The Invisible Checklist: Ascension Implications for Women of Color Leaders

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Introduction

The pipeline to the U.S. college presidency has long been evaluated by studying the candidates who made it to the helm. We've lauded the successes of an appointment to college presidency as the apex of leadership within higher education. However, we've often missed the opportunity to examine the narratives of leaders who were semifinalists and finalists but did not become appointees. More recently, researchers have begun to analyze the existing pipelines and pathways to the presidency and to consider the well-cited barriers that form for women at the intersection of gender and leadership. This analysis became the research emphasis for my dissertation (Gray 2020) and, previously, for the portfolio of work I led examining the pipeline experiences of women leaders (Gray, Howard, and Chessman 2018).

I always understood there were barriers for campuses, communities, and boards alike to recruit, appoint, and retain women leaders, but the story of women of the global majority [also read as women of color] seemed to be less available in the full scope of literature on higher education leadership. I suspect that is for multiple reasons, including the risk inherent in women sharing their stories, the unfairly distributed labor they carry, and the racialized gatekeeping by journals that invalidate the research from the margins. Whatever the reason, much of the literature ultimately centers the experiences of White women leaders.

Focusing on women leaders broadly centers the experiences of White women, creates the narrative that experiences are generalizable, and gives the appearance that the needle is moving. That is the easy assumption when we read about an increase in women presidents from the years prior—in 2016, 30 percent of college presidents identified as women (Gagliardi et al. 2017). But the hard reality is that only 5 percent of presidents were women of color.

So, for whom is the needle truly moving? Failure to capture the lived experiences in the intersectional identities of historically racially minoritized women is a disservice to creating the pipeline change higher education so desperately needs. This brief presents interviews of women leaders to start understanding those lived experiences.

When this study was imagined, it was with the knowledge that we've seen the highlight-reel versions of many leaders' successes but still need to capture, understand, and minimize harm for others enduring presidential interview experiences. This brief highlights perseverance, despite all of the women clearly articulating an invisible checklist they encountered that is specific to women of color leaders. This checklist often required these leaders to be overqualified and overprepared, but they were then subjected to harmful interview experiences and left to pick up the pieces in a strategic way after failed searches. I saw that these women are the flowers that grow despite tough terrain. Their resilience inspires us, yet we simultaneously ask why women of color have to gain resilience through trauma. This study has implications for higher education broadly—campus search committees, search agencies, and prospective presidential candidates alike. Simply stated: when all women are free, everyone benefits.

Leader Profile and Study Recruitment

It is with great trepidation that I paint the profiles of these women of color leaders. Stating certain positions, institutional types, and regions makes these women much more identifiable than White women or male leaders in higher education because they are few. The women who enter into applicant pools for presidential positions were already leading institutions and doing much of the work. Simply put, they were more than qualified to meet the standards of the presidential roles for which they interviewed. The five women featured in this study have been finalists and semifinalists for presidential roles across institutional types, including two- and four-year institutions and minority serving institutions, specifically Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). There were two women who self-identified as Brown Asian women and three who identified as Black. They hold a myriad of executive leadership roles across campuses and organizations alike. They are provosts, chiefs of staff, directors, interim presidents, and professors. Beyond their professional capacity, some are mothers and wives, and all are community leaders. Their chosen pseudonyms used through this brief are Anna Mary, Kingmaker, Natasha, Zeent, and Zora (see the appendix for additional researcher considerations). I paint these portraits with a delicate brush out of respect for the vulnerability and candor these leaders shared with me. Time spent with these leaders involved tears, many facial expressions, body language cues, and colloquialisms only understood by those belonging to a similar struggle and resilience. Rest assured, I was always convinced my hands and heart were called and capable.

Age and Appearance

The invisible checklist described by the participants in this study often required them to navigate barriers at the intersection of racism and sexism. In the case of many women of color leaders, their age emerged as a threat to being perceived as ready or presidential enough. I noted similar accounts in my dissertation study "I've Got a Testimony: Black Women College Presidents' Ascension Barrier Stories," as Black women presidents in that study were also subjected to criticism related to

perceptions of their youth (Gray 2020). Those presidents were often questioned about experience and encouraged to wait to apply for these roles simply based on age. Similarly, Anna Mary discussed age being used as an excuse for boards to dismiss, undermine, and delay leadership opportunities for women of color:

> I was told that I needed to wait, you know, a little while before I applied for the position and, you know, [there were] just a lot of dissenting voices.—Anna Mary

In addition to youth and perceptions of lack of experience, multiple women in this study talked about the invisible checklist prompts related to attire and the consequences they subsequently incurred for violating them. Black women presidents in my dissertation study reported being subjected to harsh criticism not only for wearing casual clothing outside of work and meeting unspoken but real standards for appropriate dress, but they were also assessed regarding their body shape and size. Most often, the women in that study and this brief alike described a prescriptive look they had to conform to in order to be taken seriously. In some cases, these standards of dress code were taught by professional associations that did so as an attempt to minimize barriers while continuing to perpetuate sexist standards. While it's important to note that many women across racial groups contend with imposed standards of appearance, women of color navigate an added layer related to the perceived need to have a muted appearance. The notion of shining too brightly, standing out, or appearing bold threatened their candidacy.

> I have high-quality business suits that I keep for those interviews, you know, blues and grays, a little pearl necklace or earrings, nothing too bright. I don't typically wear red. I don't wear red for interviews because it's supposed to be a power color, but for a Brown woman, it can be seen as almost too aggressive.—Natasha

Zeent also discussed appearance as a potential land mine for boards in being able to see women of color as professional or presidential:

> I said, 'What was wrong with me?' I thought the interview went well. And she said . . . "One person says, 'She doesn't look official. I said, "'Official?' Does that mean I don't look professional?" I was wearing a suit. I had my hair tied.—Zeent

Another invisible checklist item related to appearance is for women of color leaders to be thin. Anna Mary discussed the feelings that engagement with boards evoked when she considered her attire, including fat-phobic remarks she had heard from board members:

> And, you know, it's almost like we're prostitutes for the board, you know, if you don't look a certain way. . . . I've heard my former board chair refer to a woman as a fat cow. And I was like, you know, just appalled.—Anna Mary

Name and Accent

Naming children allows parents and families to engage in creativity and cultural longevity. Names often also serve as indicators of race, gender, and religion. When names are seen as being outside the standards of western White culture, they are often subject to additional scrutiny at the intersection of racism and sexism (Tahmincioglu 2009). This can particularly affect women of color during the recruitment and interview stages of applying for a leadership position (Francis 2003). It was no different for the women in this study, who reported this as a major concern for whether they would be interviewed for or appointed to presidential roles; this was the case for Natasha and Zeent, who often were aggressed for their names.

> My name definitely has an impact on everything from, you know, whether I get contacted for the first time or not.—Natasha

> I'm always worried about my name, always, especially after 9/11, you know. . . . Sometimes I would feel, oh my God, I'm lucky because of my experience, my educational background, my other accomplishments . . . but I always worry about the name.—Zeent

Additionally, comments were made to women of color about accents and how that may impact their institutional fit.

> I often hear comments, such as, "You're very articulate." English is not the only language I speak, but it's very fascinating for me to hear that as if it's a surprise that a Brown woman is well spoken. . . . "How difficult will it be for you to adjust in a certain part of the country?" I've traveled to 40 countries, you know, it's not hard for me to adjust anywhere, but the suggestion is "Will you fit in this community?"—Natasha

The Woman of Color Tax

Many of the leaders in this series discussed interview processes that were particularly harmful, often involving questions that were not central to the experiences detailed in their resumes, a lack of connection during the interview, and practices that caused them to compromise their personal standards. Most often they described interview processes as exhausting—both long as well as mentally and emotionally taxing. These leaders were subjected to harmful interactions with search committee members including being ignored, refusing to shake hands, and interrogative questioning beyond the normal expectation of a presidential search. This additional tax often led the women to question themselves and to try to find the fine line between fitting in and drawing boundaries. Kingmaker described the interview experience as particularly inhumane:

> You have to have thick skin for this interview within itself because it is very exposing. You expose so much of yourself, and you have to think quickly and you are almost expected to operate at a superhuman level.—Kingmaker

Women of color are critically aware that any action could lead to extreme consequences, which causes them think often about how the perceptions of others may cause them harm. Participants were often judged by their actions during dinners and personal interactions that are part of the interview process. Zeent, in particular, detailed a time she refused a drink because of the adverse reaction she has to alcohol:

> I also made a mistake when we went for dinner . . . she asked me if I wanted a drink. I said no because when I drink wine, I can't sleep very well. I think that was not a good message. So, in hindsight, I should have just had the glass in my hand. Then I would be one of them.—Zeent

Additionally, all the participants were critically aware that they had to be increasingly more prepared and strategic than other candidates who were not women of color. They often described a separate set of rules for preparation that they considered because they knew they would be subjected to additional scrutiny at the intersection of race and gender.

> As a woman of color, I have to demonstrate 150 percent of the accomplishments relative to the rest of the population because you are scrutinized more than another person with the exact same credentials, experience, and background.—Natasha

> So I think that the bar is—no, I don't think, I *know*—that the bar, in terms of qualifications, is set just a little bit higher. Not just a little bit, they're set at least two bars higher for African American women.—Zora

These stories remind us that women of color must meet the standards set for all presidential candidates and the invisible set of standards for women of color. When the searches they engaged in didn't result in an appointment, they were left to pick up the pieces of their lives. They also found themselves treated as targets when identified in public searches.

> It made me feel disrespected. It made me feel like I wasn't being taken seriously. It made me feel invalidated in my work and unaffirmed. . . . It was just painful to see how I could be glossed over and made to be so insignificant.—Anna Mary

> That's always tough because you're picking up the pieces of your personal life that were banking on this, and then you're picking up the pieces of your professional life.—Kingmaker

Relationships

The women in the study often discussed their proximity to others in the dichotomy of good and harmful. They talked about sponsors, mentors, and supervisors who supported and advocated for them and who aided in their advancement. They also discussed the role that allyship from White men and women specifically played in their trajectory. They were very aware that for the tenor of some of these relationships to remain positive, it was contingent upon them not to be perceived as competitors to White allies. Often, when these relationship dynamics change, people who were champions for advancement can turn into major detractors. Natasha succinctly explained the slippery slope of "pet to threat" (Stallings 2020) that women of color face in the academy.

> The minute they realized I was going to be a competitor, it just changed.—Natasha

The interviewed leaders also addressed their relationships with search agencies and consultants within the same dichotomy. While some felt supported by agencies during searches, all were conscious that they may be used to fill an agency's portfolio when they are looking to add the appearance of racial diversity with no real intention to support the ultimate hiring of these candidates. Simply stated, the women in the study were looking for greater transparency from search agencies.

> To some, even within the same firm, a diversity candidate is just filling a quota. To others, it is more important. I have experienced both.—Natasha

> Look, just tell me now, are you trying to check a box off? Are you trying to say I got so many women, so many Black women, so many Black men?—Kingmaker

These leaders learned that the relationships they have with colleagues who seem like allies often have limits to which gendered racism impacted the extent that they felt supported. Tokenization from search agencies created a dynamic where these leaders had to decide whether the searches they participated in were real or merely held for the sake of institutions being able to claim they are not racist.

Bent, Not Broken

The women in this study had been semifinalists and finalists more than once. One conclusive statement they all shared was that there are no guarantees. Despite being qualified and prepared, they understood the invisible tax may impact their chances of an appointment.

> Just because you know that you are a good candidate and have done well in your previous roles and have interviewed well and have had good interactions with stakeholders, it doesn't mean that you will be hired. It is sobering.—Natasha

The women were in different healing stages; some were feeling less inclined or skeptical to enter searches, while others were persisting as candidates in active searches. Despite the precarious nature of presidential searches these leaders faced, they were still hopeful that a presidency could happen for them. Their hope, though bent, had not been broken. Some even doubled down on the belief that higher education benefits greatly from women broadly and women of color specifically, as leaders at the helm of institutions.

> And so, I can't not do the work that I'm called to do because I'm afraid. And it's a very scary process because you just don't wanna continue to put yourself out there to get beat up and, you know, rolled over, you know, and all of that. But then on the other side of it is that these institutions need us and they need women who bring to bear things that men just cannot.—Anna Mary

Conclusion and Tangible Takeaways

The five stories interwoven into this analysis remind us that higher education has work and disruption to do in support of women of color leaders. Here are some takeaways and recommendations that can inform how institutions can proactively assess their processes to change how women of color leaders experience their candidacy:

- Answer the call for greater transparency. This includes greater candor from search agencies on their portfolio building to ensure that women of color and other historically minoritized people are not only functioning as quota fillers. It also means that boards of trustees need to be clear about what they want in a candidate, both in personal and professional experience.
- Institutions should be careful to vet search agencies' commitments to equity in policy and practice prior to hiring. Understanding an agency's commitment to these ideals could have a positive effect on the recruitment experiences of women of color.
- Campus search committees and search agencies should also consider ways to recognize presidential leadership capacity beyond the traditional pathways to the presidency, as many women of color on the potential path to leadership are impacted by gatekeeping in the ranks of faculty.
- Institutions should reimagine the presidential interview process through search committee training, intentional protocol development, and interview planning.
- Institutions and search agencies should also consider when and how to share names publicly, as it may impact candidates—particularly women of color—negatively after a failed search.
- It is essential for search agencies, boards, and professional associations to undergo bias training with specific techniques for awareness and disruption of problematic practice. Professional associations, which lead much of the training around presidential preparation, may be unintentionally perpetuating problematic standards around appearance, training, and interviewing for women of color—essentially acting as enforcers of the invisible check-list. This emerged as a conversation point for most of the leaders in this study. Many of them were taught what it meant to be presidential, and fitting that mold often required them to leave pieces of themselves behind as they climbed the ladder to leadership.

It's important to recognize that although organizations are sharing their understanding of promising practices, there is still much work to do in addressing the systemic issues impacting women of color leaders. Simply put, overtraining already qualified women of color is akin to over-pruning a flower while ignoring the soil it grows in. While this study doesn't propose that these are the generalized standards for women of color leaders in the academy, it does show us the necessity of paying close attention to and disrupting systems that negatively impact women of color leaders.

Appendix: Researcher Considerations

What emerged from this study was the reality that beyond shared gender identity and the systemic oppression of sexism, women of color experience an additional checklist of requirements. This checklist is not one that women of color, prospective candidates, or search agencies can easily find in writing, but it exists with full clarity within the stories of those who have lived it. Many of the stories captured in this study detail the daily relationship women of color leaders have with harm, healing, and hope. For that reason, this study used a narrative approach to understand and re-story the lived experiences of women of color leaders who have been finalists and semifinalists but never appointed to a U.S. college president role. The participants in this study were recruited through various mediums including social media, snowballing, and purposeful sampling. The methodological approach allowed participants to share space and stories with me and to engage in choosing how their stories were shared.

For some participants, the re-storied accounts were particularly important to review for confidentiality. Participants reviewed transcripts and provided edits for clarity or safety; some wanted to know exactly which quotes would be used. This is a methodological consideration for researchers who are looking to work with women of color leaders in the future: be prepared to discuss confidentiality early and often, allow for multiple opportunities for member checking, and understand the risk. One participant dropped out of the study and cited fear of retaliation, as she was at that point still in an active search process. Simply put, these participants have a greater perception of the risk of their identity and stories being recognized. When these leaders returned to their original campuses after failed searches, many reported feeling shifts in relationships. This slippery slope from support to threat is one that women of color have to contend with often.

Regarding the process of participant recruitment, it is important to mention the number of responses from White women and men alike who named women of color who they felt should participate or who volunteered to co-lead the study with me. Even in capturing the stories of the women of color, other people who were not women of color felt compelled to center themselves while simultaneously asserting their ability to identify participants and carry out this study.

Other researcher considerations include putting women of color at the forefront of collecting these stories, as body language and other colloquial speech patterns are not as readily captured or interpreted without preexisting familiarity. I certainly believe that my identity as a Black woman; a researcher of women and, more specifically, of women of color leaders in higher education; and an HBCU graduate, among other attributes, created a space in which these leaders were able to participate without performance.

Another consideration is in the naming or assignment of pseudonyms. Allowing the women in the study to choose their names was important in a world where women of color are often judged harshly and subjected to discrimination based on their names. Many of the women in the study made note that they were never asked in previous studies how they identify racially or what they'd preferred to be called in their profiles. This is a reminder for researchers that they can create space in their work for the autonomy and cultural relevance of study participants.

Limitations

A major limitation of this study was that there were no participants who identified as Latina, Indigenous, or non-Brown Asian. While I am critically aware that any of the women in this study may identify as Latina or Indigenous, none explicitly identified as such for this study. Further research is needed on how women with these identities understand and navigate pipeline journeys, barriers, and support mechanisms. As stated previously, the freedoms of all women are contingent upon theirs. An additional limitation includes wrestling with how to state individual racial and ethnic identities in a society that labels all non-White women by blanketed terms. The term "women of color" simply falls short.

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