

## Learning to Lead in Higher Education: Insights into the Family Backgrounds of Women University Presidents

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*Qualitative methods were used to explore the backgrounds, experiences, and perceptions of ten women U.S. university presidents on becoming leaders. Using the phenomenological research methodology, the presidents were interviewed about their lived experiences of developing the knowledge, skills, abilities, and competencies required for successful leadership in higher education. This paper reports the portion of the results specifically related to insights into the family backgrounds and influences of these women.*

Keywords: Leadership Development, University Presidents, Women and Leadership

According to Brent D. Rubin, author of the book *Pursuing Excellence in Higher Education: Eight Fundamental Challenges*, “Extraordinary challenges face higher education nationally, and leaders with exceptional capabilities are needed to help institutions meet these challenges” (Rubin, 2004, p. 288). Within this new and constantly changing higher educational environment, leaders must now have an exceptional set of capabilities and competencies to help their institutions rise to new levels of excellence and innovation. For this reason leadership development has become a critical topic in higher education today.

The role and leadership abilities of university presidents or chancellors is of particular importance in higher education because of the influence and power these leaders have on the direction and strategy of their institutions and also the relationships they have with government officials, boards of regents, legislatures, business and community leaders and members, and their own faculty, staff, and administrators. Yet, even with the concern about the preparation of future educational leaders, there has been little research published that explores the particulars of the development of current outstanding presidents. Further, even less is focused on the development of high-level women leaders in education. The literature does continuously mention the lack of women leaders in high-level; yet again, few pieces and projects have focused on the deep exploration and investigation of the backgrounds and experiences of successful women leaders. Understanding the influences, backgrounds, and career paths of women who have succeeded in obtaining and maintaining powerful positions of influence within higher education is essential in deepening and broadening our understanding of leadership development as a whole.

During the past decade, work in the human resource development (HRD) arena has expanded to include an interest in development (organization, training, and leadership) in higher educational settings. In fact a current issue of *Advances in Developing Human Resources* focused on organization development and change in universities while a previous issue was devoted to leadership development. Although there is nothing in the HRD arena currently published exploring the development of high-level women leaders, it is clear that many members of the academy are interested and acknowledge that it should be a focus for at least a segment of the HRD community.

### Purpose, Research Questions, and Theoretical Framework

The purpose of the larger research study was to explore the lived experiences of women university presidents related to becoming leaders or learning to lead. It investigated and examined the experiences, influences, backgrounds, career paths, opportunities, assistance, motivation, and perspectives related to the development of important leadership knowledge, skills, abilities, influences, and overall competencies.

This article highlights only the portion of this research specifically focused on the immediate family backgrounds and influences on these presidents. Hence, the primary research question for this segment of the study is as follows: With regard to their family backgrounds and influences, what are the lived experiences of women university presidents related to developing into the leaders they have become today?

Although not previously used in this particular type of research, the family systems theory appears to be a powerful theoretical framework for the focus of this work. This theory explains the basic management systems model of inputs, throughputs, and outputs in a family setting (Hunts & Marotz-Baden, 2003). Bowen’s (1976) family systems concepts are useful in understanding the possible influence (negative or positive) of parents, siblings, and the home environment on the leadership development of women presidents. According to Rodriguez, Hildreth,

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and Mancuso (1999), "From a systems perspective one cannot consider the development of a single child without assuming that the behavior of any one part of a system will influence and be influenced by all other parts of the system" (p. 457).

A few of Bowen's concepts seem to have direct applicability to this research study: 1) differentiation, 2) separation and individuation, 3) triangulation, and 4) boundaries. First, according to Rodriguez et al. (1999), "individuals...can be characterized by their degree of differentiation along a spectrum ranging from fused to enmeshed, well differentiated, autonomous, and individuated" (p. 457). So differentiation is the "individual's inner boundary separating intellect and emotion from relationships with others" (p. 457). Parents and siblings can influence the degree of differentiation an individual may have by events, circumstances, relationship, and the home environment during childhood and youth. Higher differentiation means that an individual can "identify his or her own competencies, needs, and goals, and act accordingly. Well-differentiated individuals can assess others realistically and appreciate others' differences" (p. 457). Second, a related concept is that of separation-individuation which is important for healthy growth and development of a child. When a child feels or believes he or she does not have an individual identity, because it may be fused with that of his or her parent or family member, some of the competencies needed for effective leadership (including individual confidence) may not emerge. Third, problems between spouses (inability to meet each other's needs or to resolves differences) may result in triangulation to "defuse a relationship's intensity" (Rodriquez et al., 1999, p. 458). If a parent forms an alliance with a child and he or she becomes "overly involved or enmeshed with that parent" it may cause the "healthy generational boundaries to be breached" (p. 458). Finally, setting and maintaining clear and consistent (but not overly rigid) boundaries in families can provide a healthy family environment and protect the differentiation of the relationships just described.

### Literature Review

As mentioned previously, there is limit literature that relates to the leadership development of high level women leaders in higher education. However, there is some additional research on high-level women leaders in other arenas: government, political, business, and non-profit. Hence, literature in all of these arenas was explored. Although limited, the existing literature will provide insight into this phenomenon.

A seminal study exploring the development of high-level women leaders was published by Hennig and Jardim in 1977. They interviewed 25 U.S. born successful women CEOs. All were first-born children with some being only children and the others being the eldest in all-girl families with no more than three children. All were born into "upwardly aspiring middle-class families living on or near the eastern seaboard" (p. 77). Twenty-two of the fathers held business management positions while three were college administrators. All but one (a teacher) of the mothers were housewives. The educational level of 23 of the mothers was "at least equal to that of the fathers, and in 13 cases the mother's education was in fact superior to the father's" (p. 77). The parents' education ranged from high school diplomas to a doctorate (held by two fathers). All were American-born Caucasian couples and families, and no patterns were discovered in their religious preference. All of the women remembered their childhoods as happy times. They spoke of the "closeness and warmth of their relationships with their parents, and they felt they assumed a special role in their parents' eyes" (p. 77). These women clearly identified with their fathers, which appears to have been important for their success. However, they tended to look down upon their mothers. The women's recollections of their mothers were "vague and generalized" while the father-daughter relationship descriptions were rich in detail. Hennig and Jardim (1977) purported that this father-daughter relationship was central in the development of skills, abilities, and perspectives needed to be successful leaders.

Three other studies provide insight into pertinent constructs related to this research. First, Woo (1985) found that her sample (current and potential women administrators) all grew up in two-parent middle-income households with mothers who did not work outside the home. The women felt they received encouragement equally from both parents. Second, Waring (2003) interviewed 12 African American female college presidents with eight being raised in two-parent families and two others spending most of their childhood and youth in two-parent homes. All acknowledged parental support as critical to their success; however, two credit their mothers with specifically teaching them how to read people and assess situations. One cites her father and his high expectations, as the reason she was motivated to excel. Finally, from their own research results Keown and Keown (1982) suggested that Protestant females raised by parents with some college education in a solid, suburban community may be other intrinsic factors for success in the corporate business world (p. 450).

It is clear, as Lorenzen (1996) stated, that "a person's inner sense of authority will be developed during childhood in the system of family relations, when the parents express their expectations, ideas, and emotions to their child" (pp. 25-26). And, as Manfred F.R. Kets de Vries explained in an interview with Coutu (2004), the women executives she analyzed had drives that "spring from childhood patterns and experiences that have carried over into

adulthood” (p. 67). Other studies report women citing supportive families (especially fathers, but mothers as well) who constantly prodded them to achieve as foundational elements of success (Hartman, 1999) and a stable family environment as essential to their general development (Coutu, 2004) and, more specifically, feelings of competency (Wells, 1998). Further, Stephens (2003) reported that all of the 30 leaders (church, business, and education) she interviewed remembered having “strong voices and a keen sense of competency as little girls” (p. 51). Childhood years and influences are clearly important in understanding the developmental processes of effective women leaders.

Since the early 1900s, scholars have linked birth-order position to a range of personal characteristics (Andeweg & Berg, 2003). For example, later born children have stronger social skills while first-born children are more likely to have intellectual and verbal skills. According to some of the early research, first children also seek power to make up for the low estimates of self resulting from being first-born and have all of the parents’ expectations on their shoulders. In a 1982 study, Keown and Keown interviewed 21 women executives who achieved success in corporate management. After comparing their results to those of Hennig and Jardim (1977), they concluded that “being an only or first child and having a college education are still important, but not crucial, factors for success” (p. 450). These results also suggested that being an only or the oldest child from a small family (three children or less) was no longer a crucial factor for success, as Hennig and Jardim had previously purported.

In addition to the work of Hennig and Jardim (1977), other studies also address the influence of mothers. Matz (2002) found that “women, whose self-confidence had been instilled mostly by their parents with mothers rated slightly higher than fathers, never lost it.” (p. iv). She claims that the Ophelia theory that little girls lost their confidence as they grow from childhood into their teenage years and adulthood is not always the case. “This study also contradicts previous research findings that fathers offered the most encouragement.” (p. iv). Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries’ interviewees cited their mothers as being a profound influence, wise, kind, and inspiring while teaching them to learn from challenges and life in general (Coutu, 2004). In Hojaard’s study (2002) the mothers of the female leaders (business, politics, and civil service) were better educated and to a lesser degree full-time housewives than the mothers of the male leaders in her sample. Finally, Robinson (1996) interviewed a sample of African American women leaders in community colleges who with a few exceptions did not have a father in their homes. She stated, “what stands out most in the stories of these women is how very close they were to their mothers...Self-reliance was reinforced when they saw how their mothers and grandmothers without any assistance were able to get things done against insurmountable odds” (p. 50).

The influence of the father has already been addressed in the description of Hennig and Jardim’s (1977) work. Astin and Leland (1991) also found that many of the parents of the leaders (i.e., women who worked for educational and social justice) in their study “communicated the view that their daughter could do anything she wanted to. When this support came from the father it had an even greater impact on the daughter. The importance of paternal endorsement of the daughter’s intellectual strengths has been found to facilitate her intellectual achievement...and a strong career commitment” (p. 45). Cubillo (2003) also explained, “All nine women [leaders in higher education] identified their fathers as a seminal influence in their early education and subsequent careers” (p. 285).

## Research Methods

Twenty-five women university presidents of public and private institutions were invited to be participants in this research study. They were given details of the study and asked for a two-hour block of time to meet with me at their universities for in-depth interviews. The list was compiled from a variety of sources including news articles, a compensation-focused 2003 issue of *Chronicles of Higher Education*, and online searches for women university presidents. These women were invited via email contact, and twelve accepted the invitation to participate. Interviews were scheduled with the ten who could meet between March and June of 2005. Eight of the ten served as presidents or chancellors of strong, well-known research institutions or university systems while two were presidents of well-known teaching-focused comprehensive institutions with strong scholarship expectations. Nine of the ten served in public with only one being from a private institution. Eight were Caucasian and two African American women. Four of these women were in their fifties and six their sixties.

This study was designed as a qualitative interview project that used the phenomenological research approach (Wolcott, 2001). Hermeneutic phenomenology is a human science that studies individuals (Van Manen, 2001). Van Manen explained that “phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (p. 9). This approach appeared to be very applicable to this research question.

Interview questions were drafted based on this research methodology, an extensive review of the literature, and the review of other instruments measuring similar constructs for different populations or at lower levels of leadership. They were open-ended probing questions designed to extract all types of information about the presidents’ experiences and perceptions of becoming leaders. Some follow-up questions were asked attempting to

encourage the presidents to search deeper for additional answers and rich descriptions. Questions were reviewed prior to the interviews by two experienced leadership researchers. Slight adjustments to the instrument were made based on their feedback.

The interviews lasted approximately two to three hours each. At the beginning of each interview, the president was asked to read and sign a detailed consent form. A number of steps were utilized to analyze the interviews. First, all interviews were transcribed in full by the researcher and a temporary assistant. Second, each interview was analyzed to categorize responses into specific sections. Third, all of the related responses from all ten interviews were then combined into separate documents. Next, each interview transcript and analyses were reread to identify key ideas and phrases about their experiences related to each particular category. Fifth, all interview phrases or statements were then grouped by topic. The primary themes that emerged from the interviews were then noted. Finally, the presidents were asked to review the themes and results and provide additional perspective and insight into their experiences that may not have been captured in the original interview. Because of the large amount of data collected, only three of these themes (home and family, mothers, and fathers) are discussed in this paper.

## Results

The results section is divided into three subsections: 1) home and family, which addresses the home environment; religious influence/activity; and birth order and sibling information; 2) mothers; and 3) fathers.

### *Home and Family*

All of the university presidents in this study were raised in two-parent homes. Nine of the ten were raised with their biological parents. One president lost both parents early in life (she never knew her mother) but was raised by relatives whom she called her parents. All described their families as modest-middle income families, with two mentioning that they were poor at times. Two others said they were probably poorer than they had thought but they didn't realize it until they were in college and met others who had so much more. One president explained, "My needs were met. We were always well cared for and had good food. My mother and grandmother made most of my clothes. I didn't know that everyone didn't do that until I got to college. It was a good, loving, supportive, steady, wonderful childhood." Another mentioned she was "raised by loving parents who encouraged and inspired" her and who instilled in her "a lifelong love of learning." All participants described their homes as being generally stable, safe, supportive, and loving environments although one mentioned some turmoil and issues at times.

Eight of the ten women mentioned that their religious beliefs and church participation was an important part of their upbringing. Some described specific concepts learned through their religious activities or specific events that taught them important lessons for life. One president said she only attended church (no specific one) when it was convenient and was not particularly influenced by it and the other did not mention religion in the interview.

Three of the ten presidents were only children. Interestingly, two of these presidents believed they did not have all of the characteristics of an only child because of unique situations. One was the only child of biological parents who died early in her life and was raised by relatives who had other children. The second was raised in a small town and grew up with a group of close-knit peers who were "much more like siblings than friends and peers." Three presidents were the first born in multiple children families; hence, six were first or only children, three were second, and one was the third child in her family. Seven of the presidents were raised with at least one brother, two with older and five with younger. All women with siblings had at least one brother; no presidents were born into all girl families. Three presidents had no siblings; three had one; one had two; two had three; and one had four siblings.

### *Mothers*

Nine of the ten mothers of these university presidents attended college for at least a few years after high school. One earned a master's degree while eight completed college programs (bachelor, associate, or certificate). The types of degrees varied with two acquiring school teaching degrees and the others completing programs in areas such as dietetics, political science, English, museum studies, nursing, home economics, and medical technology.

Eight of the ten mothers were fulltime homemakers when their children were young, while two mothers worked fulltime throughout their daughters' upbringings. One of these eight went back to work full-time after her daughter started attending elementary school. Three of them worked part-time when their children got older. As for the mother's occupational areas, three were school teachers; two worked in non-administrative business positions; two worked in social work/welfare; two in the nursing/medical field; and one mother never worked outside the home.

All of the university presidents described their mothers (some at great length). The majority of comments were positive, loving, and understanding. Some of their short statements included the following: my mother felt fortunate to have me; my mother had high expectations for us; my mother instilled in me a love for learning; my mother loved being with me; my mother made happy times; and my mother taught me things and taught me well. The presidents described the types of things about their mothers that were influential and memorable to them. One woman stated

My mother was very dedicated and skillful. She made all my clothes through high school including mock dresses. She did my hair and went with us on hikes, picnics, and huckleberry picking expeditions. She made happy times. She was always very busy, but I never had the sense she was overwhelmed. She had an amazing capacity to adjust and adapt and had a wonderful sense of humor.

Another described her mother's influence as follows:

My mother was influential in my life. She was the only woman I knew, except for my school teachers, who had graduated from college. I was proud of that. I was proud that she expected me to graduate from college. She worked hard to make ends meet with very limited income. As I got older, I began to see how limited the resources were. I was surprised to see how invisible that was. I think people thought we had more than we did because of what she was able to do.

Her mother's college attendance and graduation also made an impact on a president who said,

My mother graduated from college because her brothers worked to send her. They did not get to go, but she was identified out of six children of a very modest income family as the one who should go to college, and she was a woman. I always had a sense of pride that my mother had gone to college.

I extracted all of the words the women used to describe their mothers and have included them in Table 1. Two of the women did make some negative statements (related to short term emotional instability or irrationality regarding certain issues) about their mothers but in all cases they explained what they learned from the experience or behavior and how they now understand their mother's struggles.

Table 1. *Descriptive Words Used by University Presidents about Their Mothers*

<i>My mother was/is...</i>			
Achievement-oriented	Dutiful	Hard worker	Responsible
Active	Educated	Humorous	Role model
Adaptable	Educationally-focused	Independent	Serious about her role
Busy but not overwhelmed	Encouraging	Influential	Skillful as a homemaker
Capable	Energetic	Interested in me	Steady
Caring	Enjoyable to be around	Involved	Supportive
Committed	Flexible	Loving	Thoughtful
Competent	Focused	My best friend	Warm
Concerned about me	Focused on lifelong learning	Playful	Willing to play with us
Creative	Friendly	Problem-solver	Wonderful
Dedicated	Fun	Protective	
Demanding	Great	Resourceful	

#### *Fathers*

Six of the ten fathers went to college, and two of them received master's degrees. Their college degrees included physical education/recreation, physics, engineering, chemistry, agriculture, and secondary education. Five of the six college-educated fathers were employed in the fields of their specific degrees. Of the ten fathers, two were employed as school teachers; two worked in managing family businesses; and the others had careers in sales, the postal service, engineering, entrepreneurship, construction, farming, and manufacturing.

The presidents also described their fathers in some detail. The majority of comments were positive, appreciative, and loving. Many of these statements began with "My father..." and finished with comments like the following: believed in training my mind, cared for me, encouraged me to achieve, felt education was important, focused on the importance of education, had a strong sense of responsibility to his family, had high expectations, helped make sure we had a good time, loved politics and debate, provided helpful feedback, turned inward because of the war, was flexible with roles, and yearned for more education.

These women also share stories and perspectives related to their relationships with their fathers and how their fathers helped them develop beneficial knowledge and skills. One president who described a particularly close relationship with her father said the following:

It was a very formative time. He was teaching us all of the time. His space was a sacred space of inventing and doing important things...He encouraged creativity and hands on doing. We would pursue anything we were interested in. It didn't matter what it was; if we were interested in it, my father made sure we did it. I think that was a really wonderful thing...I practiced problem solving all of the time with my father. He would say, 'The worst thing that could happen is the prototype works the first time, so you don't learn anything from it.' He was always talking; he would be verbalizing what he was doing, thinking, and why it was so. If it worked, 'okay'; if it didn't work 'good'. We would figure it out.... My father was really a big cheerleader of mine my entire life.

Another president described the things she learned from her father at the dinner table each evening:

At the dinner table he talked about the politics of the day, all kinds of topics. It was an interesting conversation at dinner every evening. I loved to learn the argument. I had different opinions than my father about people's needs, welfare, and discrimination. We both loved the argument. That taught me to live in that world.

Another woman told a story about her father teaching her to love learning:

He would sit me on his lap and would say, 'The only thing black people have are our minds. You have to really be able to have your mind trained.' He used to play little games with me with history. I would remember dates. He made learning fun.

Some of the fathers also appeared to have a profound influence on their daughters desire to excel in school and attend college. One described her father as follows:

My father was a wonderful man and very smart, but he didn't get to go to college. It was a burden that he bore throughout his life. It was a theme in his life. Even as a child he knew he was plenty smart enough to go, but he didn't have the opportunity. The depression came, and he couldn't go, but he desperately wanted it. He instilled that yearning and desire in my brother and me.

Another explained:

In high school my dad said, 'When I give you a college education, no one can ever take that away from you, and I know you can take care of yourself.' That had a real strong impact, but I think beyond that they believed that I could, if I wanted to work for it, do anything. Anything could be achieved through hard work.

One president learned from her father that "the inherent value system was that education was a great enabler; and that in order to have options, one wanted to be as well educated as possible. My father's basic mantra was that one had to work hard and aim high." Another said that her father taught her that "Education was always important. It is the great equalizer. The only thing others can't take away from you is a solid foundation and education."

I extracted all of the words the women used to describe their fathers and have included them in Table 2. Some of the presidents shared struggles or challenges related to their fathers (e.g., failed business ventures, war experiences, yearning for different direction in life). It was clear that these women had spent time reflecting on these issues and spoke about them with understanding and insight. They spoke of personal and professional development.

Table 2. *Descriptive Words Used by University Presidents about Their Fathers*

<i>My father was/is...</i>			
Active	Firm about expectations	Logical and rationale	Serious
Brilliant	Firm about standards	Loving, but not warm	Smart
Caring	Focused	Mountain man	Stable
Cheerleader for me	Frugal	Old style master	Strong convictions
Committed	Fun	Outgoing	Strong personality
Creative	Great person	Patient	Supportive
Dedicated	Hard working	Problem-solver	Taskmaster
Deeply religious	Influential	Proud	Teacher to me
Encouraging	Interested in what I was doing	Role model	Warm
Energetic	Inventor	Safe	Wonderful

## Discussion

Bowen's (1976) family systems model provided a theoretical framework for this study. Support for this model did emerge. It appears that all of these women were raised in families that had relatively healthy inputs, throughputs, and outputs which resulted in the development of competencies (including confidence), knowledge, and skills important for successful leadership. The results and discussion also provide evidence of healthy development within the family system with regard to the concepts previously presented: differentiation, separation and individuation, triangulation, and boundaries. The positive influences of their functional family systems are evident.

All of the university presidents in this study were raised in stable, supportive, and generally loving two-parent (or guardian, in one case) modest-middle income families, with some reporting serious financial struggles at times. Most of the women felt their religious beliefs and church participation were important and influential elements of their development and overall upbringing. This study supports the findings reported in earlier work (e.g., Hennig & Jardim, 1977; Keown and Keown, 1982; Woo, 1985) that successful women leaders are primarily raising in two-parent homes. Hennig and Jardim (1977) reported that their women business leaders came from middle to upper income families with fathers who were in management or educational administration. It is clear that although most women in the current study described their families' financial situations as modest, they did develop a middle-class value system, possibly enhanced from influences at school or church. They believed in the American dream, that

they would have viable opportunities for success if they worked hard. They valued education (although one president was the first to attend college in her family) and had somehow developed a real sense of possibility.

The presidents in the current study were in various birth order sibling positions. The seven women with siblings had at least one brother (older or younger). Times have changed. In Hennig and Jardim's study (1977), all of the women CEOs were either only children or the eldest of all-girl families. In 1982, Keown and Keown claimed that this was no longer a crucial factor for success, although it still appeared to be important. Although being an only or eldest child appears to represent the majority of these women (six of ten), this research has found that it does not have to be the case for successful leaders, and it may now be helpful for women to be raised in homes with brothers.

Nine of the ten mothers (compared to six of ten fathers) attended college. It was clear that their mothers' education was a strong model for these women. Many expressed pride in their mothers' college degrees which were in fairly traditional areas for women at that time. In the Hennig and Jardim (1977) study, 23 of the mothers had equal or more education than their fathers with 13 mothers having more than their spouses. Hojaard (2002) and Keown and Keown (1982) also noted the importance of at least some college education for both parents.

Most of these women came from very traditional homes with eight of the ten mothers being fulltime homemakers when their children were young. At least six of the mothers were working either part time or fulltime by the time their children were in school (elementary or secondary). The mothers' employment was in traditional areas for that period of time but, interestingly, most worked in professional positions. Most of these mothers had idealist employment positions generally focused on the future, making a difference, serving others, and even changing the future. They seemed to have a different type of relationship and respect for their mothers when compared to earlier studies (e.g., Hennig & Jardim, 1977). Although the presidents in this study viewed their mothers as loving, committed, and dedicated, most also saw them as influential, competent, strong, intelligent, and fun. Matz (2002) found in her sample that a mother's influence was more profound with regard to self-esteem and inspiration than was their father's. Cautu (2004) also described this phenomenon. When comparing the descriptive words used to describe their mothers and fathers (Table 1 and 2), it appears that more of the words about mothers focused on personal characteristics and relationships, while the words describing the fathers highlighted respect (possibly from a distance), strength, high expectations, and protection. Common themes continue to emphasize two kinds of caretaking: a mother who is affectionate and relationship-focused and a father who is the traditional provider. Yet, there is a non-traditional characteristic about these fathers that will be discussed later.

The presidents described their fathers' occupations as relatively traditional. Only six of the ten went to college. Interestingly, three of the four fathers who had not gone to college, had stronger voices regarding the importance of higher education for their daughters. The fathers (most of them) believed that it was vital to teach their daughters, as well as provide encouragement, opportunities, and education for them to become self-sufficient. There are a number of possible reasons for this emphasis. First, many of these fathers may have served in wars or had close family members or friends who did. With the extended leaves and possibility of death, these fathers may have felt the need for their daughters to be prepared to support themselves and their children. Second, many of their fathers' and grandfathers' occupations may have been very dangerous; lots of them were at that time. It was not uncommon to have men die in the mines, farming accidents, and so forth. Third, these fathers married more educated women who worked in professional jobs. The men may have had an early conviction that education was as important for women as it was for men. Hennig and Jardim (1977) and Astin and Leland (1991) reported that fathers had a stronger influence on the development, aspirations, and educational goals. The current study found a profound influence by both parents but a richer description of the mothers and their influence.

### **Limitations, Suggestions, and Contributions**

There are several limitations to this study that should be discussed. First, although appropriate for this research methodology, this sample was small and therefore, as with other qualitative research studies, generalizability is limited. Second, the twelve women who agreed to participate could have had slightly different experiences and perspectives than the ones that did not want to participate. All of the women who rejected the invitation cited time issues as their concern. It was impossible to interview any of these women to determine any underlying reason for their declines. Third, there could have been other influential reasons why these university presidents became who they became (for instance, self-determination). Furthermore, the family system's theory has some flaws by itself and cannot be applied across the board.

In general, research on high level women leaders in higher education is rare. But even rarer are studies that report in-depth insights into women's experiences and perspectives related to the development of leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities throughout their lives. This requires both more research using qualitative research methodologies and access to more leaders who are willing to provide detail and candor. Detailed descriptions and

perspectives are essential for progress to be made. This research is important for the development of quality and effective leadership development programs, opportunities, or counsel for women during their youth, college, and workplace years and experiences. This study is the first of its kind presented or published in the HRD field. It provides support for possible antecedents, determinants, and mediators for successful female leadership in higher education. It brings to the surface the complexity of leadership development. Although family backgrounds and influences are only a few of the hundreds of possible constructs that may influence the development of leadership competencies, practitioners expecting to achieve high-level skills in leadership would do well to understand them.

The results of this research suggest additional implications for practitioners. The similarities in the family backgrounds and influences of the women university presidents in this study demonstrate evidence of the importance of individual upbringings on personal assumptions, potential aspirations, and leadership development which will probably continue to influence them throughout their lives. By understanding these influences, practitioners can design more effective interventions dependent on an individual's background. By being aware of this information, possible strengths and weaknesses (often hidden) in skills, abilities, perspectives, and self-concepts can be discovered. This depth is essential for practitioners interested in individual leadership development efforts (e.g., coaching) with individuals interested in obtaining high level positions in higher educational institutions.

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