S. D. RICHARDSON

Higher Education Leaders as Entre-Employees: A Narrative Study

Sydney D. Richardson[1]
North Carolina A&T State University, USA

ABSTRACT

During 2020, the world experienced a pandemic that led to sickness, death, and a global shutdown. Businesses closed, governments worked to keep people paid during the shutdown, children learned from their homes, and adults worked from home (for those who could). Other adults lost their jobs due to downsizing during the pandemic, while others quit their jobs, starting the great resignation (Cook 2021). Among those affected were African American women who launched their own companies, even those with leadership roles in higher education. Whether they did so as a side business or as a second full-time career, the pandemic provided them an opportunity to take a risk. While starting a business is a cause for a celebration, the reasons behind women leaders in higher education starting their own companies is more complex. The purpose of this study, using narrative inquiry and semi-structured questions was to understand why African American women leaders, working in higher education, chose to launch their businesses during the COVID pandemic. Analyzing the participants' life stories, the researcher discovered that familial history of entrepreneurship, inequities in the workplace, and valuing authentic leadership led African American higher education leaders to create businesses for themselves while also remaining in their higher educational roles, which they enjoyed.

KEYWORDS: entre-employees, narrative research, higher education, African American women.

In higher education, women earn approximately 80% of what men earn and women of color earn an even lower percentage even though pay rates have increased over the decades (Bichsel & McChesney, 2017). The percentage of women in top executive positions is less than thirty percent, with most women in the roles of Assistant Deans and Department Chairs/Department Heads. At the Dean, Vice President/Chancellor, Provost, and Presidential levels, the percentages of women are even less. At the professor level within the United States, women comprise less than one-third of full professors, with most at the assistant and associate professor rank; however, women are obtaining advanced degrees at increasing levels (Vaughn et al., 2020). The numbers of assistant and associate professors lessen when accounting for race and gender with seven percent being Asian/Pacific Islander women, four to five percent being African American women, and three percent being Hispanic women as of 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). American Indian women make up less than one percent of university assistant and associate professors.

---

[1] Corresponding Author: An Associate Professor of Leadership Studies at North Carolina A&T State University. E-Mail: sdrichardson09@gmail.com

Within the entrepreneurial world, women often create businesses out of necessity, struggle with finding funding and investors, and often take longer to earn a profit than their male counterparts (Gupta et al., 2020; Mair & Marti, 2006). Minority business owners report issues of discrimination that further impede their opportunity to grow their businesses and receive the necessary funding to place them on a successful path (Choi et al., 2022; Panda, 2018). Needless to say, women within leadership and entrepreneurship face challenges not common to other groups. However, the pandemic caused the world to shift in many ways, with forty-two percent of African American women representing new businesses (Umoh & Garrett, 2020).

Women, especially African American women and other women of color launched businesses from their homes. While many businesses closed their doors during the pandemic, first-time women entrepreneurs were successful during that time; about forty-nine percent of pandemic entrepreneurs were women (Masunaga, 2021). While some did so out of necessity (i.e., due to lost wages during job cuts), others did so because an opportunity presented itself (Grandy et al., 2020; Mustafa et al., 2016). There was a need to be met and the women had a desire to meet that need even while working a full-time or part-time job. In other words, women, especially minority women, became entre-employees (Hankel, 2018). One particular group that became entre-employees was women higher educational leaders.

Women employees in higher education worked from home, juggled caregiving duties, completed additional housework, attended long virtual meetings, and accomplished other work duties such as advising, mentoring, teaching, and research (if it was possible) (Pettigrew, 2021). While this proved difficult, they also took inventory of their past skills and talents and launched companies that placed their unused skills and talents in front of others. As the participants confirmed, many started consulting companies, opened bakeries, tech coaching companies, and other product-based businesses. Having autonomy over one's schedule allowed the women to control a piece of their lives that no one else controlled, which was an appealing feature in a world where they were constantly at the mercy of others, often blending personal (home) and public (professional) spheres (Gherardi, 2015). Being an entre-employee provided the best of both worlds. This study explores the narratives of African American higher education leaders who work as entre-employees. Through their stories, I explain the main themes that led them to launch their businesses and lead unapologetically.

Literature Review

Women in Leadership

While women earn advanced degrees progressively, they are not matching those levels at higher faculty and senior leadership positions within academia. Research suggests that women have a lower aspiration to lead in organizations than men; however, this is due to a number of factors (Fritz & Knippenberg, 2018; Hannum et al., 2015). Organizations with little to no flexible work policy, gender discrimination, and lack of mentorship or sponsorship programs for women may contribute to reasons why women have lower leadership aspirations (Guillen et al., 2018). Evidence of imposter syndrome among women in academia across career levels also could contribute to lower aspirations, especially if women do not have advocates on their behalf or mentors to assist them in the early parts of their careers (Vaughn et al., 2020). Another reason limiting leadership aspiration is that advice that works for men may not work for women. For example, employees may be told that to aspire to leadership positions, one should be pro-social and display confidence; however, that may not be deemed a positive trait coming from women if those traits do not align with societal views of how women should perform in the workplace (Guillen et al., 2018). "With regard to gender and career equality, the consequences are that women and men are valued differently with the meanings and trajectories

of their careers constituted by hierarchical valuing of stereotypical masculine rather than feminine characteristics" (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018, p. 815).

In other roles, they still face extreme levels of responsibility that are unaccounted for. In higher education, women faculty felt the weight of attempting to balance their research, teach classes, and care for children or elderly family members while taking on more housework (Bateman & Ross, 2020; Gherardi, 2015; Pettigrew, 2021). In other areas of higher education, women faculty members saw a loss of wages as colleges closed classes with low enrollment. "Women tend to be assigned heavier course, service, and advising loads relative to their male counterparts" (Hannum et al., 2015, p. 66). African American leaders report being undervalued, overworked, over-scrutinized, and given unclear expectations at work, which also limits how they are seen as leaders (Sales et al., 2020). This influences how others view women as leaders when it comes to promotions or nominations to advanced roles. However, none of the reasons listed demonstrate that the problem is women, but organizations that operate from a lens of inequality in which those who do not look or act like the dominant worker may suffer (Acker, 2006).

Women Entre-Employees

There is very little research on entre-employees, let alone women entre-employees. To date, one article separates entre-employees from those who run side businesses or participate in the gig economy. Hankel (2018) describes entre-employees as those who work for an employer while also operating a business as an entrepreneur. This person does not want to leave her current job, as it brings fulfillment; however, the entrepreneurship side also fulfills a need as well. Without realizing it, the world may have seen an increase in entre-employees during the height of the coronavirus pandemic. Among women, the focus of many of their businesses were community and needs based, providing a social responsibility to others (Bullough et al., 2022). "During and after most crises, entrepreneurship became a key driver of community response and recovery during the pandemic" (Behr & Storr, 2022, p. 310). Other scholars found that social entrepreneurship and social responsibility increased during the pandemic as well, where profit was not the main focus of a company (Kamaludin et al., 2022). At the same time, women entrepreneurs faced obstacles such as navigating the world of funding policies. Many funded their own businesses from their bank accounts, as small business grants held requirements that were not easily met. Requirements such as operating for a certain number of years first, profiting six-seven figures, or being opportunity based instead of need-based served as barriers to many women entrepreneurs receiving funding (Conroy & Low, 2021; Dy & Jayawarna, 2020; Fabeil et al., 2020). While normal routes to entrepreneurship were limited to women, those who were entre-employees launched lowly, online, and used their own savings to get started (Masunaga, 2021).

Narrative Research

Narrative research reveals new ideas and theories by telling the truths of others, using their stories as a guide (Andrews, 2021). Whether listening to the story of one participant or six, narrative research does not require more than one participant to study, although many researchers will obtain the life stories of more than one person (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, narrative research reveals stories as the participants present them, in a non-chronological way. With narrative inquiry as a valid form of research in leadership studies, the researcher is responsible for ensuring that the events which participants speak of actually occurred (Klenke, 2016); however, one cannot fully complete this without additional resources. It is up to the researcher and storyteller to make meaning of the events, aligning them with other validated materials such as scholarly articles, news reports, archives, documentaries, and more to

understand the full story of what is presented. It is also important for researchers to understand that narrative research takes tales about a historical moment in time as participants remember it, and that is how storytellers (i.e., researchers) write about those moments (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Nobe-Ghelani, 2018). It is important for narrative researchers to understand the way in which participants construct their stories in order to retell them to audiences (Hickson, 2016).

Narrative inquiry developed during the late 1980s/early 1990s and seeks to make meaning of people's lived experiences, often from the position and identity in which others convey the story (Caine et al., 2013). The narrative methodology is the view that humans lead storied lives. While it may seem new to the social sciences, it is not new to the humanities, where oral storytelling is centuries old. The narrative methodology often involves social constructivism, where the researcher and participant make meaning as co-constructors about the participant's experiences (Hickson, 2016). Within narrative research and storytelling is also the counter-story, which allows stories from marginalized groups to be shared, offering a differing perspective (Maylor et al., 2021).

Reflexivity in Narrative Research

The positionality of the researchers is important in qualitative methodology, as narrative inquiry recognizes subjectivity instead of objectivity (Dodgson, 2019). Stemming from ethnographic research, reflexivity allows the researcher to describe his or her own self-awareness of the study and how it influenced the way in which the research is conveyed (Hickson, 2016). It is awareness of how researchers interpret their experiences by listening to others' stories, along with what they bring to the experience (i.e., their positionality). In social-justice work, reflexivity can be messy because it requires researchers to recognize the ways in which they fight to disrupt systems that they may also be a part of (Nobe-Ghelani, 2018). In this way, it can serve as a form of resistance against hierarchical structures, with the participants' stories serving as counter-stories (Wolgemuth, 2014). For this reason, it may not be possible or useful for narrative researchers to bracket themselves; instead, they can use reflexivity within narrative research (Clandinin, 2006).

Reflexivity is about positionality and transparency in one's research to explain the context to the readers. In simple terms, positionality answers the question of how the researcher's self-identification (i.e., race, class, gender, education, career, historical upbringing, etc.) influences their research (Massoud, 2022). One's reflexivity and positionality should be transparent throughout a research document (Dodgson, 2019). Through the practice of reflexivity and establishing one's own positionality, the researcher "draw(s) on preexisting discourses and categories for stories to become comprehensible and meaningful" (Nobe-Ghelani, 2018, p. 417).

Positionality Statement

My work, focusing on African American women entre-employees within the academy, is social justice oriented as the participants work to disrupt capitalistic and oppressive systems in which they also operate. However, as a Black woman entre-employee working within the academy, I also recognize the dichotomy of working to disrupt an unjust system while also working within it as a leader. I have my own experiences of sexism, racism, invisibility, hypervisibility, and tokenism. However, as a leader in the academy, I have learned to lead in a way that is authentic to me, even if it appears differently to others, and I have my own stories of acting as a gatekeeper in certain roles, regardless of the reasons. As an entre-employee, I also have my own experience of creating a business out of a creative passion to contribute to the world in a way that is different from my life as an academic. Therefore, I am able to relate to my participants, subjectively, because their stories resonate with my own experiences and vice

versa, and I shared my role and experiences with the participants to establish credibility and trust.

In narrative study, by using the participants' words and understandings of events, places the creator of knowledge with the participants, as well as with the researcher (Rolon-Dow & Bailey, 2022). Throughout conducting this research, I had to journal my thoughts in order to remain aware of my own biases and the ways in which those biases influenced my interpretation of the stories that I collected. For example, I had to remain open to new experiences that the participants shared. Although we were alike in many aspects, our experiences were not exactly the same. I made sure to use the participant's words, verbatim and not rewrite them as I interpreted them, which kept this a co-creation.

Case and Methodology

Snowball Sampling

For this study, I used the snowball sampling method, as I felt that it would provide minimal risk for myself and the participants. Snowball sampling involves asking others for recommendations of possible participants for a research study. For this research topic, I started with seeds or contacts I knew who might be able to recommend participants who fit the research criteria (Parker et al., 2019). The participants needed to self-identify as (1) a woman, (2) an African American, (3) an entre-employee (one who works as an employee for an organization and runs her own business, and (4) a leader in higher education. I did not specify what I meant by the term *leader* as titles and responsibilities differ according to the type of institution. This proved helpful because, as Staller (2021) mentioned, snowball sampling enables the researcher to connect with segments of the population that the person may not have access to. Based on the recommendations of my initial contacts, I emailed seven potential participants individually. Within the email, I introduced myself, my reason for emailing each one, and attached the Internal Review Board (IRB) approved consent form. From that request, four women responded, saying that they wanted to be a part of the study.

After I confirmed the criteria with those women, I then asked each one to recommend anyone else who might fit the criteria for the research. I also posted a request on a Facebook group that tailored itself to African American women in higher education, which yielded no results. Based on the recommendations of the four participants, I then contacted six additional women, and two agreed to serve as additional participants, based on the research timeline provided to them. Therefore, I ended up with a total of six participants. Because narrative studies result in rich information with a small number of participants, this study was able to attain saturation and rich data from the life stories of six participants (Creswell, 2013).

Because the study took place during the pandemic and U.S. lockdown, I offered to meet with the participants via Zoom and I gave them the option of meeting and recording their interviews individually or as a group. Three of the participants were able to meet for individual interviews and the other three wanted to meet as a group based on the time limits of their schedules. Although I recorded the interviews, I also took notes as a backup. A few days after recording the individual interviews, I met with the participants who wanted to meet as a group, and I recorded their interviews. They confirmed that they did not know each other before starting the interviews. Altogether, the interviews took approximately six hours, as each participant recounted her life story and then answered additional semi-structured questions. The purpose of requesting their life stories was to gain perspective on who the participants were without the confines of them being academicians or entre-employees. There were no parameters for their storytelling, and they could begin their life stories from any point in history. For each participant, aside from telling her life history, she also answered the following questions:

1. How would you now describe your leadership style as a result of being an entre-employee?
2. Is there anything else that you would like to share that has not already been shared?

These questions allowed the participants to use their life stories as a foundation for answering the questions, and it allowed them to stay in control of the interviews. As co-constructors, having control of the narrative remains important for continuing trust between the participants and me.

Participants

All participants worked full-time jobs as leaders in higher education and managed their own businesses at the same time. In terms of leadership, the participants identified in at least one of the following roles: director, faculty/department chair, dean, vice president, executive director, assistant/associate dean, or assistant/associate vice president. The role of leader also meant that the participants had to supervise and mentor others. At the time of the study, each participant worked in a predominantly White institution; however, they had worked in other types of institutions prior to their current jobs. They also had over twenty years of experience in higher education, each, and they began operating their own businesses either at the beginning of the pandemic or a year prior. However, each participant spoke of having ideas for launching her own business earlier in life.

Coding

When the women spoke, they elaborated on their own experiences in a number of ways. For the focus group, each woman would expand on her experience after hearing one of the other participants speak. What started as a single story per participant became a connected story based on collaboration (Moen, 2006), where one person's experience connected to another's experience. When interviewing a single participant, the same event occurred, but in a different way. The participant would elaborate based on my non-verbal cues, such as a head nod to confirm understanding or a laugh after the participant laughed while telling her story. Those non-verbal cues seemed to offer comfort and encouragement for the participant to continue building her story. There were also times when silence was necessary.

As a researcher, I made sure not to speak or make a sound at times and allowed the silence of a moment to occur. When a participant (in a single interview) stopped speaking, the silence between the researcher and the participant served as a space for the participant to think and ponder on the recent revelation. The same thing occurred during the focus group. That pondering led to more of the participant's openness, self-reflection, and honesty about the experience, which then led to the participant sharing additional experiences and reflections.

After each interview and group interviews, I manually transcribed the data. I then listened to the interviews while reading the transcriptions to ensure that I transcribed the words, sentences, phrases, and even non-verbal language accurately. This took place three times, although doing so three times is not a requirement. I then began coding/disassembling the interviews thematically based on full stories, as well as segments of stories that aligned among all or the majority of the participants (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014). "A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Doing so allowed the meanings to emerge from the data through the themes (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

Findings

When it comes to reporting the findings of a narrative study, it is always important to reflect the true words and experiences of participants. "Narrative researchers also understand narrating, and therefore narrative interviewing, as an action where people actively construct their experience in-the-moment. The selves of narrative research are therefore nonunitary, continually shifting, and, overall, performative" (Wolgemuth, 2014, p. 588). Reporting the words of the participants as they state them helps readers understand the feelings and interpretation of the participants, along with what it means to the study.

After interviewing the participants and transcribing their narratives, the following themes emerged as contributing to their work as entrepreneurs and employees in higher education: (1) family history of entrepreneurship, (2) disillusionment with the academy, and (3) reasons for launching their own businesses. The participants showed that the three aspects often overlapped, with one affecting the other, as shown below in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Themes of Women Entre-employees in Higher Education
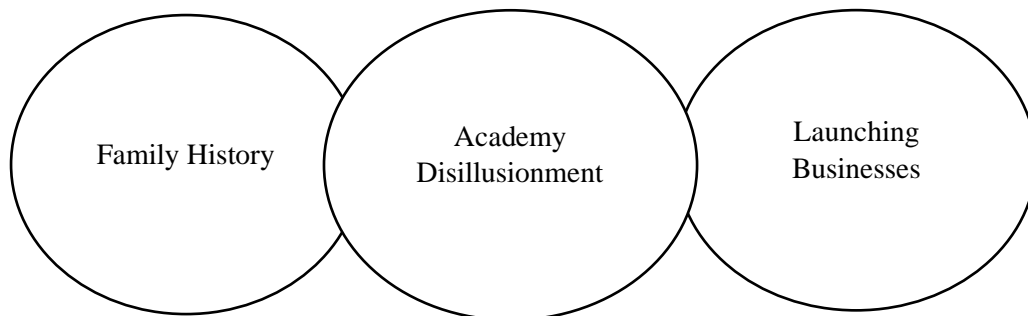
Family History of Entrepreneurship

When the participants reflected on and spoke of their life stories, they all revealed that although they never originally planned to run their own businesses, entrepreneurship had always been a part of their family history via role modeling from someone in their childhood (Brown & Trevino, 2014). As one participant explained:

> *My dad actually owned his own security company for a season, and we also used to own a corner store here in [city] when I was a kid. So it's [entrepreneurship] always been in our blood to own businesses. Growing up, I would sell candy to classmates in the hallway. So that was like my first round with being an entrepreneur. That [entrepreneurial spirit] carried me into college. In college, I braided hair essentially in my dorm room. If I had a phone bill that was due, I would braid enough here to pay the phone bill or there was something else [to pay for]. If I needed gas money, I would come take on enough clients for the week to get that. So, I think I saw it modeled for me early on with my parents and them having the corner store; then, they eventually sold the store and my dad opened his security company and that allowed me to see the inner workings of what it takes to be an entrepreneur, and there's almost like a spirit of resilience that you need to have to weather the storm, because I did [have to weather the storm.]*

Another participant spoke of her family history with entrepreneurship. It was something that she was taught at an early age:

> *I do come from a family of entrepreneurs. My grandfather started many businesses and my own father actually encouraged us [the kids] by having me set up my own snack stand when I was probably 5 years old. As early as I can remember, we'd screen movies in my family basement for the neighborhood and I had my own snacks. I sold candy, popcorn, drinks. Now I appreciate that experience [of selling] cause I think it kind of set the bar. . . at least implanted the thought that you can own something.*

Another participant talked about seeing entrepreneurship first-hand through her grandmother, who expanded her business into a family-operated business:

> *My grandmother, who had been a housekeeper for twenty-five years, opened up a [group] home. She stopped working in housekeeping and opened up a group home, which took a lot because she had to get a state license and she didn't have a high school diploma, so she had to get that [first]. Then she had to purchase a home for the group home, so it also evoked home ownership and she worked [operating the group home] herself for a couple of years and then it grew and she had to hire employees and it became a family business. It also sparked educational pursuits. Like my sister got her degree in human services so that she could work in the business. So it sparked education, trades, and revenue streams and this was all done by a black woman. That was very powerful for me. That was distinctive. It wasn't something that you did for self, but it was communal. This business was never meant to be solely for her; it was meant to be for the family. So when I started my business, I knew immediately that the goal was to build generational wealth.*

When reflecting on her life, another participant shared her story of her grandfather's perseverance and how that influenced her reason for moving forward in her business:

> *I just remember my grandfather, speaking of ups and downs, being a successful black contractor, but also not getting bids and being overlooked for some jobs. He just seemed so discouraged sometimes when he was trying to push things [his business] forward. I think that's why I do my business, wanting to do something about inequities that we see in businesses, especially black businesses. But also, my grandfather, kind of [seeing] his pain and his kind of disappointment in not being able to really launch a more successful business is what drove me to want to try it myself.*

Role modeling through either childhood or adulthood provides aspects such as goal embodiment, attainability, and desirability (Morgenroth et al., 2015). In this case, the role models served as models of possibility for the participants. Brown and Trevino (2014) suggest that childhood role models, specifically parents/guardians serve as modeling components of ethical leadership through their values, the standards that they set, and the way in which children regard them due to familial closeness. Growing up, the participants did not envision themselves

as entrepreneurs, but when the time presented itself to delve into business launching, the women reflected on those from their childhood and what those role models accomplished in a barrier-filled world. In their role models, they saw additional features such as competence, success, and group belonging (Ahn et al., 2020). These role models also showed them how to navigate barriers via values and behaviors, which contributed to the ways in which the entre-employees navigated their own lives via altruism, ethics, and perseverance. This provided the participants with the encouragement to venture on their own in the face of obstacles.

Disillusionment in the Academy

Aside from having role models of entrepreneurship, something else caused the women to consider launching their own businesses. Violations in the workplace took place, especially as they related to invisibility and hypervisibility. Diversity scholars write about ways in which intersectionality influences Black women's need to identity-shift within the workplace. With intersectionality, "power is embedded within institutions, leading to profoundly different lived experiences at the intersection of social locations such as race, gender, sexuality, and class" (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019, p. 145); as a result, organizations often create inequality regimes in which minorities cannot succeed (Acker, 2006). Identity-shifting occurs when Black women adjust attributes such as mannerisms, appearance, or voice in order to fit in or mask their culture (Dickens et al., 2022). It can often be a result of invisibility or hypervisibility in the workplace, which the participants emphasized. The different participants shared their experiences through their various statements below:

> *I found in my field that my results wouldn't be trusted unless my senior leader (who happened to be White) looked over them first. (invisibility)*

> *The amount of invisible labor in relation to my roles has been significant. (invisibility)*

> *I was working long hours, yet still being asked to prove my work dedication. (invisibility)*

> *In certain roles, I was perceived as the Black woman who would be the spokesperson for Black people. I was asked so many questions. (hypervisibility)*

> *I felt like others were allowed to just get by, but I had to work harder. (invisibility and overwork)*

While the participants did not speak to identity-shifting, they did share experiences of invisibility and hypervisibility. In general, visibility occurs when a person is seen the way that they intend to be seen within the workplace. In contrast, invisibility occurs when a person is often overlooked (i.e., invisible) by others, and hypervisibility occurs when a person is very much seen within the workplace; however, this occurs for negative reasons (Buchanan & Settles, 2019; Holder et al., 2015). For Black women, other women of color, and women in predominantly male work settings, hypervisibility and invisibility may be a result of racism, sexism, misogyny, or all three. "Mistakes (real or perceived) are used to confirm negative stereotypes, and evidence that could counter negative perceptions is minimized or held suspect" (Buchanan & Settles, 2019, p. 2); invisibility can also lead to Black women being overworked, as their work is not recognized, as demonstrated in the words of the participants. However, facing discrimination within the academy did not mean the participants did not enjoy their work.

They simply recognized that there was another need to be filled, and they had the ability to fill it through their businesses.

Launching the Business

All of the women discussed enjoying their higher education roles. Whether it was serving as department chair, Vice President, or serving in a different administrative or faculty leader role, they all discussed enjoying their colleagues and their love for teaching and research. While Black women and women of color hold far fewer administrative roles in higher education, the majority of them work in fiscal affairs or student affairs (Chance, 2021; Maylor et al., 2021), and their pay is often lower than their colleagues. The participants sought out leadership roles, but they also remained aware of ways in which their racial and gender identities influenced how they were seen within their jobs, along with their chances of leadership success (Chance, 2021). When discussing reasons for launching their businesses, each participant spoke to the difficulty of working in higher education as a woman of color who values diversity, equity, authenticity, belonging, and justice. As one participant explained:

> *In 2020, the pandemic hit and it was very symbolic. It made me realize that I'm not willing to compromise my beliefs for a job or anything. And I don't believe in allowing or continuing cycles of oppression within education.*

Another participant stated:

> *We heard about the Great Resignation that's been going on. I think that a lot of folks that I know who worked for years have left and started to develop their own businesses. I have a friend who opened up her own shop and she's been teaching for over 30 years at the university. She said that she wanted a sense of freedom and I think that's it. There's like a reckoning that happening for a lot of people in terms of whether or not this [work] is the best use of time, energy, space, or livelihood.*

Another participant emphasized the need to be mindful of her values during a time when the academy is at risk due to political conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion: "I don't see myself leaving my job, but if the space becomes hostile or unconducive for me to operate at my fullest potential, then yes, I would leave." A different participant explained the need to focus on her own business goals after years of building someone else's dream:

> *For me, I've helped other organizations, universities, departments, build up their kind of reputation and organization. But I always felt that I didn't really at the end of the day; someone else owned that and in some ways you are limited in what you can do when you are supporting someone else's dream. So I really just wanted to do something for myself, for my child, and for my family that was a little bit more in line with what I saw [as a need].*

Higher education, like many organizations, has a tendency to uphold societal inequalities and discriminatory practices, which negatively affects women, people of color, and other minorities (Acker, 2006; Powell et al., 2018). The pandemic exacerbated the problems that women faced within higher education. Most women took on more household work at the detriment of their own research and handled more work interruptions as caregiving duties

increased (Pettigrew, 2021). Community-based research suffered, which prioritized racial and low-income populations many minority researchers. Politicians during this time also worked to dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion offices and academic freedom, putting the work of higher educational professionals in jeopardy (Heyward, 2021; Rufo et al., 2023). This contributed to higher education professionals being overworked, anxious, and burnout from their jobs (Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2021). However, the pandemic also allowed women to rethink their roles in the world and within work and consider other possibilities, which the participants emphasized. This rethinking of their goals and position within the world led many to start their own businesses.

Leadership

In areas of leadership, the participants explained ways in which being an entre-employee and navigating the trials of higher education made them more aware of their leadership styles and values. The work histories gave them confidence in being their authentic selves at work. Because they were already exhibiting authentic leadership within their businesses, they were not afraid to exhibit that leadership style at their places of work. As one participant explained her being an authentic leader: "You have to infuse care and empathy with how you engage with those that you lead. If not, you will be doing yourself and your organization a complete disservice." Another participant explained her view of authentic leadership in the following way: "If my colleagues are sustained and they're happy and they're healthy, then they do their job better, and we serve our students. I'm helping my colleagues, which I see as my job." A different participant explained what leadership looked like for her: "I just want to give back and pull others up. This is not for the weak when you are the one breaking the curses. The more of us willing to give back and coach, the better for the community." Another participant included her view of leadership as well:

> *Finally, I can be who I've always been. You know, like it's almost like I've had to kind of mask some of the things that I like to do [as a leader], like, advocating for your team- I think that's something I've always done, but it's been frowned upon [by supervisors] if I advocate for things that they don't care for.*

Authentic leadership allows leaders to display their values in guiding and encouraging others. In Western culture, the theorists present it as flawed as it speaks to the individual perspective of authenticity with vague definitions and questions about if one can be authentic (Atwijuka & Caldwell, 2017; Einola & Alvesson, 2021; Ford & Harding, 2011; Ladkin, 2021). Within cultural, Indigenous, feminist, and other minority groups, authentic leadership is based on continuously learning from others, operating from a community aspect, and expanding one's values as one matures (Gambrell, 2017). There is an understanding that leadership is communal and dynamic, not static; therefore, one's values may change over the years, yet that person can still be an authentic leader if acting within their true self at a specific moment in time (Spiller, 2021).

The participants valued attributes such as mental health, care ethics, honesty, and advocacy, which are common traits of authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2015). After years in higher education and establishing their own businesses, they found the confidence to lead authentically, which was most natural to them, and incorporated their entire lived experience. Part of the reason was due to understanding their own skills and talents, regardless of what supervisors stated. With more than twenty years of work behind them, the participants felt confident that they could secure employment elsewhere if they needed to, but they were also confident in their own ability to lead successfully; therefore, when frustration with their

jobs occurred, they were not fearful of becoming unemployed due to voicing their values. This contributed to the women fully displaying their authentic selves at work yet within their individual professional work cultures.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the life stories of Black women higher educational leaders who also run their own businesses (i.e., entre-employee). Using narrative research and semi-structured interviews, participants were able to tell their life histories and answer additional questions related to leadership as an entre-employee. The findings suggest that role modeling from family entrepreneurs, facing discrimination within the academy, and recognizing one's true values influenced the participants' decision to work as entre-employees.

Among the barriers that the participants explained was their disillusionment with their current higher education work environment. While they enjoyed working in higher education, as well as running their businesses, they shared overlapping stories of invisibility and hypervisibility at work (Holder et al., 2015; Patitu & Hinton, 2003). Many studies on discrimination due to race and gender in higher education show that it happens in all types of institutions, and the pressure to perform on the same level as men or be scrutinized has not changed much from earlier studies (Hannum et al., 2015; Sales et al., 2020). At PWIs, African American women report facing subtle bias, microaggressions, and/or blatant racism and discrimination, while at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) or other minority-serving institutions (MSIs), African American women report facing sexism, racism, and/or lack of mentoring (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). This, coupled with feelings of being overworked and underappreciated caused the participants to not only rethink their own boundaries in the workplace, but also readjust their values and perspectives about how they wanted to lead in different spaces.

Leadership focused on being authentic and incorporating other humanistic attributes such as care ethics, advocacy, mental health care, and honesty (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Stemming mainly from gaining confidence as entrepreneurs and reflecting on their years of work experience, the participants integrated aspects of authentic leadership into their roles as higher education administrators and entrepreneurs. Doing this felt more natural to them and this leadership style allowed them to be themselves at work and within their businesses. Not only did the participants advocate for mental and physical health, but they also recognized that doing so served as an act of resistance against the traditional workplace culture (Acker, 2006; Folberg, 2020).

The confidence needed in order to launch their own businesses came from (1) experiencing the pandemic, which made them re-evaluate their current situations, and (2) reflecting on role models in their lives who paved the entrepreneurial way. These role models showed them what it took to overcome barriers and make their own entrepreneurial dreams come true. Not all of the role models mentioned by the participants experienced business success but watching them face hardships and care for their communities showed the women what they should value as business owners. While building generational wealth was a priority, so was social responsibility, ethics, and breaking barriers. These childhood role models did not serve as the only role models for the participants, but they served as the ones most remembered for making a leadership and entrepreneurial impact on their lives.

Conclusion

This study is important because it contributes to the body of research surrounding women within work and society; however, it places special emphasis on African American women leaders within higher education who are also entre-employees. This emphasis is not apparent in the literature on entre-employees, and research about entre-employees is limited, almost non-existent. The participants described what caused them to venture into entrepreneurship. While it aligns with research on pandemic entrepreneurship and needs-based entrepreneurship (Conroy & Low, 2021; Dy & Jayawarna, 2020), it will be important to research how entre-employees adjust within the next few years, as this topic is new to the conversation of small business and microbusiness ventures.

There is still more work to be completed on the role of women leaders within higher education, as their progression to higher positions remains limited due to the discriminatory barriers within organizational work culture (Dickens et al., 2020; Folberg, 2020). However, delving into entre-employeeship contributes to the research by showing that some women are taking an alternate route in achieving their dreams and not depending on their jobs for sole recognition (Lipman, 2021). As the world continues to diversify, so will information related to leadership and entrepreneurship. Leadership continuously gets presented from a dominant point of view, often prioritizing Western male concepts. Studying leadership, especially among women, from a cultural, feminist, and/or Indigenous viewpoint contributes to the dialogue of what a leader is (Gambrell & Fritz, 2012). Researching these fields from newer perspectives, communities, and voices ensures that due diligence is given to the conversation by challenging what is seen as the norm (Gambrell, 2017).

At the same time, there are limitations to this study. Geographically, the women live in various areas. Some work in the Southeast, and others work in the North, and they all work in predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Because of this, it is possible that part of the participants' wanting to have their own business is due to low wages in their fields. It would be interesting to see if the responses differ among other women of color, women in high-earning fields, or in areas where the pay for the same career is higher across gender. The research could also occur among women at minority-serving institutions or women living outside of the United States. In addition, all but one of the participants are mothers and balancing motherhood with careers. However, the participant who does not have children is a caretaker to elderly relatives. Therefore, researchers can replicate the study with a majority of women who may not identify as caregivers. The possibilities for future research are vast.

Funding Details

This research and study were not funded by any agency.

Disclosure Statement

This research contains no financial interest or benefit from the direct applications of the research.

References

Acker, J. (2006). Inequality regimes gender, class, and race in organizations. *Gender and Society, 20*(4), 441–464. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27640904

Ahn, J. N., Hu, D., & Vega, M. (2020). Do as I do, not as I say: Using social learning theory to unpack the impact of role models on students' outcomes in education. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 17*(2), Article e12517. https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12517

Aldossari, M., & Chaudhry, S. (2021). Women and burnout in the context of a pandemic. *Gender, Work, and Organization, 28*(2), 826–834. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12567

Andrews, M. (2021). Quality indicators in narrative research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 18*(3), 353–368. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769241

Atwijuka, S., & Caldwell, C. (2017). Authentic leadership and the ethic of care. *Journal of Management Development, 36*(8), 1040–1051. https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-12-2016-0331

Avolio, B. J., & Gardner, W. L. (2005). Authentic leadership development: Getting to the root positive forms of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly, 16*(3), 315–338. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.001

Bateman, N., & Ross, M. (2020, October). Why has COVID-19 been especially harmful for working women? *Brookings Institute.* https://www.brookings.edu/essay/why-has-covid-19-been-especially-harmful-for-working-women/

Behr, R. & Storr, V.H. (2022). Understanding pandemic entrepreneurship as a unique form of crisis entrepreneurship. *Journal of Entrepreneurship and Public Policy, 11*(4), 309-331. DOI: 10.1108/JEPP-07-2022-0074

Bichsel, J., & McChesney, J. (2017). The gender pay gap and the representation of women in higher education administrative positions. *College and University Professional Association for Human Resources.* https://www.cupahr.org/surveys/research-briefs/2017-gender-pay-gap-and-representation-of-women-in-higher-education-administrative-positions/

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Brown, M. E., & Trevino, L. K. (2014). Do role models matter? An investigation of role modeling as an antecedent of perceived ethical leadership. *Journal of Business Ethics, 122*(4), 587–598. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-013-1769-0

Buchanan, N. T., & Settles, I. H. (2019). Managing (in)visibility and hypervisibility in the workplace. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 113,* 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.11.001

Bullough, A., Guelich, U., Manolova, T.S., & Schjoedt, L. (2021). Women's entrepreneurship and culture: Gender, role expectations and identities, societal culture, and the entrepreneurial environment. *Small Business Economics, 58,* 985–996. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-020-00429-6

Caine, V., Estefan, A., & Clandinin, D. J. (2013). A return to methodological commitment: Reflections on narrative inquiry. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 57*(6), 574-586. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2013.798833

Castleberry, A., & Nolen, A. (2018). Thematic analysis of qualitative research data: Is it as easy as it sounds? *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning, 10*(6), 807–815. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cptl.2018.03.019

Chance, N. (2021). A phenomenological inquiry into the influence of crucible experiences on the leadership development of Black women in higher education senior leadership. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 49*(4), 601–623. https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432211019417

Choi, S. L., Harrell, E. R., & Watkins, K. (2022). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on business ownership across racial/ethnic groups and gender. *Journal of Economics, Race, and Policy, 5,* 307–317. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41996-022-00102-y

Clandinin, D. J. (2006). Narrative inquiry: A methodology for studying lived experience. *Research Studies in Music Education, 27*(1)*,* 44–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X060270010301

Conroy, T., & Low, S.A. (2021). Opportunity, necessity, and no one in the middle: A closer look at small, rural, and female-led entrepreneurship in the United States. *Applied Economic Perspectives, 44*(1)*,* 161–196. https://doi.org/10.1002/aepp.13193

Creswell, J.W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches.* SAGE.

Dickens, D. D., Hall, N. M., Watson-Singleton, N. N., Mitchell, C., & Thomas, Z. (2022). Initial construction and validation of the identity shifting for Black women scale. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 46*(3), 337–353. https://doi.org/10.1177/03616843221089330

Dodgson, J. E. (2019). Reflexivity in qualitative research. *Journal of Human Lactation, 35*(2), 220–222. https://doi.org/10.1177/0890334419830990

Dy, A. M., & Jayawarna, D. (2020). Bios, mythoi ad women entrepreneurs: A wynterian analysis of the intersectional impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on self-employed women and women-owned businesses. *International Small Business Journal: Research Entrepreneurship, 38*(5), 391–403. https://doi.org/10.1177/0266242620939935

Einola, K., & Alvesson, M. (2021). The perils of authentic leadership theory. *Leadership, 17*(4), 483–490. https://doi.org/10.1177/17427150211004059

Fabeil, N. F., Pazim, H. A., & Langgat, J. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 pandemic crisis on micro-enterprises: Entrepreneurs' perspectives on business continuity and recovery strategy. *Journal Economics and Business, 3*(2), 837–844.

Folberg, A. (2020). Global perspectives on women and work. *Journal of Social Issues, 76*(3), 464–483. https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12396

Ford, J., & Harding, N. (2011). The impossibility of the 'true self' of authentic leadership. *Leadership, 7*(4), 463–479. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715011416894

Fritz, C. and Knippenberg, D.V. (2018). Gender and leadership aspiration: The impact of work life initiatives. *Human Resource Management, 57.* 855-868. DOI: 10.1002/hrm.21875

Gambrell, K. (2017). The case for an Indigenous collectivist mindset: New dimensions and challenges for business, education, and society. In J. L. Chin, J. E., Trimble, & J. E. Garcia (Eds.), *Global and culturally diverse leaders and leadership* (pp. 21–39)*.* Emerald Publishing Limited.

Gambrell, K. M., & Fritz, S. M. (2012). Healers and helpers, unifying the people: A qualitative study of Lakota leadership. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies, 19*(3), 315–325. https://doi.org/10.1177/1548051812442749

Gherardi, S. (2015). Authoring the female entrepreneur while talking the discourse of work family life balance. *International Small Business Journal, 33*(6), 649–666. https://doi.org/10.1177/0266242614549780

Grandy, G., Cukier, W., & Gagnon, S. (2020). Invisibility in the margins: COVID-19, women entrepreneurs and the need for inclusive recovery. *Gender in Management: An International Journal, 35*(7/8), 667–675. https://doi.org/10.110/GM-07-2020-0207

Guillen, L., Mayo, M., and Karelaia, N. (2018). Appearing self-confident and getting credit for it: Why it may be easier for men than women to gain influence at work. *Human Resource Management, 57,* 839-854. DOI: 10.1002/hrm.21857

Gupta, P., Chauhan, S., Paul, J., & Jaiswal, P. (2020). Social entrepreneurship research: A review and future research agenda. *Journal of Business Research, 113,* 209–229. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.03.032

Hankel, I. (2018). Entre-employee and term-employee are the only career options left. *Minute Hack.* Retrieved from https://minutehack.com/opinions/entre-employee-temp-employee-are-the-only-career-options-left

Hannum, K. M., Muhly, S. M., Shockley-Zalabak, P. S., & White, J. S. (2015). Women leaders within higher education in the United States: Supports, barriers, and experiences of being a senior leader. *Advancing Women in Leadership, 35,* 65–75. http://advancingwomen.com/awl/awl_wordpress/

Heyward, G. (2021, Oct. 20). Georgia's university system takes on tenure. *The New York Times.* https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/13/us/georgia-university-system-tenure.html

Hickson, H. (2016). Becoming a critical narrativist: Using critical reflection and narrative inquiry as research methodology. *Qualitative Social Work, 15*(3), 380–391. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325015617344

Holder, A. M. B., Jackson, M. A., & Ponterotto, J. G. (2015). Racial microaggression experiences and coping strategies of Black women in corporate leadership. *American Psychological Association, 2*(2), 164–180. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000024

Jean-Marie, G., Williams, V., & Sherman, S.L. (2009). Black women's leadership experiences: Examining the intersectionality of race and gender. *Advances in Developing Human Resources, 11*(5), 562–581. https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422309351836

Kamaludin, M. F., Xavier, J. A., & Amin, M. (2021). Social entrepreneurial sustainability during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Social Enterprise Journal, 18*(2), 344–363. https://doi.org/10.1108/SEJ-05-2021-0041

Klenke, K. (2016). *Qualitative research in the study of leadership* (2nd ed.). Emerald Group Publishing.

Kossek E.E. and Buzzanell, P.M. (2018). Women's career equality and leadership organizations: Creating an evidence-based positive change. *Human Resource Management, 57,* 813-822. DOI: 10.1002/hrm.21936

Ladkin, D. (2021). Problematizing authentic leadership: How the experience of minoritized people highlights the impossibility of leading from one's "true self." *Leadership, 17*(4), 395–400. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715021999586

Lipman, J. (2021). The pandemic revealed how much we hate our jobs. Now we have a chance to reinvent work. *Time Magazine.* https://time.com/6051955/work-after-covid-19/

Mair, J., & Marti, I. (2006). Social entrepreneurship research: A source of explanation, prediction and delight. *Journal of World Business, 41*(1), 36–44. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wb.2005.09.002

Massoud, M.F. (2022). The price of positionality: Assessing the benefits and burdens of self identification in research methods. *Journal of Law and Society, 49,* S64–S86. https://doi.org/10.1111/jols.12372

Masunaga, S. (2021, September 16). Dream of becoming your own boss? These women made it happen during COVID. *Los Angeles Times.* https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2021-09-16/women-entrepreneurs-covid-pandemic-first-time-business-owners

Maylor, U., Roberts, L., Linton, K., & Arday, J. (2021). Race and educational leadership: The influence of research methods and critical theorizing in understanding representation, roles and ethnic disparities. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 49*(4), 553–564. https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432211022770

McCluney, C. L., & Rabelo, V. C. (2019). Conditions of visibility: An intersectional examination of Black women's belongingness and distinctiveness at work. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 113,* 143–152. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.09.008

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and Implementation* (4th ed.). John Wiley & Sons.

Moen, T. (2006). Reflections on the narrative research approach. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 5*(4), 56-69. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690600500405

Morgenroth, T., Ryan, M. K., & Peters, K. (2015). The motivational theory of role modeling: How role models influence role aspirants' goals. *Review of General Psychology, 19*(4), 465–483. https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000059

Mustafa, F., Khursheed, A., Fatima, M., & Rao, M. (2021). Exploring the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on women entrepreneurs in Pakistan. *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship, 13*(2), 187–203. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJGE-09-2020-0149

National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). *Characteristics of postsecondary faculty.* https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/csc

Nobe-Ghelani, C. (2018). Learning through a reunion of mind-body-emotion-spirits: Experience of mindfulness-based reflexivity in critical qualitative research. *International Review of Qualitative Research, 11*(4), 413–431. https://doi.org/10.1525/inqur.2018.11.4.413

Panda, S. (2018). Constraints faced by women entrepreneurs in developing countries. Review and ranking. *Gender in Management: An International Journal, 33*(4), 315–331. https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-01-2017-0003

Parker, C., Scott, S., & Geedes, A. (2019). Snowball sampling. In P. Atkinson, S. Delamont, A. Cernat, J. W. Sakshaug, & R. A. Williams (Eds.), *SAGE research methods foundations.* SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526421036831710

Patitu, C. L., & Hinton, K. G. (2003). The experiences of African American women faculty and administrators in higher education: Has anything changed? *New Directions for Student Services, 104,* 79–93.

Pettigrew, R. N. (2021). An untenable workload: COVID-19 and the disproportionate impact on women's work-family demands. *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences, 113*(4), 8–15. https://doi.org/10.14307/JFCS113.4.8

Powell, S., Ah-King, M., & Hussenius, A. (2018). Are we to become a gender university? Facets of resistance to a gender equality project. *Gender, Work, and Organization, 25*(2), 127–143. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12204

Rolon-Dow, R., & Bailey, M.J. (2022). Insights on narrative analysis from a study of racial microaggressions and microaffirmations. *American Journal of Qualitative Research 6*(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/1-.29333/ajqr/11456

Rufo, C. F., Shapiro, I., & Beienburg, M. (2023). Abolish DEI bureaucracies and restore colorblind equality in public universities. *The Manhattan Institute.* https://media4.manhattan-institute.org/sites/default/files/model_dei_legislation013023.pdf

Sales, S., Burke, M.G., & Cannonier, C. (2020). African American women leadership across contexts: Examining the internal traits and external factors on women leaders' perceptions of empowerment. *Journal of Management History, 26*(3), 353-376. DOI: 10.1108/JMH-04-2019-0027

Spiller, C. (2021). 'I am': Indigenous consciousness for authenticity and leadership. *Leadership, 17*(4), 491–496. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715021999590

St. Pierre, E. A., & Jackson, A. Y. (2014). Qualitative data analysis after coding. *Qualitative Inquiry, 20*(6), 715–719. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800414532435

Staller, K. (2021). Big enough? Sampling in qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Social Work, 20*(4), 897–904. https://doi.org/10.1177/14733250211024516

Umoh, R., & Garrett, B. (2020). Black in business: Celebrating the legacy of black entrepreneurship. *Forbes.* https://www.forbes.com/sites/ruthumoh/2020/02/03/celebrating-black-history-month-2020/?sh=1b05b05a2b45

Vaughn, A. R., Taasoobshirazi, G., & Johnson, M. L. (2020). Imposter phenomenon and motivation: Women in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education, 45*(4), 780–795. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1568976

Wolgemuth, J. R. (2014). Analyzing for critical resistance in narrative research. *Qualitative Research, 14*(5), 586–602. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794113501685

Notes on Contributor

Sydney D. Richardson, PhD is an Associate Professor of Leadership Studies at North Carolina A&T State University. During her career in higher education, she has previously served as a Director/Assistant Professor of Education, Dean at a private, liberal arts college, and Dean at a community college. Her teaching interests include women in leadership, multicultural education, and qualitative research. Her research focuses on entre-employeeship, women leaders in higher education, and narrative and ethnographic research. Dr. Richardson earned her PhD in Educational Leadership and Cultural Studies with a certificate in Women and Gender Studies from The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

ORCID

Sydney D. Richardson, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5678-6642