and I need to make sure that they're getting enough space to talk. And I also need to deal with the guys who come into my class who are like, "Oh, you know, this bitch is teaching me [discipline] and but I studied [discipline] at my…high school, and I know." So, I was always sort of dealing with those guys and then trying to make space for women to talk because that was sort of what I knew from the research was that women don't feel that they have a voice in class. After [Summit] it became much more…complicated because I became more aware of women in my classes, sort of what they were working through in a year. It's suddenly now I see sort of what they, but also the men, are really going what developmental stages they're going through, not only intellectually, emotionally and spiritually, which I was very aware of and very intentional about.

Participant 14 is describing the intersection and overlap between social culture and classroom culture at AU, which illustrates and underscores ways a more nuanced understanding of undergraduate women's experiences affected participants.

Lack of Mentors. Participants realized through their involvement mentoring undergraduate women in Summit these students did not have women mentors on campus. This became clear based on mentees reaching out to participants with personal questions or intimate problems after meeting them just once or twice. Participant 11 noted:

> The questions that the young women would come to me with, the things that they wanted to talk about were so wide ranging and it was so clear that they had no one else to talk to about this. So, we might talk about careers, we might talk about things, we might talk about sex, we might talk about faith. We might talk about an interview, you know, but it was equally likely that we might be talking about any of those things when they would come to see me. And invariably what you would hear is that, "We don't really have anyone else to talk to about this."

Participant 11 and other participants expected undergraduate seniors would have had other adult mentors on campus to wrestle with these issues. After having one of her mentees reach out to her with a particularly personal problem, Participant 5 was surprised the student did not have another trusted resource:

> I would have expected at that point that there would have been other adults at the university that she had known well and that she would have gone to for a resource. And that disappointed me with the institution—that we hadn't done a better job of connecting.

Many participants were surprised by this absence of mentorship, particularly because these students had been at AU for more than 3 years at the point when they joined Summit; however, participants were grateful Summit provided students with a space where they could access strong mentors. Participant 5 expressed this hope, noting, "It showed me they were looking for people to trust and by the fact that we were in the program showed that they could trust us. And I value that." Participants were not intimidated by the mentees' hunger to connect, to learn from, and to be mentored by them.

Awareness of Commonalities of Experience and Awareness of Institutional Sexism

Through participation in the Summit program, women examined their own experiences and environments in a trusting atmosphere through deep and honest conversations. Through these conversations with other mentors they started to recognize the commonalities in their experiences regardless of the position they held or the department where they worked. This recognition provided them with validation they were not the only ones experiencing gender oppression. It also led them to connect the dots between their personal experiences and undergraduate women's experiences and determine they were all being victimized by broad, institutionalized subjugation of women. The Summit program provided these participants with the fundamental element they needed to make these important connections: a safe community to share their own stories.

Backdrop for Mentor Development of Critical Consciousness. Summit mentors would not have been able to develop their understanding of systemic institutional subjugation without digging into their personal experiences, connecting those experiences to the experiences of others within the Summit program, and recognizing there were larger systems at play keeping them from gaining power, influence, and status as faculty and administrators at the institution.

Participants quickly understood Summit to be a counterpoint to the patriarchal culture of AU. The community of mentors in Summit and the regular gatherings of that community created a safety net for participants they had not experienced in other spaces at AU. Where the broader culture of AU was male dominated and predicated on rigid hierarchy where women were not trusted to hold power, Summit was a communal organization where trust was foundational, vulnerability was seen as strength, title and level did not matter, and mentors were encouraged to bring their whole selves. Women who had been at AU the longest in the group took the lead and modeled vulnerability and trust in the group at the initial lunch meetings, setting this foundation.

As one of those women, Participant 6 shared her actions were a result of where she was in her career at the time of joining Summit:

> I was somewhat untouchable and I had done everything in my career that I was going to do. . . . I had nothing to lose. And I also felt strongly that somebody in my role needed to speak these things, and especially in the [Summit] program, if we weren't going to be honest with one another, what was the point exactly? If the mentors couldn't be real themselves to the mentees, how could we expect the mentees to speak to us truthfully and honestly? The program wouldn't have been as effective, wouldn't have been effective at all, unless people could speak the truth in a protected environment, a somewhat protected environment. We can trust one another in ways that we might not always be able to trust everyone.

Other participants leaned into the culture Participant 6 helped to ignite in the Summit lunches. Participant 10 shared how much she appreciated the depth of conversation and the honesty of all around the table:

> There was such safe space around that room that the conversations that happened in that in that one-hour lunch were far deeper and far, far more honest than any other setting that I had at [AU]. So, it really became a place where people would even store up something they wanted to share and would use that room as a way of talking it through.

Participant 3 echoed this feeling and explained the rarity of a space where participants could be truly honest, noting, "I don't feel like anyone ever held back and I don't think it is ever going to happen again where I would be in a space like that, honestly." Participant 9 also commented on the uniqueness of a space on campus where she felt safe to share experiences and the phenomenon that the more open people were the more they invited others to do the same:

> It was the demeanor. It was the ambiance. We're here for this reason. . . . This is a spot where you can say things. And then I think everybody reinforced it because they did go out on a limb and say things then that made you braver to say what you want to say and what's in your mind, but you would never say in, for example, your own department, never. You would just keep that locked up in the vault and all of a sudden, we were having these conversations. We're able to express those things and so things came out that I think a lot of us were reluctant to say ever anywhere. . . . And so, I think this was a space where you could do that and it was like a relief and a release in a lot of ways so and I think we encouraged it in one another.

Participant 16 shared her appreciation for the collaborative and nonhierarchical structure of the Summit program:

> I feel like it's just so cool to be in a room with people from across the university at various levels and having our titles not matter. . . . And in terms of conversation, it felt like we were peers. And I think that was not something I had felt before. . . . This was a space where we could shed some of that and just talk about our experience in a way that was very authentic and in raw in a way that I think I didn't expect.

The flat structure allowed for Summit mentors to feel important and that they mattered regardless of their position titles, location at the institution, or gender identity.

Participant 11 noted how much she and other participants needed a space like this on campus, for their own wellbeing and development:

> I was relatively unfamiliar with the idea and the concept of having a community of women at work where I was both free to identify as a member of that community and where I could lean into my own gender identity as part of my presence there, not in a

> defensive way. It was freeing. It filled my cup. It recharged my batteries. It made me feel loved and supported.

She also shared she was surprised when she realized how much she needed a space like Summit, stating, “It took me a back in the sense of, oh, shit, do these women need this? And don’t I too?! Wow. I don‘t think I realized how thirsty we were all until we got a drink of water.” Participant 13 echoed this sentiment, explaining Summit provided a place she felt cared for on a campus where she typically felt exploited and underappreciated:

> I think I thought about myself differently. It made [AU] so much more enjoyable for me. . . . As I keep telling my students, you create communities of care. Right? And that’s what helps you sustain no matter where you are. And you need those. Right? [Summit] gave me another circle like that . . . it gave me another circle of care that was so important in my ability to survive and thrive there [AU].

This environment created the necessary foundation for women to be honest about their experiences. By sharing their truth, mentors began to see they were enduring institutionalized oppression rather than individualized marginalization.

Impact of Shared Stories on Awareness. Participants’ involvement in the Summit program led them to begin to identify the systemic nature of the subjugation of women at AU. Through the storytelling and truth telling they engaged in, they came to understand their personal experiences as women at AU were not unique. Participant 19 explained:

> And then I feel like in those more personal settings and private meetings, we felt like it was a safe space to talk about how we feel about something. And you didn’t feel like anything that you said was necessarily going to go anywhere. That’s very therapeutic and

> you suddenly are like, "Oh, I thought it was just me, right?" I didn't understand other people felt this way.

This recognition that other women also experienced marginalization because they were women was foundational for their subsequent awareness of the ways institutional structures denied women power and influence at the institution.

Participants were particularly surprised those in higher positions within the administration also felt the effects of gender inequity. Participant 13 shared:

> I was like, oh wow. Learning that [Participant 6] and [Participant 10] felt oppressed . . . was very illuminating for me to see the extent to which they also were experiencing gender inequity. I think it's even more acute. You're seeing it from the perspective of the administrators is really eye-opening for me.

This realization brought down imaginary walls between faculty members and administrators; as Participant 9 explained:

> There is a "bro" network at [AU], you know, and you don't feel it so much as a faculty member, but you feel it in administration. And I was shocked to . . . hear that in a nice academic setting in a Catholic school with these values, that women were purposely being excluded from the conversation. Although there was a representation of women making decisions. At the same time, there was a back room that women were excluded from. And I found that so appalling. I appreciate now that I'm sensitized to it and had it not been for our lunches and our very candid conversations that we were able to have with one another.

Participants also began to tie together different circumstances and trends that occurred at the institution and to identify them as systemic inequities. Participant 18 shared her

understanding of promotional inequities, noting, "[AU] just doesn't promote women. They just don't seem to care about females . . . in terms of high level, high ranking positions, I learned that [AU] does not care, and that's just what it is." Participant 2 gained an understanding of ways AU systems kept women out of positions of power at the institution:

> I felt like a lot of our conversations around the mentor table revolved also around the lack of women in leadership in particular. And I remember never actually explicitly thinking about that all that much until I was at a table with multiple women leaders who felt like they were always the only one at the table, and I think I became much more aware of the structural issues at the institution through these discussions. Not to say that I was completely naïve before, but I just didn't think that it necessarily always affected me. But I could really through these conversations, I realized that it had a direct impact on me, too.

For some participants, there was a sense of solidarity associated with the recognition their experiences of gender oppression were tied to larger systems. Participant 17 explained her recognition that she was not the only one who was marginalized because she was a woman was simultaneously affirming and cause for despair. Participant 16 explained how she began to lose some hope in AU because of her understanding of ways she was marginalized simply because she was a woman:

> I think it made me realize that some of my experiences were not isolated and that others who, you know, were way above me, in terms of position, pay grade everything and who've been here for a long time and have a lot of experience were experiencing similar things . . . knowing that it's more common, I think made me more frustrated, if that makes sense.

Overall, this layer of awareness fueled a recognition of institutional sexism affecting all women at AU regardless of position or level. Participant 6 explained, "The fact that my undergrads had a somewhat similar experience to mine, confirmed what I believed about women in [AU], that we were always a little bit different." Other participants noted women seem to leave the institution, perhaps because of these circumstances. Participant 12 indicated, "I see females—powerful, talented females come and go, and not too long ago, they went in great droves at the highest levels of the organization. . . . It's a much more challenging place for a female to be successful." This recognition prompted Participant 11 to question whether women could succeed at AU:

> There was a moment, and I can't tell you exactly when that moment was, but there was a moment of realization that [AU] was not an institution where women could, what's the word I'm looking for? Rise as high as they were capable of and that there was a set of dreams that I might have for myself, even if they were not completely well defined, etc., but a set of: "Well, of course, the next thing would be this and the next thing would be this. And if I really wanted to persist . . ." And there was a moment where I realized, Oh, my God, that is never going to be me. This is not an institution where women after a certain point can do X.

In summary, participants' involvement in the Summit program facilitated an accumulation of knowledge or awareness of institutionalized gendered oppression: (a) awareness of undergraduate women's experiences, (b) awareness of their own experience as administrators and faculty, and (c) awareness of women's experiences as a whole regardless of position/affiliation at the institution. The awareness participants developed from their involvement in Summit helped them understand the systemic nature of the marginalization of

women as a whole at AU. As Freire (1970) explained, the oppressed begin to question and push back against systems and institutions when they come to understand their marginalization as systemic rather than inevitable. Participants began to understand their experiences and positions as women at AU as the result of systemic oppression. This awareness created a foundation for the additional components of Critical Consciousness, agency/motivation and action, which I unpack in the next section.

Agency/Motivation and Action

Once participants recognized the experiences of both undergraduate women and women more broadly across the institution were the product of institutionalized sexism at AU, they were motivated to assess their agency or power to act to mitigate or to combat this oppression. They embedded themselves in the problem of gender oppression in order to begin to deconstruct what they previously understood as truth in regard to organization of power at the institution. This section details participants' motivation and ability to challenge and change structural aspects of the institution that contribute to oppression of women, to alter and enhance ways they interact with undergraduate women on a personal level, and to evaluate their own futures at the institution. It also explains the subsequent action the mentors took as a result of their motivation, within the bounds of the agency they held to make such change.

This is not to say everything the mentors were motivated to do actually came to fruition in concrete actions. The actions that did come to fruition fell under two different categories: actions directly impacting undergraduate women at AU and those indirectly impacting women's experiences more broadly at the institution, including the mentors' own experiences. The components of agency/motivation and action to improve undergraduate women's experiences participants reported were deeply intertwined. During interviews, participants shared their

experiences in retrospect. Sharing in retrospect made it difficult to pull these components apart because participants were motivated *to* do something and when they discussed that purpose it was tightly connected with what they actually did. This is different from the way participants discussed their agency/motivation and action following their awareness of the institutional subjugation of women they became aware of because of their involvement in Summit. Participants sought to improve women's experiences more generally at AU and they qualified their motivation with tangible reasons—they were motivated *by* the safety of the Summit community and *by* each other's activism. This distinction made it easier to separate the agency/motivation and action components of Critical Consciousness, which justifies differences in organization of the following sections.

Agency/Motivation and Action to Improve Undergraduate Women's Experiences

Participants expressed they were motivated in numerous ways by their increased awareness of undergraduate women's negative experiences of AU based on their gender identity and felt they had the agency to make particular changes within their spheres of influence beyond the Summit program. Their motivations fell into two areas: motivation to improve undergraduate women's academic experiences in the classroom and motivation to change how they interact with undergraduate women. They sought to change how they interacted with undergraduate women in order to create more personal and intimate relationships so they could better understand undergraduate women's experiences and provide support to improve those experiences. These motivations translated into corresponding actions. Participants reported centering, supporting, and protecting women within the classroom or learning environment that they controlled and cultivating relationships with undergraduate women by increasing their own visibility on campus, sharing more of their personal story with undergraduate women, and

speaking candidly about strategies for combatting gender oppression on campus. The following paragraphs provide examples of the convergence of these motivations and actions.

Motivation and Action to Improve Learning Environments for Undergraduate Women. Participants who taught classes felt they had a level of power and control over the environment they created for their students within the academic sphere; therefore, participants who taught classes felt motivated and capable of changing the structure of that environment in order to improve undergraduate women's experiences. They believed if undergraduate women had more positive experiences in the classroom those positive experiences could have a domino effect and that increased self confidence in the classroom could extend outside of the classroom. Participant 14 explained how she became aware of the impact studying abroad had on undergraduate women through conversations in Summit. She wanted to change the way she taught and interacted with her students so she could help students develop the same self confidence in the classroom they developed from their experience traveling abroad, preferably earlier than their junior year:

> So, I think, what I heard a lot in the [Summit] groups were women saying, "It was when I went abroad that I finally realized I was competent." I thought, dang, I want my classroom to be a place where people experience that, you know what I mean? I don't want you to have to freaking go to Spain to find out that you're competent, you're a competent thinker, and that your thoughts can be translated into really great action.

The understanding she gained in the Summit program impacted how she taught and how she organized her learning environment: "I would say [Summit] made me teach freshmen differently." Summit helped her understand students are progressing through developmental stages that impact ways they engage in the classroom; those developmental stages are gendered.

She primarily teaches 1st-year students but because of Summit she gained a deeper understanding of where students are developmentally during their senior year:'

> It's like when I teach [yearlong course], I know where I'm heading. When I teach [key thinker], I know that I'm going to be teaching [key thinker] in May, and I am teaching and laying groundwork for all these thinkers that we're going to do. It's the same now. I feel like, "Oh, okay, I know better or I know a little bit more now what you're going to face sophomore year to your senior year and then trying to transition out." So, I'm already trying to lay some things down that will be helpful.

Participant 14 was much more intentional about preparing her students for what she knows they will face during their time at AU through both individual and group discussions. She explained Summit encouraged her to think much more about students' developmental arcs and she is now strategic about helping them recognize their strengths throughout the yearlong course that she teaches. She noted, "It's a whole shift in my teaching . . . [now] it's the long run. It's the long game." Participant 14 also explained that through her conversations with her mentees in Summit, she came to understand they were not gaining confidence in themselves in the classrooms at AU:

> And I also heard from a lot of the [Summit] students wondering if they were good enough to do research or good enough to go to grad school. I thought, what the hell are we doing for not helping them identify, not just identify their strengths, but really more like have them pay attention to what they're doing while they're doing and knowing that that's doing a thing.

Participant 14's experience is an example of how participants were motivated to determine ways they could positively impact undergraduate women's experiences in more structural ways and the subsequent actions they took.

Participant 9 also used her power and influence on the academic side of the university to positively impact undergraduate women's experiences. She developed a new course at AU that compared women in two different societies, noting, "So, yeah, I designed that class specifically because of [Summit]." She worked with a global partner in a corner of the world where men and women are segregated in classroom environments. She was strategic about this partnership because it afforded her the freedom to offer a course at AU just for undergraduate women, given the partnership institution would not allow its female students to engage with men in a classroom environment, even virtually. Participant 9 explained the impact on a single gender classroom for undergraduate women at AU: "We couldn't have guys in the class. And I think in some ways it was more, I think, no, I *know* that it was more comfortable." She elaborated on the experience of teaching just undergraduate women and remarked how much more comfortable and forthcoming the students were about their own personal experiences and the classroom provided them with a space to process, empathize, and support each other. She also explained how she changed her management of her mixed gender classes. She committed to actively and publicly calling out students who attempt to coopt others' contributions within classroom discussions, stating, "There's no reason why you can't say, 'Oh, this was so-and-so's idea first.' I think in academia this happens a lot." She believed men more often than women take credit for something a classmate expressed by saying it louder or with more conviction. She believed attributing classroom contributions to the correct student could mitigate feelings of self-doubt or lack of confidence and could help students feel seen, particularly women undergraduates.

Participants facilitated changes outside of the classroom as well. Two participants discussed ways they intentionally changed the set up and the content of the student leadership programs they ran on campus. Participant 1 explained her process of revisiting the curriculum she used to train students to lead international solidarity trips:

> Certainly, women's oppression globally was one of the themes that I felt like the program wasn't addressing that it ought to be addressing. I came up with a few texts that we could have read in [to address it comprehensively]. . . . So those were definitely ideas that surfaced or circulated as a result of [Summit] and thinking that the self-esteem problem at [AU] is not isolated to [AU]. Right? It's a global situation and it affects women in more dramatic and violent ways in situations of higher need. So, I wanted to draw our students' awareness to that through the [immersion] program, which probably came from some [Summit] inspiration as well.

Participant 16 shared a similar action she took in the undergraduate mentorship program she led on campus. Rather than change the content of her training to center other women's experiences, she updated the curriculum to provide space for senior women leaders in the program to be able to process and reflect on their own experiences:

> [Summit] helped me reevaluate my training for my senior women leaders. . . . I added more specific discussions and conversations that may not necessarily come up . . . to kind of help them as seniors start thinking about some of their own experiences and give them a space to talk about it. . . . I incorporated it into my training so that they would have a space to talk about real issues that they felt like they were experiencing at [AU] because they were women.

Both Participants 1 and 16 changed the content of the curricula they presented to student leaders to foster a space that acknowledged gender oppression as well as a space to process the impact of that oppression.

Motivation and Action to Build Personal Relationships. In addition to thinking structurally, participants were motivated to reevaluate how they interacted personally with undergraduate women. They felt called to develop trusting relationships with students so students felt comfortable voicing their lived experiences as women at AU. Participants determined they needed to be vulnerable and transparent about their own challenges and experiences as women to gain the trust of students and to illustrate they have faced similar challenges related to their gender identity. Participant 4 discussed how Summit drove her to see a particularly painful lived experience as a learning tool, a connection point with her students, and a way to encourage them to use their voices to combat injustice:

> Particularly when the #MeToo Movement was really front and center . . . I remember having a conversation with the students in my group because I had gone through a situation of sexual harassment at a previous institution and the way I chose to deal with it made me feel bad that I hadn't done more and made me feel like I wanted to. I wanted the women to know . . . that there were opportunities out there for them to speak up when those things happened and that we did have some things [AU] could really provide them with the support when they were dealing with some of the issues.

Participant 9 also reported becoming more candid with her students. She shared anecdotes of gender oppression she experienced on campus as a way to increase students' awareness of the issue as well as a way to provide students with advice and strategies to combat said oppression when they face it:

> So, what I'm telling them is instinctively, if you feel that something is wrong, you must defend yourself. To me, that was the best action I could have taken, . . . just relaying [my own] experience, because it occurs in so many different ways of, you know, you're in a board meeting and you come up with a good idea and everybody says, "okay," and then somebody else, a man, jets in and everybody's applauding. And you're erased. Do not let that happen!

Summit participants were also driven to invite undergraduate women into conversation about their experiences. Participant 2 believed sharing one's own experience empowered and encouraged undergraduate women to do the same, stating, "I was vulnerable in sharing my story in [Summit]. And a lot of these students felt comfortable enough to come to me and share their experiences." She went on to explain how Summit made her more comfortable to open up dialogue with her women students because she understood how much they needed to unpack their experiences:

> I started to also ask questions of my [women] students when they did come in to see me outside of [Summit] focused more on their experiences, whether that was related to gender or any other type of injustice on campus, I think I just became more aware it was happening and felt more confident in asking students about their experiences and seeing if there were ways that I could step up.

Many participants expressed their belief students can only receive assistance if they feel comfortable reaching out to ask for it and mirroring that process through their own vulnerability facilitated that comfort.

Agency/Motivation to Improve Women's Experiences Broadly

Participants were motivated by two important components of the Summit program: the safety of the community and the activism of fellow mentors. During the coding process it was easy to disentangle the agency/motivation from the actions in this section because there was a separation between the components not existing in the previous section. The forthcoming paragraphs describe both motivators before presenting concrete actions the mentors took as a result of the safety and inspiration they received from the Summit community.

As noted in the Awareness section, participants described the Summit community as a safe haven separate from the broader, hierarchical, and patriarchal institution. Participants expressed a strong sense of trust in other mentors in the program and as a result shared openly and truthfully about their experiences at the institution in their various areas on campus. Although it was not explicitly discussed, many participants independently communicated their belief that other mentors would defend them if they did anything that could put them in harm's way, which included being publicly critical of the institution. Participant 17 explained:

> You had a sense that if you were going to step up to the line or maybe put your toe over it, that someone in some entity had your back, which you know you couldn't always say about your supervisor. . . . But I could say that, and I did say that about the [Summit] group."

Participant 17 clearly articulated the strong community bond and unwritten expectations of Summit mentors.

Many participants also commented on the relative power of Summit mentors as a group and the safety they felt from that power. Participant 2 described the protection she felt from the Summit community and the impact of that protection on her motivation to advocate for a particular justice issue:

> It was knowing that I had this group of women mentors who would stand behind me if I [vocalized injustice] and if things went wrong. . . . I actually felt like if I were to get into trouble . . . I would have people at the table who would stand up for me, . . . which was very different than the messaging I was getting in my own [department].

Participant 3 explained similarly that she felt the protection from her association with Summit, which changed how she conducted herself on a regular basis:

> I am shocked sometimes how vocal I am [since joining Summit]. And I'm kind of like, go at me then, because I feel like whether it's true or not I have these other amazing women [Summit mentors] backing me up.

These accounts are just examples of ways the strength and protection of Summit community motivated participants toward actions to mitigate institutional sexism at AU.

Participants also explained they were motivated by work fellow mentors were doing to combat systemic gender oppression at the institution. Participant 9 explained, "You think you're doing something and then you listen to these other women [Summit mentors] and you're like, 'Oh, my God, [I'm] doing nothing!' And I think that was really beneficial. And I think we reinforced one another, too." This motivation was not predicated on shame or judgement; rather, it was based on a recognition and understanding that mentors had agency within their spheres of influence to push for change. Participant 3 explained her surprise that mentors did not just use Summit as a space to process their experiences of sexism at the institution but as a place to figure out ways to act:

> But these mentors don't mire in it, we say, "What can we do?" And everybody seems to be at their own pace and their own research and their own voice doing what they need to and their divisions at the university at large or whatever it is they're doing for the

> students and supporting the students that they're that they are, you know, going into spaces and making changes, little or big. And that is what's really, really important for me to see. It was important for me to observe other mentors.

Through dialogue with others and through an examination of gender oppression, participants developed motivation and almost a welcome burden to act to mitigate oppression they likely would not have gained if they did not participate in Summit.

Action to Improve Women's Experiences Broadly

Participants described several ways they acted on the awareness and motivation they cultivated through their involvement in Summit to improve women's experiences at AU, broadly at the institution and/or their own personal experiences. First, participants explained they mentored and advised each other on ways they could gain more power and influence at the institution and sought out opportunities to accrue and share that power and influence with each other. They also discussed ways they vocalized and advocated for change at the institution at all levels. Participants revealed the concrete changes they made within their own spheres of influence that had a broader impact on the university community. Finally, two participants described decision to leave the institution in order to preserve their own wellbeing. The following paragraphs provide further explanation and examples of these actions.

Advice and Mentorship as Action. Participants expressed the value of leveraging other mentors' expertise and influence in shaping them into change makers. This process of seeking advice protected mentors and helped them gain power and influence at the institution. Participant 13 explained how she looked to other mentors to guide her in accepting invitations to join committees at the institution, noting, "So whenever I was asked by the dean to serve on a university committee I always just got intel from the other [Summit] mentors, like usually a

coup. So, I always tried to seek opinions from more senior women." As a result of the advice from others in Summit, Participant 13 was able to ensure she spent her time in places of influence where she could make change and or increase her power at the institution.

Participant 2 explained the advice she actively sought out from other mentors in the program helped her to keep her position at the institution:

> And I just admired [Participant 13]; . . . she reached out personally and we were able to form a personal relationship there was also a sense of like if I did need anything, I could reach out to her and ask her opinion. And I did that a few times. . . . "Do you think this is a good idea?" or "Will this get me in trouble?" And I think that just having that resource I think was really, really important for me.

As a result of the advice and mentorship she received in the program, Participant 2 sought out ways she could pay her experience forward:

> Last academic year I joined a coaching program for a woman of color in academia and I'm not sure that I really would have done that if I hadn't had the experience of [Summit], because I kind of felt like [Summit] was that for me.

Participant 2 also provided advice and experience to other mentors in the Summit program. Participant 12 described consulting with Participant 2:

> To have [Participant 2] as a resource, a friend actually, I could have read about her and known that was her role, I knew and seen her on [media station] and all of that, but I wouldn't have called her up. The [Summit] connection was the only way I felt she would have known me and where I was. . . . There's also a whole source of women that I wouldn't get [connected to]. I'm not going to get that connection at all. At all."

Participant 12 implied the importance of such connections at the institution. As the quotations illustrate, participants had equal opportunities to serve as a mentor to other participants as they did to be mentored. This reciprocal mentoring further demonstrates the flat, nonhierarchical structure of Summit.

Vocalizing Need for Change. Participants created change by intentionally and strategically articulating the oppression women were facing on campus—all levels, all affiliations—in addition to recommending strategies and actions to create a more equitable institution. Participant 2 shared how Summit pushed her to constantly call attention to the gender and racial oppression perpetrated on campus, more specifically in the school where she works, to people in positions of power who could create systemic change. She stated:

> I have been really persistent about continually talking about issues that are happening in the classroom. And [I] just didn't back down enough that now it's a topic of conversation [and] that something is being done about and not just by [me], but by the associate dean.

Participant 12 explained how her daily interactions have changed because of her involvement in Summit, stating, "In meetings or in comments that I will hear I will be the one to say, 'Let's keep this in mind,' or 'That's probably not a good word choice' in ways that I wouldn't have done before [Summit]." She also explained how she vocalized her commitment to hire and develop a woman leader in her area of the institution:

> I'm looking to get a female on that team. It would be the first time we ever had a female in that position here at [AU]. . . . I think in the past, I would have wanted to get a female in the position and I would have wanted to avoid anyone knowing that that was a goal of mine. I'd want to sneak it in and be successful. And I'm taking a different approach. And

> I've already gone on record with my boss…And I don't think I would have been as vocal about it.

Participant 18 explained she was the only woman on the leadership team in her division so she actively spoke up for undergraduate women:

> I would just make sure I was a voice and I was only female in a room of males . . . honestly, I took a lot of what I heard in [Summit] or what I learned in [Summit] about how students felt, and I was able to bring that back and relay that into the room of males.

This sentiment illustrates the ways that participants educated others about what they learned about undergraduate women's experiences in Summit.

Participant 11 disclosed a particular instance where she decided to publicly share a personal story about oppression she felt within her religious organization because she is a woman and the subsequent fallout she experienced. She was the only woman on a panel at a very well attended university sponsored event discussing her involvement in the organization. She explained she felt called to the leadership of the organization but she was unwelcome because she is a woman. The president of AU was in the audience at the event and she explained he "[never] forgave me for that." However, she understood how important it was for women in the audience to hear her articulate the marginalization and oppression women face in the [religious organization] simply because they are women:

> That level was structural. I don't think I would have done that if I hadn't been mindful of the experiences these young women [at AU] were having. There were a lot of young women in the room. . . . I just don't think I would have - it cost me so much to say it. It was such a vulnerable moment. And I don't think I would have spent that cost if I hadn't become aware of how important it was to tell our truths and let young women in that

> community know that they're not alone in their struggles. Right? And so that's just one anecdotal example where it [Summit] really fundamentally affected how I behave at the university to pull something out and to let young women know that there was a long-term struggle going on even at our most fundamental underpinnings.

Similar to Participant 11, other participants expressed, as a result of their involvement in [Summit], they could not continue to be silent about issues of inequity at the institution. Participant 3 noted, "It's just like, do I want to do that or do I want to go back into my corner and shadow and, you know, like move through [Apex University] as if I'm not here?" Summit seemed to have endowed mentors with responsibility to create change however they were able.

Actions Within Sphere of Influence. Participants discussed they did not have access to enough power to create systemic change but they made changes within their own loci of control. Their actions varied based on their positions at the institution from intentionally recruiting and hiring women, to thoughtfully centering and highlighting women in events and programs, to training others to understand the different experiences that women were having at the institution and encouraging those folks to make change within their spheres of influence, to embedding activism into their daily work practices. Whereas Participant 12 needed to vocalize the importance of hiring a woman in her area, other participants had the power to make those hires themselves and did so.

Participant 10 discussed ways she was more thoughtful about creating space for women in the leadership pipeline, noting, "So I think it made me think maybe again, more structurally about the ways in which we were hiring and the ways in which we were creating pathways for women to more powerful, structurally powerful roles." Participant 7 explained her actions to ensure undergraduate women see faculty members who look like them in positions of influence:

"I will only hire women to teach [the course]. We've lost [woman professor] and I wouldn't even interview a man because it's not fair. We already have three White philosophers and I don't need anymore." Although these may seem like small changes in the scope of such a large institution, participants have the capability of compounding their influence if they all practice similar interventions.

Participant 15 discussed one of the small ways she was inspired to act. In her position she often conceptualizes, plans, and implements university events and she was compelled to ensure she did not hold events that centered men. She called panel events with just men "manels" and explained:

> By being brave and being around other people who are not afraid to say things they inspired me to talk about things like manels, right? And to make sure that different voices are being heard at everything that I do and that women's voices aren't being squashed.

Participant 6 used the power she had in her role to disseminate data about undergraduate women's experiences to faculty members in order to influence how they structured their classrooms:

> [Summit] certainly heightened my sense that there was a need to address the role of women on campus at [AU] explicitly, rather than just hope that everything would turn out for the best. So, I did try during new faculty orientation and then especially with meetings with department chairs . . . we talked about gender issues a lot, women, faculty especially. But also, how women students feel in the classroom. And I remember talking at a provost advisory council, elected faculty members to the provost advisory council, about this issue in particular, especially after . . . the terrible survey.

Participant 4 provided additional resources to the women's center at AU in order ensure women were fully supported around gendered issues such as sexual violence. She doubled the professional staff in that office and repositioned it as a standalone office with a more significant operating expense budget. She also collaborated with Participant 10 to place the women's center in a more prominent space on campus to ensure it was easy to find and access. Participant 10 explained:

> If I think about a particular policy change that came directly out of these [Summit] conversations . . . [the women's centers'] move . . . the prominence of [the] center and what we need came out of some of those early discussions as well.

Participant 2 described her involvement in Summit as a catalyst for not only creating change to mitigate gender oppression at the institution but also for embedding activism into her daily work as a scholar:

> This idea of like if you are an activist for a particular cause, like Black Lives Matter or the #MeToo Movement, that doesn't have to be independent of your academic work, you can find creative ways to make it a part of your academic life and specifically thinking about [Participant 13's] courses. Two courses.

Participant 2 learned how to strategically organize from Participant 13's example as well as from other Summit mentors. She explained:

> I was able to see what the process [of activism] was like for [Summit mentors]. . . . It was thoughtful. . . . So just finding ways to be creative if you are going to be an activist, if you are going to speak out about something, make it a part of your job to do that. And then it's not an act of rebellion. It's just a part of your job that you're doing. And I think

> that that was a change in mindset that I'm not sure that I would have been exposed to otherwise.

Participant 2 described ways Participant 13 motivated her to stop adhering to the current system without questioning whether or how to change it:

> I think that was really motivating for me and really made me realize that that was possible, again, because I think prior to [Summit], I think I was just going through the system the way that I was supposed to be going through the system and trying not to make any waves that I wasn't supposed to be making. And I think that that's definitely not [Participant 13's] personality. And I just admired her for that. And in addition to my admiration, I was actually able to see her do that in multiple spaces, which I think that example, I think was really important for me, that it wasn't just the talk, she walks the walk to.

Involvement in Summit clearly had an impact on participants' actions around ways they could chip away at gender inequities at AU; However, their actions were limited to their immediate roles on campus and did not extend into more systemic changes.

Preservation of Personal Wellbeing

Several participants described their awareness of systemic gender inequity at AU prompted them to evaluate if the institution provided opportunities for future career growth and progression. They also expressed concern that if they stayed at AU they were complicit in gender oppression because of their affiliation as paid employees of the institution. After some reflection, Participant 11 determined the institution would not allow her to progress in her career or to meet her personal career goals:

> This is not an institution where women after a certain point can do X. . . . So, then you have the conversation, "Is this one where I can and should fight from the inside?" And for me, the answer was no for a few different reasons.

Participant 2 described the ongoing struggle she had reconciling her position as a member of the institution with ways the institution actively oppresses groups of people based on gender as well as race:

> You have to be sort of questioning, "How am I advancing this structural racism or sexism, right, and what am I contributing to that and what am I doing to move against it?" And I never feel like I'm doing enough and I never feel like that I can do enough. . . . Like, it really does make me question, am I at an institution that values me as an individual, right, or do they just value the output that I provide? And that's really a really difficult conversation and a really difficult thought process to constantly have to go through.

She went on to describe a sense of consolation that Summit has provided her with a community where she is with others who are wrestling with the same ethical struggles and shared, "But at least I'm more aware of the system. And at least I know of other people who are fighting that and I can help and join in their cause." Participant 16 shared the cognitive dissonance she experienced because of her involvement in Summit, her recognition of structural gender oppression, but also her desire to improve the institution:

> I think being a part of [Summit], made me want to leave in some ways because I realized pretty quickly what [other Summit mentors'] experience was like, but then also felt pulled to stay because it's like, well, if everyone leaves, you know, will anything ever

> change here? Right? I remember wrestling with that after maybe my second cycle with [Summit].

Although other participants left the institution following their involvement in Summit, two participants were outliers in that they attributed their departure specifically to the insight they gained from their participation in Summit. Participant 11 explained she left AU without having another place of employment and she left knowing she would be giving up the possibility of obtaining tuition remission for her high school-aged child. She shared these qualifiers to illustrate how much Summit impacted her view of the institution:

> I talked my [child] out of applying to [AU]. . . . I didn't want [them] there. I know what kind of kid [they are] and I didn't want [them] there. And being exposed to the experiences of the other young women, seeing how hard the senior women in the organization were fighting and watching women just leave. I told [them] not to go.

Participant 17 discussed the impact of understanding the systemic nature of gender oppression at the institution:

> It was everyone sort of understood the experience of being a woman at [AU]. . . . It was a shared sense of, "Oh, I'm not the only one that feels this way." You know, and as much as that was empowering, there was also still a sense of the wave is too high.

She felt it was impossible to grow professionally at the institution as a woman because of the overwhelming gender oppression. She also noted other Summit mentors who left the institution:

> You know, and then you saw [Participant 5] leave, you saw [Participant 10] leave, you know, I mean, [Participant 13] left, you know, like how many of the women have left? And why? Why did they leave? Because they found places that they can grow!

She indicated other institutions raise women up rather than disempowering them and that she and others chose to leave to find a better environment.

Barriers to Enacting Change

It was clear participants were not able to solve nor even address the roots of institutional gender oppression at AU. Many participants needed to be prompted to think bigger when asked about what they would change about the institution because they realized they were self-censoring. Participant 13 explained she initially only considered small, manageable changes within her jurisdiction because she understood the limitations of structural change under the current president's leadership. Many participants explained the barriers to change felt impossible to overcome. For example, when prompted to imagine more systemic change, Participant 13 responded, "Oh, I guess I'm thinking about what's possible. I'm concerned with the president there that it's not possible to create systemic change." All participants discussed they did not hold the power to initiate systemic change, nor did any women at the institution. They explained three specific barriers to any type of improvement of the institutional causes of women's negative experiences at AU: the identity of the institution as Catholic and the patriarchal roots of Catholicism, the president's insular leadership style, and fear of repercussions. The forthcoming paragraphs unpack each of these barriers.

Only priests have served as presidents of AU throughout its 159-year history. The Catholic church does not ordain women as priests and therefore women have not led the institution (Haskins, 2003). Although it is not a written rule for a priest to be in the highest-ranking position at AU, it has come to be understood as the expectation. Participant 2 noted the absence of gender diversity where decisions are made has a negative effect through the entire institution:

> I don't know if that's a written rule, but it does seem like it's been a traditional rule that's been passed down and that continues to be in play. I think that for me, that's one of the biggest ones when we're thinking about the leadership component. I think that alone in terms of having a woman in a high leadership position could have major ripple effects all the way down, even down to things about how we prioritize athletics or how we prioritize business school. Like it could all change the dynamics potentially if you find the right people at the table.

Other participants also discussed the impact the religious identity has on preventing women from entering into leadership positions at the institution. Participant 17 noted the institution appears to use the structure of the Catholic church as its leadership guide and because women are not visible in leadership position in the church it seems to justify excluding them from leadership at AU.

Participants expressed the current president of AU seems to practice that same leadership that is prevalent in the Catholic church. He prevents women from accessing any type of power at the institution. He is involved in all levels of decisions at the institution and surrounds himself with colleagues, all men, who reinforce his opinions. Participant 5 shared an example of the minutia the president is involved in as well as the impact his involvement has on others' agency to make decisions:

> This is a ridiculous example, but we were renovating . . . space and so we were meeting [with the president] to select final fabrics. We had stuff out and we were asked for opinions. No one said a word. No one. And so, I said, "Well, you know, this is what I think—I like this for this or that." I really think that no one said anything until [the president] spoke because they were afraid of saying "I like this [color] more than that

> color." No one would speak! And I thought, you're unwilling to speak about this, how about when we deal with the important stuff? It's a change of culture that needs to come from the top. It would then empower other people who I think are, generally speaking, very well-intentioned.

Along with the reputation for micromanaging decisions, the president also has a reputation for concentrating all power in his office. Participants noted their perception that he is the only person who it is important to please. Participant 6 and Participant 5 each independently expressed the leadership culture is "an audience of one." Participant 10 explained in addition to this type of insular leadership style, the president has surrounded himself with people who will agree with him. She shared:

> I realized early on that the board was just stacked. It was part of that same structure. I mean, every member of that board, if you sat at those big board meetings, which are 50 trustees, you realize that there was no dissent. It was a rubber stamp kind of process.

This type of leadership style prevents any type of systemic change the president does not introduce. Therefore, because the president uses his religious affiliation to inform his leadership style and the Catholic church actively prevents women from holding power, there will not be any type of structural change to improve women's experiences at the institution because he will not initiate it.

In addition to the barrier of the identity of the institution as well as the president's leadership style, participants mentioned they were reticent to push for institutional change because they were concerned about retaliation. When comparing AU to other institutions where she worked, Participant 5 explained:

> [At AU] lot of people were worried about their jobs . . . if I do the wrong thing, if I say the wrong thing, if I get on the wrong side that I'll be punished. And I don't recall hearing that word used before in my professional work.

Participant 3 explained how she counseled a colleague out of sharing the truth about her experience as a woman of color on at AU because she wanted to protect her:

> It's fear. 100%. [Name] was going to be on a large circuit and she said, "Tell me the truth. Is this something I should be afraid of? How much do I speak out?" I said, and I truly believe it, "You should be careful." And that's a horrible space because change is never going to happen. But self-preservation has to happen. You need a job.

Other participants discussed fear of their own bosses who were in positions that were not directly connected to the president but who seemed to embody the president's leadership style and ideals. This pattern indicated the president's impact trickles down in such a way it squashes any type of progress. Given that recognition, the work participants were able to accomplish, although small in impact, were monumental when compared to the barriers they faced.

Impact of Context on Critical Consciousness

This chapter maps closely to Freire's (1970) components of Critical Consciousness; however, Freire did not address the crucial role context plays in enabling Critical Consciousness development or in creating change because of that new knowledge. Context and culture can facilitate important change, as illustrated by the important role the Summit community played in raising awareness, stimulating motivation, and facilitating low level change at AU. However, context can also prevent a smooth transition from awareness to action as evidenced by the rigid barriers to change created by the Catholic identity of AU and the patriarchal leadership ideals of

the president predicated on that identity. The following paragraphs will provide additional details for each of these findings.

Context as a Facilitator of Change

When considering participants' development of awareness of their own experiences as women at the institution as well as their understanding of women's experiences broadly at the institution, context played an important role. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the Summit community provided a foundational context for participants to develop an understanding of women's subjugation at AU as systemic. The primary aspects of the Summit culture promoting such growth among participants were tied to the characteristics of the group that align with feminist consciousness raising groups, namely, lack of hierarchy, implicit trust, vulnerability as strength, deep care and concern for each other, and a strong sense of belonging (Hogeland, 1998; Koedt et al., 1973). Participants allowed themselves to share their true experiences and this sharing perpetuated itself. Participants shared things they had not voiced before because the context felt safe and almost sacred. Then participants began to make connections between each other's lived experiences and recognize systemic gender marginalization.

Participant 1 explained how much the Summit community sustained her by helping her to recognize she was a victim of institutionalized oppression. Although this was a difficult realization, it provided her consolation to know she was not the only one experiencing such treatment. She explained:

> The mentor luncheons for me, I think raised my consciousness, that experience was real and challenging and not right but that I wasn't alone and that women at even the highest levels of the university experienced this . . . it gave me a lot of strength. And yeah, to honor my voice and my work and know that what I was doing was valuable. They were

> such encouraging times and it was such a sharp contrast to what the rest of the day looked like, which in retrospect is really sad. Yeah, but they were a break from the hardship of the day that was male dominated.

Participant 16, a junior-level administrator, discussed importance of the absence of hierarchy within the community and the way it allowed her to feel comfortable and understand that what she contributed mattered:

> I feel like it's just so cool to be in a room with people from across the university at various levels and having our titles not matter . . . this was a space where we could shed some of that and just talk about our experiences in a way that was very authentic and raw in a way that I think I didn't expect and I was a little bit surprised by.

Participant 11 explained there was an implicit ethic of care that each of the mentors practiced with each other, noting, "This constant reinforcement among the [Summit] community that we take care of each other, we are good to each other, we support each other, we help each other." As a result of this context, Summit mentors were transparent with each other, which increased each other's understanding of how sexism plays out at the institution and that foundation pushed them through the other components of Critical Consciousness. Without the context of a space that centered feminist ideals, it is unlikely participants would have shared their stories and been able to make connections between those stories to conclude they were victims of systemic marginalization. Participants were then motivated by the protection of the group and the work other mentors were doing to push for broader change.

Context as a Barrier to Change

Participants discussed several important implications of the Catholic and patriarchal context of AU on their ability to reach action: context prevented them as women from imagining

or initiating structural change, context inhibited women from accruing the power necessary to initiate change, context diluted women's influence. Participants discussed how context deterred them from imagining or initiating larger changes outside of their personal spheres of influence to positively affect women's experiences at AU because they were socialized to understand the limits of their power as women at the institution. Participant 13 explained she felt AU "symbolizes whiteness and maleness" in a way that prevents women from imagining their role as leaders on campus. She described the impact of the omnipresence of celebration of men's leadership and the simultaneous absence of women's leadership. She shared:

> You internalize it even if it's not said. I'm thinking about the pictures of the presidents [all men] displayed prominently in [an important space on campus] or just everything is named after a White man, or on and on and on . . . it's everywhere.

These constant depictions of leaders as men signaled that only men could be leaders. This affected how participants thought of themselves and the potential that they hold to achieve positions of power and influence at AU.

Participants also discussed how AU structurally prevents women from accruing power and influence. Participant 13 went on to explain:

> [AU] inherently devalues women. Like, you don't have to say women are not as good as men here but you see that all the leaders are male, right? The institution unequivocally helps to maintain a culture of White supremacist heteropatriarchy.

Many participants also pointed to another feature of the institution that fed into a patriarchal culture, an inner circle of leaders the president surrounds himself with and ways they perpetuate sexist attitudes throughout the institution. Based on participants' observations, the language that group used coupled with the word choice exposed insular and sexist ideas. This illustrates how

difficult it is to work within the institutional context of AU, never mind the challenges associated with accruing the power to change the institution.

Participant 3 expressed sentiments about the misalignment between the institutional mission and reality:

> I feel that many institutions hide behind their mission statements and don't necessarily live it out . . . honestly, I get really frustrated at the [university tagline predicated on justice] when we're not seeing that consistently carried through from people internally at [AU].

The exclusion of women from positions of power and influence appears intentional and supported by the highest levels of leadership at the institution despite the institution's rhetoric on developing and supporting students, staff, and faculty who hold all different identities.

Participants who were in more senior positions at the institution discussed the impact of having so few women peers in similar positions. The absence of gender parity in these high levels prevented women from seeing their experience as anything but personal. It was not until they came to Summit and began to make connections across divisions of the institution that they began to understand how the current leadership and power structures were operating to preserve the status quo.

Summary

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of participants' initial involvement in the Summit program and their progression of Critical Consciousness development of undergraduate women's inequitable experiences at AU. It further describes findings that participants' involvement in Summit also triggered a layer of Critical Consciousness development of their own experiences as women at AU, as well as an understanding of the

experiences of women more broadly at the institution. The chapter closes with a discussion of the crucial role context plays in facilitating participants' Critical Consciousness of their own experiences as well as the barrier context creates to enacting structural changes to mitigate institutional sexism at the institution.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the study's conclusions, a summary of the constructed grounded theory and ensuing model, the alignment between the original research questions and the findings, the relationship between the constructed theory and the literature, the strengths and limitations of the theory, and the implications and suggested directions for future research.

After analyzing the data from the study, I was able to construct three major findings, which I will summarize below and further explain throughout this chapter. First, involvement in Summit facilitated participants' development of Critical Consciousness of their own experiences, and those of their colleagues, as women at the institution. Whereas the literature indicates that it is common for mentors to develop a level of Critical Consciousness about their mentees' experiences (Diemer et al., 2016; Landreman et al., 2007) it is unique for a mentorship program to prompt mentors to examine their own experiences at the institution where they reside. Second, the community that the mentors built with each other through the Summit program was fundamental in the construction of an environment where they could develop this Critical Consciousness. Third, the conditions within the community that facilitated this development mirrored many of the tenets of early feminist consciousness raising groups (Koedt et al., 1973; Reger, 2004).

Overview of Theory

The following section describes the theory that I constructed based on the study. As discussed in Chapter 3, I arrived at these results after employing initial line-by-line coding to build action codes that corresponded to my research questions. I then explored and evaluated

these initial codes through focused coding, where I compared the codes to each other and to other supporting data, which allowed me to construct additional codes that were not part of the original group. I then employed axial coding to organize my codes into larger categories in order to identify interactions and links between the categories. These codes lined up with Freire's three components of Critical Consciousness: awareness, agency/motivation, and action. However, there were differences in codes based on which population was considered.

The final model I constructed indicates that there is a varying effect of the impact of serving in the Summit mentor program on participants' enactment of Freire's components of Critical Consciousness. First, participants described a more linear progression from awareness to action related to their interactions and impact on undergraduate women. As noted in the previous chapter, participants entered into the Summit program with a shared baseline understanding of undergraduate women's negative experiences at Apex University compared to undergraduate men's experiences. Second, the data indicates participants engaged in a more complex progression through Freire's components of Critical Consciousness when they changed their focus from undergraduate students to their own personal experiences as women at the institution. Participants used the safe space within the Summit program to develop strong, trusting relationships, which provided the foundation for sharing their own stories and experiences as women at the institution. This allowed participants to begin to make connections between each other's experiences and to start to see the impact that identity, institutional leadership, and university systems and structures had on them as women. Participants also built an understanding of women's experiences more broadly at the institution through their growing awareness of undergraduate women's experiences coupled with their greater understanding of the experiences of other women in the group as well as their own at AU.

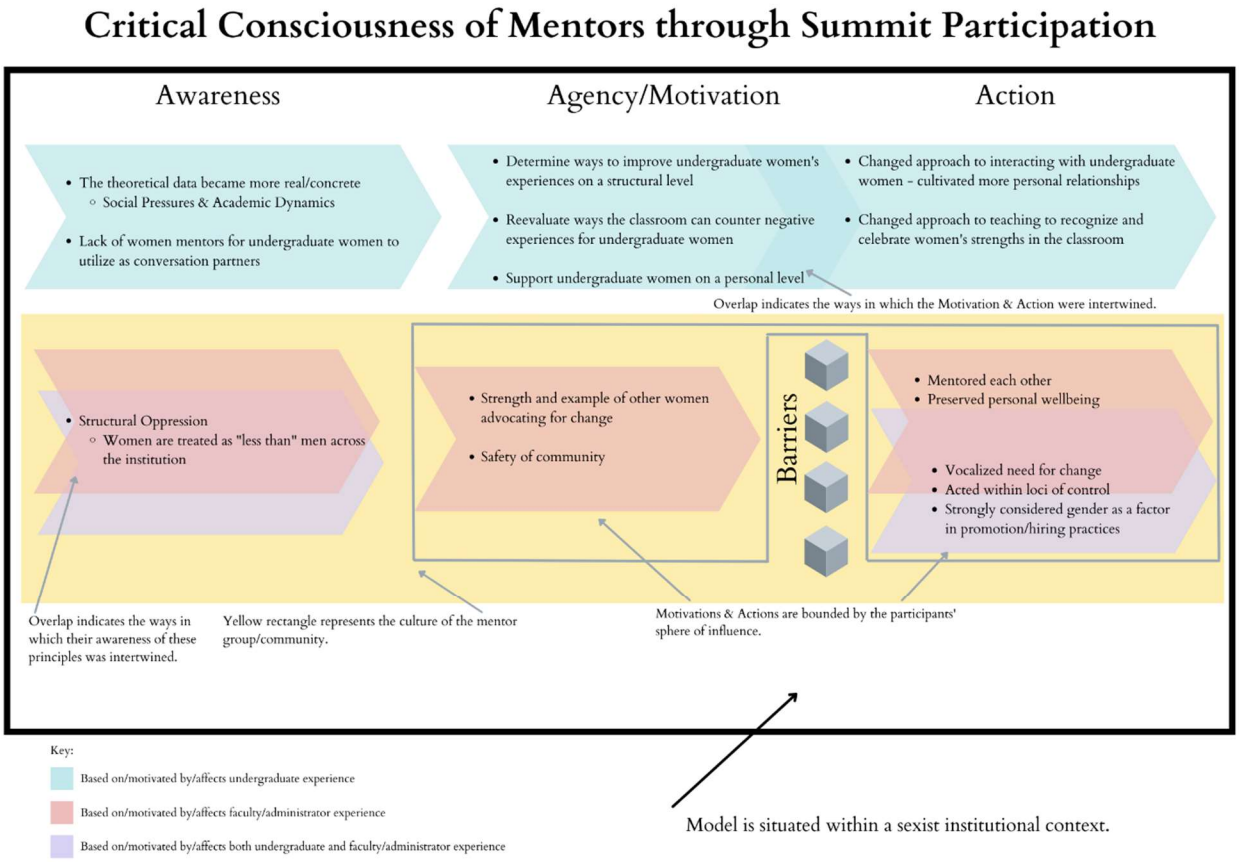
The grounded theory model illustrated in Figure 2, *Grounded Theory Model*: *Critical Consciousness in Summit Mentors' Participation,* explains the impact that serving as a mentor in the Summit program has on participants' development of Freire's (1970) components of Critical Consciousness. The blue arrow under "awareness" corresponds to participants' deepened understanding of undergraduate women's experiences in both the social culture and the academic world at Apex University (AU) because of their participation in Summit as mentors. As discussed in the previous chapter, relationships participants developed with undergraduate women, coupled with subsequent sharing and storytelling students engaged in, provided a personal narrative to data around declining self-esteem participants were aware of prior to joining Summit. Participants also came to recognize how much their students needed from them as mentors, even after only knowing them for a relatively short period of time. This experience deepened their understanding of the lack of mentors these undergraduate women had access to up to this point in their time at AU despite having been at the institution for over 3 years at the time of joining Summit. Hearing these personal accounts of students' experiences in both the social culture and in the classroom and responding to the intimate and complex issues their mentees presented to them inspired participants to figure out ways to improve the experience of undergraduate women. This progression is relatively common based on literature on mentorship outlined in Chapter 2.

The overlapping blue arrows under "agency/motivation" and "action" connect to the intertwined ideas participants had about what they could do to advocate for change that would improve undergraduate women's experiences at AU and what they actually did do to realize that change. It is difficult to distinguish between what participants were motivated to achieve based

on their new awareness and what they actually did change because in the interviews they discussed both in retrospect.

Figure 2

Grounded Theory Model: Critical Consciousness in Summit Mentors' Participation



These motivations and actions fell within each participants' unique sphere of influence or where they had agency to create change. As noted in the previous chapter, faculty participants most frequently acted within their classroom environments whereas administrators worked through programmatic or policy channels outside of the classroom. Regardless of the area that they worked, participants all described their determination to figure out ways that they could inspire and advocate for structural change that would have a more significant impact on undergraduate women's experiences at AU. In addition, both faculty and administrator

participants discussed their motivations and achievements in changing the way they interacted with undergraduate women to develop deeper relationships to ensure that undergraduate women felt held and cared for.

The second set of arrows encased in the yellow box refer to progression of participants' Critical Consciousness of their own experiences as women at AU and that of their women colleagues across the institution. Participants' cultivated a greater awareness of their own experiences (indicated by the red arrows) as women at AU as well as women's experiences more generally (indicated by the purple arrows) at the institution through Summit. As explained in Chapter 4, the power of the Summit mentor community was created and fostered at the regular lunch meetings. It was the strength of the community, indicated by the yellow box around the second set of arrows, that provided the crucial backdrop participants needed to be able to truthfully share their experiences at AU with each other. This shared storytelling transformed their understanding of institutional sexism at AU. As discussed in Chapter 4, the Summit community was the antithesis of the broader Apex University administrative and academic communities. It was predicated on the feminist principles of trust, inclusion, vulnerability, care for others, collaboration, and dissemination of power (de Beauvoir et al., 2010). Within the safety of this community, participants were affirmed the subjugation they felt within their pockets of the institution was not personal or unique; it was systemic. They came to understand the sociopolitical factors affecting their experience, such as the ideals of the Catholic church and the manifestation of those ideals in the leadership of AU which translated into embedded patriarchy and sexism. The Summit lunches mirrored the structure and outcome of feminist consciousness raising groups, which I discuss in an upcoming section.

Participants expressed feeling motivated by the community they were able to create, which is indicated by the red arrow under "awareness/motivation." Many participants discussed the ways their deeper awareness of women colleagues' experiences and actions at the institution, particularly those who worked to promote gender equity in different ways at AU, motivated them to assess their own capabilities and conclude they could do more. The accrual of shared power manifested into feelings of safety for some participants. Many participants explained the safety of the community was a motivating factor because in the midst of the culture of fear that existed at the institution, they felt protected by each other.

This motivation led participants to act in a variety of ways. The overlapping purple and red arrows denote the actions mentors took that could affect themselves and women broadly on campus. Two of the five codes reside in the red arrow because they are specific to the mentors: mentored each other and preserved personal wellbeing. The other three codes rest more in the middle of the overlap because they correspond to actions affecting the mentors as well as the community of women at AU more broadly. Those include: vocalized need for change, acted within loci of control, strongly considered gender as a factor in promotion/hiring practices.

Both the red arrow under "agency/motivation" and the red and purple boxes under "action" are encased in a grey box, which indicates participants' motivation and actions were bounded by their spheres of influence. Participants explained that as they considered what they could do to combat institutionalized sexism at AU it was necessary to take into account the context of the institution. As a result of their identities as women, participants did not possess the power to enact widespread structural change so they only considered changes they felt they realistically had the power to achieve. This is important to note prior to discussing barriers because participants faced barriers in carrying out their actions but they also faced barriers in

conceptualizing what was possible because some barriers prevented them from even considering higher level change.

This entire model is encased in a black box to indicate the totality of participants' experiences at AU and in Summit all took place within the context of an institution that systemically subjugates women. The context of the institution connects directly to the unique barriers participants' described in achieving positive change. The four cubes in the model indicate the barriers that prevented participants from enacting particular changes. All participants expressed the leadership philosophy of AU's president prevented women from gaining the stature to be in the meetings where strategy was developed and large decisions that could have a structural impact were made. Participants understood the president's leadership style to be entrenched in ridged patriarchal ideals rooted in Catholic ideologies, which are fundamentally sexist. A majority of participants expressed fear as a barrier to vocalizing and advocating for change that would improve women's experiences at the institution and enhance their power. They were weary of retaliation, either explicit or concealed, that would negatively affect their status at AU. A final barrier to advocating for change was unique to a few participants. These participants chose to leave AU because they came to understand the problematic nature of the institution and the way in which it hindered their growth because they were women. Because participants were no longer at the institution they were unable to achieve any actions to combat the institutional sexism they witnessed through Summit.

Discussion of Theory Related to Research Questions

This study sought to understand the impact that involvement in the Summit mentor program had on mentors' accumulation of knowledge about the sociopolitical factors of gender oppression at Apex University, ways that deeper understanding impacted their motivation to

push for change, and the concrete actions they took to create that change. The study was driven by the following research questions:

1. How, if at all, do mentors perceive their involvement in Summit impacted their awareness and/or understanding of institutionalized sexism and its effects?
2. How, if at all, do mentors perceive their involvement in Summit has impacted their motivation or ability to effect change related to institutional sexism?
3. In what ways, if at all, have mentors enacted change on behalf of themselves or other women at the institution that they perceive is connected to their involvement in Summit?

This study provided the information necessary to answer the above questions. First, participants detailed their increased awareness of sexism at AU as the result of their involvement in Summit. They noted it was through the Summit community they began to make connections between their own experiences and their colleagues lived experiences through shared storytelling. Participants moved from understanding their experiences at AU as singular to conceptualizing women's experiences as a whole as part of an orchestrated reality. The Summit community played the crucial role of establishing a trusted shared space where participants could be honest about their personal experiences. Simultaneously, the community became a haven offering protection for participants. This security, coupled with participants' feelings of accountability to each other, fueled their motivation to push for equity. Participants explained the various ways that they successfully implemented change at the institution but explicitly noted the ceiling to that change because of the strong institutional barriers that prevented them from gaining the power necessarily to implement widespread, structural improvements. The common and crucial tie throughout participants' progression through Freire's (1970) components of

Critical Consciousness is the Summit mentor community. The community is what differentiates the program and the outcomes of the program from other mentorship programs that are administered in areas in higher education.

Relationship of Theory to Literature

This study contributes to the existing body of literature primarily by providing a new perspective on the impact that serving as a mentor in a mentor program designed to mitigate undergraduate women's declining self-esteem can have on the mentors' development of Critical Consciousness of their own subjugation as women in higher education. It is important to have an updated understanding of this issue given the ongoing trend of inequitable experiences of undergraduate women compared to undergraduate men coupled with the prolific use of mentorship programs as a way to improve undergraduate women's experiences (Crisp et al., 2017; Duke University, 2003; Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999; Princeton University, 2011). Much of the current research on the impact of mentorship programs within the sphere of higher education focuses on mentee outcomes as opposed to mentor experiences (Agosto et al., 2016; Crisp et al., 2017; Crisp & Cruz, 2009). If institutions of higher education are going to continue to prescribe mentorship experiences and continue to task already marginalized populations with mentoring undergraduate students who share similar identities then it is crucial for those institutions to understand the potential impact those programs can have on the mentors themselves and capitalize on the positive possibilities.

The following section provides specific connections between this study and the categories of literature presented earlier in Chapter 2: mentorship, relational cultural theory, and Critical Consciousness in addition to literature on feminist consciousness raising groups, which is important to include in light of the findings.

Mentorship

Although mentorship can hold an important role in improving mentee's experience, it is more of an interim measure than an initiator of systemic change. The current study confirms portions of the prevailing body of literature on mentorship and challenges others. It contests critics' view that mentorship is a problematic tool that socializes the oppressed to understand systems of oppression in order to successfully navigate rather than break down those systems (Brabazon & Schulz, 2020). It does so by illustrating ways that the study participants came to understand and then subsequently change some, but not all, components of the institutional culture that marginalize undergraduate women. Participants were not focused on helping their mentees simply navigate the current culture, they worked to change that culture because of their heightened Critical Consciousness. An example of such a change includes revamping the classroom environment to dismantle practices that diminished women's voices and impact.

This study confirms literature that highlights the benefits of serving as a mentor such as a deeper understanding of mentees' experiences (Zachary, 2002), development of more advanced listening skills, and cultivation of stronger feelings of increased satisfaction at work (Haber-Curran et al., 2017). That being said, the literature also indicates that mentorship can often be a burden that is inflicted on those with marginalized identities because they are assumed to be able to best relate to and connect with folks who are suffering as well, for example women administrators and faculty mentoring undergraduate women (Dahlvig, 2010). However, this furthers their oppression because it requires additional labor and endows them additional labor, while their colleagues are free to go about their work and progress in the facets of their responsibilities that will further their career progression (Potter et al., 2009). This study confirms

that there is a ceiling to the change that mentors can make and their inability to make sweeping change was directly related to the lack of power they were afforded because they are women.

Relational Cultural Theory

As discussed in Chapter 2, relational cultural theory (RCT) argues that individuals, specifically women, grow and develop through relationships rather than independently (Jordan, 2013). Mentors within the Summit program cultivated strong relationships with each other that were fueled by the configuration of the program, namely regular lunch meetings, shared storytelling, and a foundation of trust and vulnerability (Miller, 1976; Miller & Stiver, 1997). These relationships were unique because the mentors were different levels at the institution but they focused on their combined power rather than their power over one another, which is a tenet of RCT (Lewis & Olshansky, 2016). These connections provided the mentors with the basis to grow in their Critical Consciousness as well as the strength to organize to breakdown aspects of the institutionalized sexism of which they were victims (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Participants in the study described how the members of the mentor team came together from different corners of the institution and entered into an environment that was countercultural to the institution and where they were encouraged to share their own experiences – in order to strengthen the program. They quickly found from those experiences that there were systemic issues related to marginalization of women. Up to this point the university successfully siloed women and cultivated a culture of fear of speaking out so women did not have the opportunity to develop relationships and have such candid conversations. It was this feeling and understanding that they "weren't the only ones" that pushed them through the Critical Consciousness cycle. The connections that the mentors made with each other allowed this to be possible.

Feminist Consciousness Raising Groups

The findings of this study relate closely to the literature on feminist consciousness raising (CR) groups. This connection was made after reviewing the data and considering the study's findings and as a result, CR groups are not part of the original literature review in Chapter 2. This section will provide a brief overview of what CR groups are and how they connect to Freire's tenets of Critical Consciousness as well as to the current study.

Feminist consciousness raising groups are "small meetings to discuss and analyze women's conditions" (Stromquist, 2014, p. 555) that became foundational to the women's liberation movement in the United States beginning in the 1970s. Such groups were designed to bring women together, to provide a space for those women to share stories of their lived experiences as women, to encourage them to make connections between each other's experiences, and subsequently to recognize that they were victims of gender oppression (Reger, 2004). CR groups were transformational at the time because participants began to relate personal, individual women's stories, to larger social and political structures that constrained women to certain places in society (Reger, 2004). The groups sought to change the culture to improve women's experiences rather than to instruct women on how to change themselves in order to fit into that culture.

It is easy to see many of Freire's components of Critical Consciousness alive within the principles of feminist consciousness raising groups, however leaders of the CR movement did not intentionally base the groups' principles on Freire's work. Instead, founders looked to the Civil Rights Movement, Students for a Democratic Society, and Chinese revolutionary practices as blueprints to construct these groups (Koedt et al., 1973). The groups were designed to be

solely for women, democratic and without a leader, centered around storytelling rather than theory, and predicated on trust with the goal of liberating women.

There are many connections between the above literature and the study, particularly around the makeup of both CR groups and the Summit mentor group. As previously noted, the study illustrates the importance of context. The Summit mentor community was couched in similar ideals and possessed similar characteristics to CR groups, namely trust, absence of hierarchy, and storytelling (Koedt et al., 1973). The sharing that occurred in the Summit mentor lunches cemented the foundation for participants to develop Critical Consciousness of their marginalized position as women at Apex University, created protection and generated a sense of safety that motivated participants to push for action, albeit within what they had direct control over. The main difference between CR groups and the Summit community was the goal; the Summit community did not set out to liberate women at AU broadly whereas the goal of CRs was to liberate women across U.S. society (Koedt et al., 1973). In some ways, one could argue that the intention of Summit was against CRs because it sought to provide undergraduate women with mentors to help them work through the institutional culture rather than to change the culture to better support women.

Critical Consciousness

The model clearly aligns with Freire's conceptualization of Critical Consciousness as well as the individual components of that theory. The most important connections include the gathering of oppressed individuals from across the institution to a space where they could share their truths (Freire, 1970). Due to the male dominated leadership of the institution, women leaders were rarely afforded the opportunity to understand each other's experiences because they lacked proximity. Jemal (2017) argued the lack of understanding about the ways in which

systems and structures can marginalize individuals with a particular identity creates an environment where oppression can "rampantly spread through systems" (p. 604). This study illustrates how such oppression penetrated all systems at AU.

An additional important connection between the literature and the study occurred when participants gathered in the Summit community and truthfully exchanged personal stories. Other members of the community felt empowered to do the same and all began to examine what they had previously understood as singular experiences as systemic. As Watts et al. (2011) noted in the literature, it is only when individuals understand that there is a need for change that they are inspired to make that change and that cycle perpetuates itself and strengthens. As study participants explained, they fed off of each other's activism. When one member of the community pushed against the rigid systems that constrained them then others felt called and inspired to do the same.

The theory also illustrates the ways that a programmatic intervention can morph into a larger vehicle for change. Summit was initiated as a microlevel intervention, one that would help individual undergraduate women navigate a difficult campus context. However, as a result of the awareness that participants developed about that context and how they themselves were personally affected by it, Summit became a catalyst for larger change. This relates directly to the origin of Freire's work. He was originally inspired to address the low literacy rates among peasants in Brazil and quickly realized that that small intervention had the potential to grow into a catalyst for systemic change that could address illiteracy at its root (Freire, 1973).

Study Limitations and Strengths

The study contains both limitations as well as strengths. The following two sections detail each.

Limitations

A primary limitation of this study was my positionality as the researcher. As discussed in Chapter 3, I am an alum and a current member of the campus community where the study was conducted as well as the founder and operator of the Summit program. Additionally, my primary role at the institution is to serve and empower women students. Some of the roles I hold are advantageous in positioning myself to deepen my understanding of the complicated relationship between participants and Apex University. However, other roles could threaten the validity of my study. For example, as the operator of the Summit program, I could consciously or unconsciously assign meaning to Summit participants' shared experiences because I am invested in the success of the program.

To overcome these potential conflicts that could have biased my collection or interpretation of the data I made sure to adhere to a strict process. Following each interview, I engaged in memoing to gain awareness into any possible bias or conflation of my other roles with my role as a researcher. If I noticed any such conflict I immediately addressed it. After transcribing each interview, I sent the transcript to each participant for their review. I encouraged them to reach out to me if they felt I had misinterpreted or misrepresented any of our conversation. After all of my interviews, I developed an initial theory and model I reviewed with participants through focus groups to ensure I was correctly representing their shared experiences. Overall, I believe my deep involvement in the program and my understanding of the complexities and nuances of systems and structures at the institution were assets to building trust with participants. They knew I understood the possible implications of releasing any identifying information that could compromise their status at the institution and as a result felt comfortable sharing with me, knowing I would protect them.

A second limitation is that participants self-selected into the study, which could create a self-selection bias. This could skew the data because the respondents could have chosen to respond because they had a particular type of experience in the program, whereas those who did not respond had a different experience. It is also possible members of the population who chose not to respond were afraid of possible repercussions of sharing negative experiences at the institution as women. Many respondents expressed the desire for any identifying information to be stripped from the interview transcripts to ensure they could not be identified because they were afraid of repercussions. The population was more diverse than my participants, particularly in terms of racial diversity, which could be a result of self-selection bias. I was able to challenge this limitation by examining the responses of those who chose to participant and who held a non-White identity and confirming they were not significantly different than respondents who identified as White. Two of the four members of the population who did not participate expressed not having the time due to family issues and the other two did not respond at all.

A third limitation of my study is that it was conducted at one institution and examined one program. This makes it difficult to generalize the results to other mentorship programs and other institutions. It is clear from the interviews and focus groups the Summit program is having a net positive impact on mentor participants and it is motivating them to enact change to mitigate institutional sexism, however it is not possible to generalize this impact across other mentorship programs because there are so many characteristics and contexts embedded in the study that are unique to Apex University. That being said, as the literature indicates it is difficult to generalize many findings across mentoring relationships or programs because the concept of mentorship is defined and constructed so differently across contexts of higher education. Despite this

limitation, the data collected could play an important role in making this one institution a more equitable space for women.

Strengths

The primary strength of the study is the comprehensive data I was able to collect about participants' experiences in the Summit program and ways those experiences generated a high level of Critical Consciousness around institutional sexism. By engaging in qualitative research practices such as intensive interviewing coupled with the grounded theory tenet of pivoting and following different lines of questioning to understand particular emerging themes, I developed a rich and extremely honest description of participants' experiences in the program. I was able to do this by gaining a strong foundation of trust with participants that mitigated their concerns about possible repercussions of sharing negative experiences at the institution. Another strength of the study is that it adds to the research gap in understanding the impact that serving as a mentor has on mentor's development of Critical Consciousness and their capability for larger instigation of change. This creates a strong basis for future research.

Implications

Findings indicate the potential of mentor programs is larger, especially in higher education than necessarily realized. This section will detail mentorship's capacity to have a positive impact on mentors above and beyond one-to-one relationships. As noted in the literature, often staff and administrators in higher education are recruited to serve as mentors to undergraduate students (or colleagues) who hold similar marginalized identities (Dahlvig, 2010). Many reason professionals with marginalized identities who have achieved success are best positioned to guide marginalized students through the oppressive environment (Dahlvig, 2010). These professionals then hold the burden of additional labor, often without significant benefits.

This study illustrates that the potential benefits of serving in a mentor program could be more significant than originally believed.

The study indicates the possibility for the individual mentors to form a strong community among each other that can actually help sustain them within the oppressive context where they reside. This finding is supported by the Harvard Business Review's 2018 study that found 'community' is one of the top three priorities of the current workforce (Goler et al., 2018). When employees feel that their place of work provides them with community as well as 'career growth' and 'cause' they report being more satisfied and able to bring their whole selves to work (Goler et al., 2018). Given the amount of time mentors dedicate to others, the benefit of connection and community could make the act of mentoring more worth that time and labor. Mentors also described how being a part of the Summit community helped them to overcome isolation and to gain hope and strength at the institution. These feelings of belonging improved mentors' experiences more broadly at the institution.

Another potential implication of the study is that mentorship programs like Summit have the potential to impact retention at institutions. On one hand, such programs can retain faculty and staff members because of the strong affinity they develop with the community of mentors. As noted above, the role of community can play a huge role in increasing the sense of belonging for individuals (Goler et al., 2018). Alternatively, the Critical Consciousness participants gain coupled with their inability to create necessary change because of the context where they reside could encourage program members to leave the institution. As discussed in Chapter 4, although some participants in this study expressed a stronger affinity with the institution because of the Summit community, others felt they needed to leave the institution because of their new understanding women could not succeed as leaders at AU. In order for institutions to capitalize

on the potential retention benefits connected to involvement in a program like Summit, the institution needs to ensure that participants feel that they have the power and influence to enact change.

An additional implication is a program like Summit has the potential to upset the status quo within higher education institutions. It has the potential to shift ways of doing things and center voices that may have been previously overlooked, which institutions may or may not embrace. However, the landscape of higher education has historically been an environment seeking to be adaptive and progressive so institutions may welcome programs pushing for equity, inclusivity, and shared power and influence.

Recommendations for AU and Directions for Further Investigation

The study indicates participants are affected by the negative effects of the sexist culture of AU; the same culture in which undergraduate women graduate with lower self-esteem than when they matriculated. It is difficult to formulate recommendations that do not play into this sexist culture, namely because it is clear men need to be involved in order to enact change because men hold the power, particularly at AU. However, educating men of the reasons to make change actually just perpetuates the subjugation of women because it puts the power to make change exclusively in men's hands. The following list are four recommendations for next steps specifically at AU that would address the broader culture that promotes institutional sexism:

1. Convene a campus climate committee to examine the status of women on campus (students, staff, and faculty) and develop a strategic plan to address those findings. Ensure that the committee is comprised of men and women in leadership positions who can work together and compound their power to enact change. The institution

must move beyond convening a small group of women and include decision makers who have the potential to influence the president.

2. Conduct an additional study with a wider focus that further investigates intersections of oppression employees at AU face. It is important to note a critique of feminist theory has been that early definitions of "women" only captures a small slice of that group, namely White women, straight, cisgender women of an upper middle social class. Critical race feminists have advocated for a more inclusive definition of "women" to include individuals of all racial backgrounds, sexualities, and social classes that identify themselves as women (Ropers-Huliman & Winters, 2011).
3. Engage the current Summit mentors in a Participatory Action Research project to identify a small-scale structural change (outside of mentoring) that they could make which would positively impact undergraduate women, and conceptualize and implement that change. This would help to locate the ceiling of the power of women with influence on campus coming together to combine efforts to enact change.
4. Annually build a Summit mentor team that consists of half new mentors and half returning mentors. This will allow more women to join the program and to contribute to and to reap the benefits of the Summit mentor community. It will also expand the community of women on campus who possess Critical Consciousness about the institutional subjugation of women and possibly create more pressure for the president to actively combat gender inequity at AU.

These data also raise a number of questions for future research. First, it is important to study additional mentorship programs designed to support undergraduate women to determine if mentors are developing similar levels of Critical Consciousness around institutional sexism. It is

also important to test a program structured like Summit at another institution to see if it is transferable and if it could produce similar effects. Doing so would help to determine if there are other institutional characteristics other than religious tradition and formerly single-sex institution impacting outcomes for undergraduate women in similar ways. The results of this study could be a starting point that inspires other institutions to utilize a similar intervention to ignite change.

Conclusion

This study provides important information about the role of mentorship in shaping mentors' Critical Consciousness (CC) of their own oppression. Whereas much of the current literature on mentorship has focused primarily on the experiences of mentees and much of the literature on Critical Consciousness in mentor relationships focuses on mentors' accrual of CC of mentees' experiences, this study introduces important information about the transformative potential of serving as a mentor on the mentor and possibly on the institution where the mentor resides.

This study confirms that mentor participants did develop Critical Consciousness of their mentees' negative experiences of institutionalized sexism. However, what is more interesting is that they developed Critical Consciousness of their own subjugation as women at Apex University (AU). The data suggests that this transformation is the product of the community that the mentors built with each other. The community mirrored that of early feminist consciousness raising groups (Koedt et al., 1973). The participants created a strong foundation of trust and honestly shared their experiences as women at AU. Subsequently, they made connections between their experiences and understood that they were victims of institutionalized sexism rather than individual oppression.

Participation of institutionally marginalized mentors in mentorship programs that raise their Critical Consciousness of their own oppression could provide them with an important sense of belonging that could increase their investment in the institution. Alternatively, their involvement could reveal the insurmountable systems that are working against them and preventing them from accruing the power needed to ignite change, and discourage them. Either way, it is important to recognize the impact of mentors gaining CC on retention rates of faculty/staff at the institution. An equally important consideration is that, depending on the institution, these findings could be viewed as a threat to the status quo that the institution seeks to maintain or they could be seen as an exciting opportunity to initiate important strides toward gender equity. Further study could provide additional important insights into the power raising the Critical Consciousness of members of an institution through their involvement in mentorship programs.

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

General Introduction

Thank you so much for your willingness to participate in today's interview.

As you know, in addition to leading the Women's Center at AU, I am also a doctoral student in the Higher Education Administration Program. For my dissertation, I am exploring Summit mentors' experiences and trying to understand the impact that serving as a mentor has on the women in the program (both undergraduate women and the mentors themselves).

I have invited all past and present Summit mentors who have served for at least 1 year in the program as of May 2020 to participate in my study. I will provide pseudonyms for all participants and will make sure to eliminate any identifying information. All participants will have an opportunity to review the transcripts of their interview and to provide clarifying information or request that I remove particular parts. Following the interviews, I will reconvene participants to engage in focus groups to provide feedback on my understanding of their experiences in Summit. I will invite you to participate in one of those focus groups.

Explaining the Interview Process

This interview will last about 60 minutes. At any point, you are welcome to take a break or to decide that you would no longer like to participate. I will ask a number of predetermined questions and I may also ask additional questions to clarify or to gather more information about any answers that you provide. You may choose not to answer any of the questions that I ask.

Consent Form

I will review the consent form that I emailed to you along with the reminder of our interview session.

[If meeting in person, share paper copy of form. If meeting via Zoom, share screen to show consent form]

Do you have any questions? *[I will answer questions.]*

Do you agree to participate in this interview?

Is it okay if I record the interview?

Interview Protocol

History in feminist activism/Motivation for joining Summit (Reflection)	Have you been involved in organizations that focus on women's empowerment or gender equity? When did you first get involved in this work? Do you consider yourself an activist? Thinking back to your initial involvement in Summit, can you share your motivation for giving your time and energy to the program? What did you hope to accomplish? What, if any, goals did you have?
Effect of involvement (Action)/**Ability to enact change** (Agency) ***MENTEES***	*As a reminder, Summit includes on- to-one and group interactions with mentees at program-wide dinners, additional meetings scheduled by the mentor/mentees, and preparation and processing lunches with the mentors*. What experiences, if any, in Summit had an impact on your **awareness or understanding** of gender and sexism at the institution? • What about specifically in regards to women students? • Could you provide specific examples? What experiences, if any, in Summit had an impact on your **motivation or sense of agency** around gender and sexism at the institution? • What about specifically in regards to women students? • Could you provide specific examples?

	What experiences, if any, in Summit had an impact on your own **action** around (to mitigate) gender and sexism at the institution? • What about specifically in regards to women students? • Could you provide specific examples? What was meaningful about connecting with and forming relationships with undergraduate students in the program? Can you recount a specific experience or conversation that stands out? In your opinion, what, if any, institutional factors impact undergraduate women's experiences at AU? Describe things that you would like to change about the institution based on your knowledge from Summit? Describe the barriers that are preventing you from accomplishing these changes.
Effect of involvement (Action)/**Ability to enact change** (Agency) ***MENTORS***	What experiences, if any, in Summit had an impact on your awareness or understanding of gender and sexism at the institution? • What about specifically in regards to women faculty or administrators? • Could you provide specific examples? What experiences, if any, in Summit had an impact on your motivation or sense of agency around gender and sexism at the institution? • What about specifically in regards to women faculty or administrators? • Could you provide specific examples? What experiences, if any, in Summit had an impact on your own action around (to mitigate) gender and sexism at the institution? • What about specifically in regards to women faculty or administrators? • Could you provide specific examples? What was meaningful about connecting with and forming relationships with other mentors in the program?

	Can you recount a specific experience or conversation that stands out? Describe anything new you learned from the other mentors.
Effect of involvement (Action)/**Ability to enact change** (Agency)	Based on all your work in this program, do you think any differently about yourself as a woman at this institution? Since your participation in this program, are there things that you have done differently in your role?
Vision for equity (Reflection)	Is AU a sexist institution? Talk about how and when you came to this understanding. What does it mean to you that it is? Does your understanding have anything to do with your Summit involvement? Either your motivation to be in it, how you've experienced it or what you've done? What would social justice look like for women at Apex University?
Additional Information	Is there anything that I didn't ask about that you feel it is important to share?
Additional questions as of 7/13/2021	o Probe into generational and position/level difference – ask if those who are more senior were inspired by smaller changes – or ask if they even noticed. o Ask more junior folks if they were inspired by other junior folks or if was primarily the senior folks who inspired them. o Probe into the lunches more – what was happening there – what was making people think differently? Was it the trust – the vulnerability? o Ask about retention – did Summit relationships affect interest in staying? Did information about student experience affect reason for leaving?

Appendix B: Focus Group Protocol

- Provide detailed overview of the model I created based on the interviews.
    - Provide an explanation of what Critical Consciousness is.
- Ask for open feedback about whether participants feel that their experience is reflected in the model.
    - If so, how?
    - If not, what is missing?
- Ask specifically about the storytelling piece. Was it difficult to share your story? If so, how did you overcome that? How was your story received? Have you ever shared that particular piece of your story at AU?

Appendix C: Email to Member Check Interview Transcripts

Greetings,

I hope you're well.

I am writing to thank you again for participating in my dissertation study and to provide you with a copy of the transcript of your interview. Please note that I have substituted pseudonyms for the institution as well as the program and I refer to you only as a participant number. Please also note that I will not include the full transcript of your interview nor any other participants' interviews in my dissertation to prevent readers from being able to identify you.

Please reach out with any questions or concerns or if I have misunderstood or missed anything that you shared in your interview.

Thank you again for your time,

Katie Dalton

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