2021

Dr. Willa Beatrice Player: A Quiet But Resolute Force For Social Justice

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DR. WILLA BEATRICE PLAYER:

A QUIET BUT RESOLUTE FORCE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

A Dissertation

Presented to

The College of Graduate and Professional Studies

Department of Educational Leadership

Indiana State University

Terre Haute, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Kelsey Bogard

July 2021

Keywords: Leadership, college presidency, women's colleges, Bennett College, African American women

DR. KELSEY BOGARD

EDUCATION

Indiana State University (ISU); Terre Haute, IN
Doctor of Philosophy in Higher Education Leadership, 2021
Dr. Willa Beatrice: Catalyst of Change at Bennett College
Murray State University (MSU); Murray, KY
Masters of Art in Postsecondary Education Administration, 2016
Murray State University (MSU); Murray, KY
Bachelor of Science of Computer Information Systems, 2013

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

ISU Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN | Teaching Assistant, January 2020 - May 2021

- Teaching master's courses in the Student Affairs and Higher Education program, advising students, chairing dissertations, and assist in recruitment and admission activities.
- Serving as an advisor for the Student Affairs and Higher Education master's program
- Assisting in recruitment of masters and doctoral programs
- Expertise in asynchronous and synchronous teaching platforms.

Courses Taught

- SAHE 634 Practicum in Student Affairs and Higher Education
- SAHE 637 Introduction to Student Affairs and Higher Education
- SAHE 641 Current Trends in Student Affairs and Higher Education

Guest Lecturer Topics

- The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly: Becoming a Leader in Student Affairs
- Campus Racial Climate

MSU Success Seminar; Murray, KY | *Instructor*; Aug 2014 – Dec 2016

- Taught eight student success-focused classes to college freshmen
- Selected to participate in inaugural retention initiative bridging academic affairs and students affairs

STUDENT AFFAIRS EXPERIENCE

ISU Indiana State University; Terre Haute, IN | *Graduate Assistant*; Aug 2018 – May 2021

- Coordinated the master's and doctoral program in student affairs and higher education in the Educational Leadership Department with primary leadership and management oversight responsibilities for the program.
- Assisted in the grant writing process for the departments's study abroad trip to South Africa
- Served as an advisor for the Student Affairs and Higher Education master's program
- Assisted in recruitment of masters and doctoral programs
- Recruited and hosted department Lunch & Learns;
- Organized and facilitated department events and recruitment fairs;
- Assisted with the editing of the case studies book and other publications during the academic year;
- Organized the SAHE Hooding Ceremony;
- Edited the department newsletter, websites, and banner;
- Planned and recruited for department study abroad trip
- Attended all Departmental Faculty meetings as well as college wide meetings

STCC Southwest TN Community College; Memphis, TN | *Recruitment and Completion Coach*; Jan 2017 – Aug 2018

- Assisted students in developing an Academic Plan for timely completion

- Assisted students in accessing resources for academic, financial and/or personal support
- Facilitated or conduct workshops, seminars, presentations and meetings
- Maintained a flexible schedule for student advisement appointments
- Collaborated with faculty and student academic staff on delivery of grant support
- Assisted students/faculty advisors with completing Financial Aid & SAP Appeals
- Collaborated on individual student success strategies with faculty advisors, and interact with Admissions, Financial Aid, Counseling, and Student Success Center staff

MSU The Department of Student Affairs; Murray, KY | *Graduate Intern*; July 2016 – Dec 2016

- Assisted with undergraduate and graduate retention
- Managed data entry and analysis
- Collaborated with professional staff to plan and implement campus events
- Completed necessary daily activities the department
- Co-facilitated Family & Alumni weekend activities

CLU California Lutheran University; Thousand Oaks, CA | *NODA Intern*; May 2016 – Sept 2016

- Responsible for logistics, details, and implementation of New Student Orientation (NSO) for incoming first-year students, transfer students, and their families
- Supervised 20+ Orientation Staff in implementing all logistics for five-day Welcome Week Orientation
- Coordinated the logistical preparation of all new student and family check-in
- Communicated and coordinated with offices across campus intricately involved in New Student and Transfer Orientation programs
- Responsible for maintaining Orientation database
- Assist in the final planning, implementation, and execution of NSO and all student and family programs
- Collaborated with faculty members and assisting with the logistics of a first year seminar program
- Model and facilitate icebreakers and community builders for Orientation staff

MSU Center of Student Involvement; Murray, KY | *Graduate Assistantship*; Aug 2015 – Dec 2016

- Supervised two undergraduate student workers
- Planned and coordinated Student Leadership Awards and Reception
- Maintained Center's website, updating up to 30 pages daily, weekly and monthly
- Created promotional materials for student organizations
- Prepared and present PowerPoint presentations, on-campus and regionally as University representative
- Managed data entry and analysis
- Collaborated with professional staff to plan and implement campus events
- Served on short-term college projects as the Center of Student Involvement Representative
- Assisted with Homecoming weekend activities

MSU Office of Recruitment; Murray, KY | *Student Worker*; Jan 2010 – Dec 2014

- Entrusted to handle and file confidential information, upholding all FERPA guidelines
- Greeted guests in person and answered phones, providing positive customer service experience
- Processed and assisted with mass mailings

Summer Orientation Lead Counselor; Nov 2012 – Aug 2013

- Served on NODA summer intern selection committee
- Supervised staff of 20 undergraduate staff
- Encouraged open communication between student and professional staff
- Prepared counselor materials and delegated counselor assignments prior to five orientations
- Facilitate discussions on campus life, academic expectations and MSU with new students and families

Summer Orientation Counselor; Jan 2010 – Aug 2010; Jan 2012 – Aug 2012

- Communicated with students and their families to welcome and orient to campus
- Participated actively in all spring and summer training events

Racer 101 Camp Counselor; July 2010

- Led group of 20 incoming freshmen to ease transition from high school to college
- Facilitated activities to encourage comradery and comfort with campus life

TECHNOLOGY EXPERIENCE

United Systems & Software; Benton, KY | *Technical Support and Trainer*; Jan 2014 – Aug 2015

- Trained city employees on software through onsite group and one-on-one training sessions
- Performed troubleshooting and customization to solve problems over the phone
- Coached customers on day-to-day procedures over the phone and via remote desktop connection

PUBLICATIONS

Books

Hinton, K.G, Howard-Hamilton, M.F., V. Grim, Brown, O.G., Davenport, M., & **Bogard, K.** (Summer, 2021). *Unleashing suppressed voices on college campuses: Diversity issues in higher education and student affairs*. 2nd Ed. New York: Peter Lang.

Book Chapters

Howard-Hamilton, M. F. & **Bogard, K.** (in progress). History of Student Affairs: From Counseling Theories to Leadership Models. In French's *The heritage of student affairs in higher education: values, philosophy, and history*. Charles Thomas Publishing

Howard-Hamilton, M.F., Hinton, K.G., & **Bogard, K.** (in progress). Resistance, Resilience, Respectability: The Leadership Journey for Black Women. *In The Bloomsbury Handbook of Gender and Educational Leadership and Management*.

Book Reviews

Howard-Hamilton, M.F., & Bogard, K. (2021). [Review of the book The Campus Color Line: College Presidents and the Struggle for Black Freedom, by Eddie R. Cole]. Journal of College Student Development 62(2), 258-260. doi:10.1353/csd.2021.0023.

Articles

Lewellen, C., Donahoo, S., Howard-Hamilton, M.F., & **Bogard, K.** (in progress). *Cancelling Mammy: Black Women Overcoming the Housekeeper Leadership Mentality*.

PRESENTATIONS

2020 - Indiana State University – Using the Dialogical Assessment Model In Your Programs and Classrooms
2020 - Indiana State University – Learning Connections Summit
2020 - Indiana State University - Radical Self-Care - Mind - Bougie, Ratchet, Ghetto: Defining Roles of the 21st Century Black Woman
2020 - IABHE Panelist - Racial Pandemic
2019 - ASHE Preconference - Dr. Willa Beatrice Player: Catalyst of Change at Bennett College
2019 - IABHE Conference - The Erasure of Black Women and Their Contributions
2019 - AABHE - Dr. Willa Beatrice Player: Catalyst of Change at Bennett College
2018 - Indiana 21st Century Scholars Next Steps College Conference

LEADERSHIP ACTIVITIES

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, INC. DREF, *Research Assistant*
Bayh College of Education Faculty Senate, *Graduate Student Representative*
President of Indiana State University's Omicron Delta Kappa Circle

Murray State University's Young Alumni Council
ASHE Land Acknowledgement Workgroup
IABHE Symposium Panelist
Indiana State University's Inclusive Excellence Council
Indiana State University's President's Council, *Bayh College of Education Representative*
The Women's Society
Business Ambassadors of the Future
Women in Computing: *Vice President*
L.E.A.D. Team *Vice President*
Black Student Council *Historian*
Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. Chapter *Vice President*
Walt Disney World *College Program Intern*

HONORS

Association for the Study of Higher Education - Council on Ethnic Participation: Most Reimagined Poster Award
Bayh College of Education Graduate Student Research and Development Recipient
Learning Connections Summit Presenter
Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence Case Study Team
Dr. Dale Findley Professional Development Award
Educational Leadership Scholarship Presented by Cohort 27 Award 2x Recipient
Indiana State University's Her Color Shines Award Recipient
Indiana State University's Helen Reitzel Memorial Scholarship Recipient
Marvin D. Mills Scholarship Recipient
Murray State University's Homecoming *Queen*
Black Student Council's Homecoming Coronation *Queen*
Computer Information Systems Faculty Scholarship
Murray State University Idol *Winner*
Miss Black and Gold of Murray State University *Winner*
Hope Endeavor Achievement Recipient

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS/ORGANIZATIONS/ACTIVITIES/CERTIFICATIONS

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, INC.
Indiana State University's Graduate Teaching Excellence Certification Program
SACSA: Southern Association for College Student Affairs
NODA: Association for Orientation
ACPA: American College Personnel Association - College Student Educators International
ODK: Omicron Delta Kappa
ASHE: Association for the Study of Higher Education
AABHE: American Association of Blacks in Higher Education
IABHE: Indiana Association of Blacks in Higher Education

TECHNICAL SKILLS

General: Advanced knowledge of personal computer components, Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Office Suite and Macintosh
Editing Software: Canva, Photoshop, and Illustrator
Website Design: Drupal, HTML and OU Campus
Software Development: Visual Basic, SQL, Database and Query Building, Alice and Ada programming languages
Higher Education Software: Banner, Canvas, and BlackBoard

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Committee Chair: Dr. Mary Howard-Hamilton

Distinguished Research Professor and Chair, Department of Educational Leadership,

Indiana State University

Committee Member: Dr. Kandace Hinton

Professor of Higher Education Leadership

Indiana State University

Committee Member: Dr. Valerie Grim

Professor of African American and African Diaspora Studies

Indiana University (Bloomington)

Committee Member: Dr. Catherine Cushinberry

CEO

Hopelink

ABSTRACT

DR. WILLA BEATRICE PLAYER:

A QUIET BUT RESOLUTE FORCE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Dr. Willa Beatrice Player survived the college presidency during one of America's most tumultuous times, the 1950s and 1960s. Unfortunately, like the many other Black women's contributions, there is very little known about Dr. Player's work in education. Very little is also being done in scholarship and research to correct this problem. This historical research study seeks to depict accurately Dr. Willa Beatrice Player's role as an educator, college administrator, civil rights activist, federal appointee, and Bennett College's first woman president. She was an advocate for social justice and equity. Her work to further the academic and political agendas that supported the Greensboro community illustrates her dedication to education and the Black community. This study's significance is to uncover the hidden life and leadership legacy of Dr. Willa Player as a pioneer in higher education and local civil rights activist.

DEDICATION

To the strongest woman I know, my mother, Dorothy Bogard, I dedicate this dissertation to you. You are my best friend, biggest supporter, and my most treasured confidant. I thank you for serving as my research assistant and pushing me across the finish line. You have devoted your life to me, and I hope that I am have made you proud.

Love you, mama!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There is an African proverb that states, "It takes a village to raise a child." The village represents a supportive community that helps equip the child with the necessary skills needed to survive in this world. I was blessed with a fantastic village throughout my doctoral pursuit, and I would like to use my acknowledgments to recognize them.

First, I must acknowledge my family, Ludie Mae, Dorothy, Faith, Diane, Aaron, Bailey, and Constance, for your lasting love and support. I appreciate the many times you visited, called, and celebrated me along this journey. I honestly could not have done it without you. I hope that my academic career inspires and challenges you to work toward your passions.

Dr. Mary Howard-Hamilton, Dr. Kandace Hinton, Dr. Catherine Cushinberry, and Dr. Valerie Grim, thank you for your willingness to serve on my dissertation committee. Your guidance helped me see this process through. I thank you for your patience and for handling me with such care. Thank you for being the perfect example of being strong, Black, brilliant, educated women. You made up my superwoman dream team, and I have mighty shoes to fill. I am forever indebted to you.

Thank you so much to the faculty in the Higher Education Leadership program within the Department of Educational Leadership at Indiana State University. Drs. Jon Iftikar, Amy French, and Jack Maynard I truly appreciate your mentorship and words of wisdom throughout my time in the program. I would not be where I am without your constant encouragement. Dr. Chavez Phelps, I appreciate your gentle reminders that I am exactly where I need to be. I appreciate your

constant reminders that anything lost during this transition is making room for the great things to come.

Dr. Tiffany Brewer, my degree war buddy, THANK YOU. I could not imagine this process with anyone else. We spoke daily, helped each other conceptualize theories, encouraged one another, and the list goes on. I thank you for working so closely with me and talking me off the ledge of imposter syndrome. I admire your strength and your drive. You are far beyond your years, and I am so honored to have experienced this process with you.

Pastor James S. Barleston Jr. and my Second Missionary Baptist Church family, I cannot thank you enough for your covering and continued prayers. You have served as my family away from home and as a place of refuge. In times of despair, you have been a reassuring voice that reminds me to walk by faith and not by sight. I extend my greatest gratitude.

Dr. Paula Turner, thank you for meeting with me weekly to help me process this life-changing time I was experiencing. You helped me make sense of my feelings and challenged me to be present, slow down, and enjoy life. You reminded me of my greatness to come and helped me awaken new parts of myself to ensure a healthy way of living. Thank you for reminding me that I am my own light in times of darkness, and there is no need to outsource it again. I measure my value in the purity of God's love and I am now open to new possibilities.

To my Murray State University family, friends, and mentors, thank you for your continued support and your willingness to invest in my personal and professional endeavors. My experiences while at Murray greatly influenced my decision to enter higher education.

Bennett College, thank you for your ongoing encouragement and support of my study. I recognize how sensitive this matter is, and I appreciate your willingness to entrust me with the

task of narrating your history and highlighting Dr. Player as a catalyst of change in higher education.

To those who have assisted me in my journey at Indiana State University, I express a heartfelt thank you. Many of you deserve special recognition, and by trying to mention all of them, I fear I would forget others. Please note, I would not be here without your assistance, and I thank you.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Whether it be my religion, my aesthetic taste,
my economic opportunity, my educational desire,
whatever the craving is, I find limitation
because I suffer from the most significant known handicap,
a Negro—a Negro woman.
(Bethune, 1936)

Mary McLeod Bethune's (1936) *Closed Doors* speech confronted the racial climate in America. It attributed White racism as the sole proprietor of constructing its most significant handicap known: to be Black while also being a Black woman. She charged her White audience to confront the "closed doors" that encumbered Black citizens from moving forward while also using their influence to dismantle the systems that hinder the progression. Bethune often used her platform to confront racial discrimination and generate better educational opportunities for Black people. Serving as the founder and first president of Bethune-Cookman University, she laid the groundwork for future women and, in particular, Black women as leaders in higher education and the college presidency. But what is to be said of the unsung heroines whose stories have gone unexplored? Much like the role of Mary McLeod Bethune, Dr. Willa Beatrice Player, who is known for her role as Bennett College's first woman president, worked to advocate for the normalcy of Black excellence and was one of many women who worked to further the agenda

academically and politically that supported the Greensboro community. Player (1948) believed it is the educator's responsibility to prepare young women for opportunities in an occupation generally considered "closed" to them. As an educator, it is critical to help students explore a wide range of interests to develop knowledge and skills in fields outside the significant areas of specialization (Player, 1948, p.26). Therefore, education at Bennett College must mean for every young woman enrolled: self-discovery, career fulfillment, and civic responsibility (Brown, 1998, p.102) as they join a list of freedom-seeking voices working toward a more conscientious America.

While serving as the first Black woman president of a four-year liberal arts college, Dr. Player faced many challenges. While simultaneously spearheading social justice movements and shaping federal policies for institutional expansion, Dr. Player also established a curriculum with a holistic educational approach. The curriculum included interracial exchanges to enrich the students' cultural competence, career readiness, a commitment to service, and social and political intelligence. With very little representation to follow in this role, Dr. Player was forging a new way to challenge gender identity and politics for higher educated women. The leadership literature identifies critical attributes for successful leaders, emphasizing preferred leader styles, actions, and attributes that align with the strengths of women; however, the success factors of Black women college presidents remain invisible (Bartol et al., 2003; Bruckmuller & Bransscombe, 2010; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Hackett & Byars, 1996; Hertneky, 2012; Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Parker & Ogilvie, 1996; Rahman et al., 2016; Rosette et al., 2016; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Smerek, 2013; Stanley, 2009). Dr.

Player became the president of Bennett College during a time when women were expected only to teach. Robnett (1996) wrote:

> Within the context of the civil rights movement, African American women operated as "bridge leaders," who—through frame bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation—initiated ties between the social mobility and the community and between prefigurative strategies aimed at individual change, identity, and consciousness and political strategies aimed at organizational tactics designed to challenge existing relationships with the state and other societal institutions. (p. 1662)

Dr. Player's leadership style did not conform to traditionally perceived roles, with men being task-oriented and women being nurturing and socio-emotional. Gender was of insignificance to Dr. Player, as she modeled a balance of leadership, being diplomatic and demanding respect while also remaining compassionate and poised. Warren Bennis (1980), in his essay, False Grit, explained, the impact of the organization is much more significant than gender differences when it comes to success or failure. Gender was of insignificance to Dr. Player, as she modeled a balance of leadership, being assertive and demanding respect while remaining flexible and poised. Dr. Player (1962) believed women realized more than ever that their contribution could not be made as a woman disguised as a man; she must be herself to gain self-fulfillment. Dr. Player's intersectional experience as an African American woman represents a clear illustration of the groundbreaking contributions that shaped her higher education success.

The college president's role is complex and requires a considerable amount of flexibility, stability, courage, and perseverance. They are expected to provide knowledgeable leadership, model institutional principles, and enforce the institutional policy. While college presidents do not govern alone, they are essential to the welfare of their institution, surrounding community, and higher education in its entirety. "Though the ranks of women in the presidency have increased over the past 30 years, there are still several areas of disparity, reflecting the need to

develop or bolster supports and interventions to continue to reach parity" (Howard & Gagliardi, 2017, p. 2). The American Council on Education (2017) noted women make up 30% of college presidents in higher education.

Moreover, the statistics indicate that African American women hold only 8.0 % of these positions, Hispanic women 4.0%, Asian American women 2.0%, multi-racial women 1.0 %, and American Indian women 1.0% (ACE, 2017). The percentage of Black women presidents has only grown by 2% since 2007. African American women have ascended to lead higher education institutions; this unique group's voices, shared perspectives that challenged the status quo, and success factors in achieving leadership status must be further explored to influence social–cultural realities and leadership research (Stanley, 2009). Black women college presidents are rare, thus making their experiences unique and worth being highlighted. Creswell (2018) explained that narrative research begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories, but it is an exploration of the social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which individuals experiences were, and are, constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted (p. 68).

Dr. Willa Beatrice Player contributed to the advancement of education for women at Bennett College and the civil rights movement in Greensboro, North Carolina, between the early 1930s through the late 1960s. Her contribution to higher education was indispensable, as she took the initiative to advocate for equity in education for all women, irrespective of their racial or cultural background. Dr. Player understood the need to provide young girls with a wide-ranging learning experience to ensure they could be selective in their career choices without running the risk of discovering severe gaps in their education (Player, 1958). She also assisted in the boycott's planning and organization against the segregated movie theaters and racist portrayals in

film offerings in downtown Greensboro. In addition to her resistance to racial inequality, injustice, and discrimination, her educational, social, and political activism often advocated for the advancement of Black women. She also challenged the status quo of them as higher education leaders.

Dr. Willa B. Player walked the radical line of cultural and societal change at Bennett College. Many of those challenges still appear today. Because Bennett was one of the few colleges in the country designated to educate and serve women, Dr. Player made sure Bennett's curriculum would provide the students the freedom to attain the quality of life they desired. She established a holistic educational approach that included interracial exchanges to enrich the students' cultural competence, career readiness, a commitment to service, and social and political intelligence. Her educational philosophy was grounded in education principles for others' use while also developing the self. She believed in instilling in her students the value of empowering women. She also believed in leadership, outreach, and independence, which further strengthened their professional and personal values. An example of her philosophy in action was Operation Door Knock, a voter registration drive where Bennett College students registered Greensboro's 1,478 residents. Dr. Player influenced her students far beyond the classroom, which later resulted in the students becoming change agents in the world.

This historical research study gives Dr. Player her rightful place as a pioneer in higher education who was also the lifeblood of the civil rights demonstrations in Greensboro, North Carolina. Dr. Player's story of education, college administration, and activism not only serves as an opportunity to provide a more accurate account of the historical record of Black women leaders and pioneers during this period of history, but also fosters, creates, and develops a more robust historical and collective memory about social activism in higher education. She

demonstrates the capability of an effective Black woman in leadership.

Background

Historically, Dr. Willa B. Player has been one of the most successful Black woman leaders in higher education and local civil rights activism. However, she also remains one of the most overlooked heroines within the Black woman college presidency. Her eleven-year tenure as president at Bennett College resulted in the reorganization of Bennett College's curriculum to provide practical education with philosophical values for Black women. She also dedicated the remainder of her professional career to spearhead initiatives to raise over 400 million dollars in funding for programs for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as the Director of the Division of Institutional Development with the Bureau of Higher Education in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. While many have benefited from her hard work, there has been little reference or recognition outside of the primary archival records that reveal her leadership contributions' depth. In Dr. Linda Brown's (1998), Long Walk: The Story of The Presidency of Willa B. Player at Bennett College, a book detailing Dr. Player's experiences as a college president, she exclaimed, "The legacy of Willa Player is only as significant as the lives of the young women she served, the quality of their lives, and the contributions they have been able to make to the world" (p. 218). I argue that Dr. Player's legacy has greater reach, and there is a need to know more about her contributions to inspire Black women interested in the college presidency. This historical research study gives Dr. Player her well-deserved place as a pioneer in higher education who was also the lifeblood of the civil rights demonstrations in Greensboro, North Carolina.

Dr. Willa Beatrice Player is most famous for her involvement in Greensboro's civil rights movements and her push to improve girls' education quality at Bennett College. However, her

desire to serve her community started far beyond her journey as a college administrator. Dr. Player was greatly influenced by her parents, Clarence and Beatrice Player. Speaking of the influence of her parents, Dr. Player's niece, Dr. Linda Brown, explained, "Her upbringing and family imprinting figures in an important way as an influence on her leadership style" (Brown, 1998, p. 48). Her father had great expectations for their family; as Dr. Player recalled in a personal interview with Dr. Brown, "My father would say, "Be prepared to take care of yourself and do not depend on a man to take care of you" (Brown, 1998, p. 49). Racism and sexism hindered Black women's upward mobility, and her father's foresight would require them to be very strategic in the career-building process to guarantee employment.

Willa Beatrice Player was born in Jackson, Mississippi, on August 9, 1909. She was the youngest of three children. Her brother, Clearance Cromwell Player, was born in 1903 but preceded her in death in 1915. Her older sister, Edith Amelia Player-Brown, mother of her infamous niece, Linda Beatrice Brown, was born in 1907. Dr. Player's father owned a plastering and contracting company while building and later owning many Akron, Ohio houses. Her mother was a home economist and leader in the church. This resulted in a very privileged life for the Player's household. In 1918, the hope for a better job and educational opportunities influenced Player's family to relocate to Akron, Ohio. The family's relocation resulted from the Great Migration when the African Americans left the Southern states and moved to Northeastern and Midwestern states.

In 1929, Dr. Player graduated from Ohio Wesleyan with a bachelor's degree and later received a master's degree from Oberlin College. She hoped to become a teacher and utilized her undergraduate and graduate career to prepare her for the work she set before her. In the fall of 1932, Dr. Player began her teaching career at Bennett College as a Latin and French professor.

Serving as a part of Bennett College's faculty was her first teaching assignment. In a personal interview with her niece, Dr. Linda Brown, Dr. Player stated, "I wanted to teach Latin and French in a college, and that was challenging because most of the students spoke with southern dialects" (Brown, 1998, p. 79). Bennett College provided a space for her to help students explore their many talents outside of academia. To broaden her teaching and outreach to students, Player taught Sunday school and violin exercises to students in the chapel. She was firmly committed to that mission to serve, and historical circumstances continued to push her toward her interest in school.

Dr. Player undertook a compelling responsibility for the African American community in Greensboro. Though she had experienced racial injustices before, Greensboro was like no other place. During an interview with Eugene Pfaff (1977), Dr. Player noted the following regarding the state of race upon her initial arrival in Greensboro:

> When I first went to Greensboro, the city was pretty tightly segregated. We were having problems—the women in the community were having problems with being called by their first names, the restaurants were—well, really, no one was allowed to eat in the restaurants in the department stores or downtown stores when I first went there. The drinking fountains were marked "white" and "colored." The station had a white waiting room and a colored waiting room. Dr. David C. Jones had such a good rapport that we never had to go in and out of Greensboro on segregated railroad cars. However, we had to wait until everyone was served before we could eat regarding dining on Pullmans. Buses, of course, were segregated; we had to ride in the back of the buses, and it was a segregated situation. (Pfaff, 1977, p. 2)

However, she did not allow her first impression of Greensboro to deter her from all the work that

needed to be done.

Dr. Player was most inspired by the heritage and orientation of Bennett College. In 1935, she took a leave of absence to pursue her postgraduate studies. She received a *Certificat d'Études* at the University of Grenoble in France. Dr. Player first encountered activism when she returned to the U.S. in 1937 when she helped facilitate a boycott of the segregated movie theaters in downtown Greensboro for their racist portrayals in film offerings.

In 1948, Dr. Player completed her doctorate at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her dissertation subject was the institution, and she entitled her work, *Improving College Education for Women at Bennett College*. Her study sought to analyze women students' needs and efforts to improve curriculum from 1940 to 1948 and make recommendations for further development and improvements. Her research opened the door for her to be promoted to Coordinator of Instruction and Chairman of Religious Activities at Bennett in 1952. Unfortunately, at this time, women were not made Deans. Out of fear that the male professors and administrators would resign in protest, President Jones named her the Coordinator of Instruction instead of Dean of Instruction. She later became the Acting Dean.

In 1955, Dr. Player assumed the position of college president at Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina. It was a time in history when Black college presidents were accused of "appeasement," of racism, and accommodationist philosophies by more than one political activist in their time" (Brown, 1998, p. 40). Though presidential appeasement would make for a less radical institution, Dr. Player was not concerned with assimilating to mollify her white counterparts, colleagues, or community. Her bravery, as a Black woman, was almost unheard of during this time. She ran the risk of losing it all.

An example of her bravery was her acceptance of the National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) request for Dr. Martin Luther King to deliver an address in Greensboro, North Carolina. In 1957, the Greensboro branch of the NAACP sent a request to various venues in Greensboro to host Dr. Martin Luther King. He was denied by churches, high schools, and other universities. Among the media they requested, Bennett College had the smallest location but was the only place willing to allow him to speak. It was an intense climate in the United States. Rosa Parks had just been arrested and jailed. Emmett Till had been brutally murdered. The ruling for Brown v. Board had been settled. Dr. Player recounted the reasons Greensboro was hesitant to host Dr. King, and she stated, "There was no place, not even black high schools, would allow Martin Luther King to deliver an address" (Chafe, 1977). Dr. King was known for leading the Montgomery bus boycott, encouraging African American domestic workers to protest. He seemed very dangerous because he attracted crowds of what appeared to be angry black people. However, on February 11, 1958, true to Bennett tradition, Dr. King spoke in the Annie Merner Pfeiffer Chapel. Dr. Player remembered saying, "This is a liberal arts college where freedom rings, so Martin Luther King can speak here" (Chafe, 1977). Bennett College surrounded the campus with police protection, and Dr. King spoke to a packed crowd.

Problem Statement

Within the body of literature regarding college women administrators, there is a lack of sufficient research concerning how Black women matriculate to and succeed in senior administrative roles, such as the college presidency. The problem is that too many sources continue to erase, ignore, and/or disregard Black women's contribution to leadership development in higher education. Dr. Player survived the college presidency during one of America's most tumultuous times. However, her impact on higher education is often overlooked

because she is a Black woman.

In the 1950s, Black women leaders in higher education were highly underrepresented. Because women who sought leadership positions in administration faced stereotypic attitudes and racial discrimination, being Black limited access to top roles for minoritized women in education (Jackson & Harris, 2005). Though women may not have served as higher education leaders, their service to the civil rights movement was immeasurable. During the civil rights movement, women were the connectors responsible for moving the platform forward. Collier-Thomas and Franklin (2001) explained:

> When civil rights became one of the dominant issues in national politics, Black women's clubs and organizations worked at the grassroots level to support the policies and positions taken by President Harry Truman. In June 1948, the delegates of the Democratic Convention voted to adopt a strong civil rights platform which called upon the Congress to support President Truman in guaranteeing "the basic and fundamental American principles: (1) the right of full and equal political participation; (2) the right to equal opportunity of employment; (3) the right to security of person; (4) and the right of equal treatment in the service and defense industries." (p. 36)

Their connection to the church, their leadership organizations, and schools allowed them to be excellent sources of help for the movement. The work of African American women in the civil rights movement provided the bridges necessary to cross boundaries between the personal lives of potential constituents and adherents and civil rights movement organizations (Robnett, 1996). Though women's involvement in these organizations was valued, it is essential to note they were subjected to more minor leadership roles during the civil rights movement because of their gender. During the Civil Rights Movement, the subjection faced by women makes Dr. Player's

role as college president much more significant. Dr. Player managed to lead Bennett College with strategic gender politics while also supporting her students. At the same time, they also participated in sit-ins to integrate lunch counters in downtown Greensboro, North Carolina.

The pathway to college presidency for Black women is immensely challenging and requires a great deal of adapting and coping. Black women often are the matriarch of an organization but are cast away when they have resolved the lingering issues. Black women are "seen culturally, and in society as strong, the Black woman is generally thought to innately possess the power expected to singularly maintain family, help others, overcome obstacles, and suppress weakness" (Muhammad, 2018, p. 4). Dr. Player modeled the ideal leader as she possessed the skills to overcome implicit and explicit biases and trail-blaze a pathway for future women leaders.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore Dr. Willa Beatrice Player's life, leadership style, and vision for Bennett College and how it impacted the institution and women interested in pursuing the college presidency. The research focused on Dr. Player's role as the first African American woman to serve as president of a four-year women's college nationwide. She is also known for serving as the first woman president of Bennett College. Before her presidency, nine different men led the institution. Despite being a respected college educator, administrator, civil rights activist, and federal appointee, Dr. Player is remembered most for empowering her students and the Greensboro community to confront social and political injustices.

To explore the complexity of Dr. Player's presidential journey, it is essential to confront how deeply race and gender intersect in Black women's lives. "An intersectional framework can be employed to explore how social categories simultaneously interconnect and potentially lead or

contribute to women's oppression from racial minority groups in diverse professional environments" (Holder et al., 2015, p. 168). Understanding what Dr. Player endured as a Black woman college president sheds light on her personal experiences and how they influenced her professional and political decision-making.

Research Question

The focus of the study was to understand Dr. Player's life and leadership legacy. Qualitative research questions intend to narrow the purpose to several questions addressed in the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As a result, the following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. What is the life story of Willa Beatrice Player?
2. How did Dr. Willa Beatrice Player's leadership style and vision for Bennett College impact the institution and the Greensboro community?

Significance of Study

The significance of this study was to uncover the hidden life and leadership legacy of Dr. Willa Player as a pioneer in higher education and local civil rights activism. Black women seeking the college presidency face unique challenges that deter their transition to success as college presidents. As more women rise to leadership positions in higher education institutions, they bring new management styles and perspectives to the office of the president (Brown et al., 2001). However, the lack of representation or mentorship opportunities from women previously serving in the role makes it challenging for Black women to visualize their placement in part. "The seemingly simple act of imagining themselves in the position can be a mental hurdle for prospective presidents. The support of peers and superiors can help them lift over it" (Howard & Gagliardi, 2017, p. 6). It is vital to address Black women's needs to close the gap of

appointments to the college presidency.

Examining Dr. Player's career trajectory highlights important leadership priorities for Black women pursuing the college presidency. In addition to her activism, Dr. Player was responsible for the reorganization of Bennett College and her own journey as an educator, college administrator, college president, civil rights activist, and federal appointee. She was a gracious leader who dedicated her life to empowering, cultivating, and inspiring the Black community. Dr. Player was a resilient believer in democracy and was courageous in her actions to pioneer change. She encouraged risk-taking and committed herself to make the girls who came to Bennett into strong women who could survive within an ever-changing society and dedicate their work to social justice. "This study is significant because it contributes to the research area by filling in the research gap, which largely fails to consider the agentic African American woman and her experience as a double minority in the workplace" (O'Brien et al., 2014, p. 252). Esther Terry, a participant of the Greensboro sit-ins and student during Dr. Player's presidency, explained in an interview, "Part of Bennett was always that the education at Bennett was to prepare you to make a contribution to the world and to be reconnected into your community" (Esther M. A. Terry oral history, 2011, p. 17).

Students at Bennett were taught to be leaders for their local and national communities. It would be their effort to act as a catalyst for change to educate more African Americans. Students were taught that their professional and educational practices should not be separate from the community that surrounds them. She affirmed the necessity for students to take a person-centered approach. In 1964, Dr. Player stated in an appeal to the Ford Foundation,

> Bennett has the desire to provide a college where young women of the minority group might experience a developing sense of dignity and worth as persons free from the

> prejudice, injustice, and contempt so often associated with daily living in the south . . . Always striving to acknowledge the person as the center of concern . . . The person-centered approach to education has been developed over many years to study, evaluation, experimentation and change. The person-centered approach is now apparent in the emphasis of democratic involvement, individualized instruction, and small classes highlighting intellectual accomplishing and personal advocacy. (as cited in Brown, 1998, p. 112)

Bennett College recognizes Dr. Player as the most influential president at Bennett College.

Limitations

The reorganization of Bennett College, the participation in the local civil rights movement in Greensboro, North Carolina, and the push to provide Black Americans with an equitable education experience were all facilitated by Dr. Willa Beatrice Player, and this story is the primary focus of this historic research study. This study focused on Dr. Player's life and leadership legacy in Greensboro, North Carolina, Washington, D.C., and Akron, Ohio, to provide the best depiction of her aspirations for the overall push to better access of higher education programs and degrees for Black Americans.

However, this study experienced a variety of limitations. "A limitation of a study design or instrument is the systematic bias that the researcher did not or could not control and which could inappropriately affect the results" (Price & Murnan, 2004, p. 1). The initial limitation in the study is the component of time. Dr. Player's presidency at Bennett College during the 1950s limits the first-hand accounts for this study because many adults from this time period are no longer alive. Thus, the researcher used primary sources and secondary sources to account for this study. The study relied heavily on the archival documents held at Bennett College and archival

newspaper articles.

Positionality

As a Black woman from Memphis, Tennessee, I have never personally experienced the sting of discrimination. However, when growing up, I was guided with preventative measures to ensure I knew how to survive or navigate a situation that might arise for being a Black woman in the South. As a newly minted doctoral candidate, I am considered "good" or "ideal" by America's standards because of my professionalism and ability to adjust to any environment. My speech portrays a significant degree of assimilation in the White American mainstream.

Growing up Black in the South, you learn instantly there is a place for you to operate within. In this place, you are expected not to go too far left or too far right because you are treading waters that are not yet accessible to Black Americans. Being raised in the same city that stole the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the historical "record of lynchings, rape, and other forms of physical violence endured by African Americans in the Jim Crow South" (Berrey, 2009, p. 65), you learn quickly that this overt racism is very real and this is what happens when you speak out against it. You are at risk of being ostracized, blackballed, or even killed. We are constantly reminded to remain in this "place" as news outlets strategically replay these narratives every year, and Black Americans fight for their daily right to live. Consequently, there is a growing fear of living while Black in the South, and Black Americans have been conditioned to operate within this social construct to survive.

If you asked my teachers to describe me as a child navigating through Memphis City Schools' K-12 system, they would say I was very outspoken, opinionated, and fearless. I asked many questions and challenged ideas with which I disagreed. Some teachers welcomed this type of behavior as they believed I was gifted with the ability to think independently. In contrast,

other teachers worried that I would one day get myself into trouble. Their concept of the real world evolved from their experience with virulent racism, and it shaped the way they viewed and navigated life. I am lucky never to have experienced it and was unknowingly protected from it. My unwillingness to subscribe to racism stemmed from disbelief that the world was as horrific as it so terribly is. With my mother's roots originating in Tutwiler, Mississippi, only 37 miles away from where Emmett Till was murdered, she saw firsthand the repercussions of an outspoken, lively child in the South. She did her best to guide and teach me the world's ways without censoring me and negatively affecting how I saw the world. She knew her child was gifted, but she also knew not everyone would appreciate my brusque personality.

As I began to build my professional network, I was also met with directions on how to tone down my daring personality. I would see Black women speak privately about the discriminatory behavior and treatment they received but would inadvertently accept it when they chose to remain silent. I watched them reluctantly accept a more significant portion of the workload, and each time, I felt them shrink. When I questioned their decision to opt-out of standing up for themselves, they could not believe I did not understand the "ways of the land." They could not think I was naïve enough to think that speaking out would change anything. They tried to explain that speaking out could cost you everything, but I could not accept it. In hindsight, I recognize I did not have much to lose and could not understand the position they occupied. Over time, they grew annoyed with my questioning and my constant push to speak up on behalf of themselves. My lack of understanding of their duality regarding hating a system that has not changed yet, but they need to survive it. They had to provide students with the right tools and courage to overcome this system but were also challenged with being a Black woman persisting in that same system that they hated. This often caused rifts in my professional

relationships. I grew frustrated because I believed their willingness to "play the game" often perpetuated the academy's oppressive nature, which incited the burnout I experienced working with them.

While in my doctoral program, I learned that all three of these valuable relationships with my mother, teachers, and professional network have in common is . . . fear. Each of them experienced racism, whether formally or informally, but it was in a way I could have never imagined. All were fearful that my naïveté and boldness would be mistaken as disrespect, and I would fall victim to the racial violence and injustice prevalent in America. I did not believe anyone's relationship is wrong because they speak from a place about which I knew nothing. However, each of their approaches in teaching me was different. I also learned about Patricia Hill Collins's (2000) concept of "other mothering"—a series of behaviors adopted within the Black community for survival purposes. It originated from slavery: Black women would care for children who were not Blood relatives to nurture and grow the next generation. I had been experiencing their way of protecting me and teaching me how to survive each of these relationships. It is what Black women do. We nurture everyone but are often left to fend for ourselves.

The thing I admire most about Dr. Player is her boldness, her love for her community, and her resilience. She was a trailblazer because she had no concerns for the ground others have covered as she planned to carve her way. I was inspired and realized we should not simply inhale this narrative as something we need to know, but we all grow from something. Dr. Player's life and leadership legacy stand as an example of how Black women can navigate the spaces that work so hard to exclude them. We do not have to subscribe and take on the ways of men to be noticed. We can create our paths as Black women. Dr. Player once said, "You don't have to act

like a man to get ahead. You just have to be secure, knowing what you're talking about . . . You don't have to wear Madison Avenue pinstriped suits to get ahead . . . for true authority is through words, ideas and implementation of those ideas" (Brown, 1998, p. 90). Black women are equipped with the strength and knowledge to change the world.

My hope with this dissertation is that women, specifically Black women, will no longer accept being silenced, disregarded, or ignored. If we are worthy enough to do the work (raise, nurture, and take of our children), we are worth the recognition and ability to make decisions and lead. Your wisdom, paired with my courageousness, is so powerful. I charge the older generations to provide us with advice but also respect and support our decisions to do it our way. I charge the younger generation to be open to correction and understand that faster is not always better.

Research Methodology

This research study explored the historical journey of Dr. Willa Beatrice Player's life and leadership legacy in higher education. The study will focus on Dr. Player's role as the first Black woman to serve as president of a four-year women's college nationwide. This study will also focus on her dedication to shaping federal policies for institutional expansion and faculty professional development at colleges and universities adopted throughout the country. The study intends to understand the impact of the significant role she played in the reorganization of Bennett College, the local Civil Rights movement in Greensboro, North Carolina, and higher education.

This historical research study used various data collection procedures and analysis to divulge Dr. Player's notable role in Bennett College's reorganization, the local Civil Rights movement in Greensboro, North Carolina, and higher education. However, the combination of

Critical Race Theory (CRT), Black Feminist Theory, and the Nexus of Black Leadership Efficacy (NOBLE) model is used as the study's theoretical frameworks to gain an in-depth understanding of Dr. Player's life and leadership legacy.

This research study examined historical documents and artifacts to understand Dr. Player's life and leadership legacy. Her pathway to presidency encompassed working as an educator, college administrator, and civil rights activist. Chapter 3 includes details on how the data were selected, collected, analyzed and what measures were taken to ensure validity and reliability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 277).

Historiography

The best methodological approach for this study was a qualitative historical analysis. Historical research is a technique used in the social sciences for examining historical events in a manner that creates and develops concepts and explanations that are reasonable and valid beyond a given time and place through theory-building comparison of historical events and making reference to the existing situation (Marius & Page, 2012). Berg and Lure (2016) also defined historical research as the "attempts to systematically recapture the complex nuances, the people, meanings, events, and even ideas of the past that have influenced and shaped the present" (p. 305). In addition, the significance of a historical topic is often stated in terms of completing the historical record, filling in gaps of knowledge about the past, exploring areas only alluded to in prior research, and opening a new field of inquiry (McMillan & Schumacher, 2009, p. 420). The underlying principle of the study is to understand Dr. Player's life and leadership legacy.

However, the study attempted to uncover her role as a college president and how her leadership impacted Bennett College and the community of Greensboro, North Carolina. Dr. Player served as president of a college when women served in senior executive roles and were

not supported. She fought for the students at Bennett College to experience the world in a safe environment that encouraged their exploration through education and truth. Bennett College was among many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) that provided unique educational opportunities widely acknowledged throughout the community. This research study examined and analyzed academic, legal, and social artifacts that reveal the development during this historical epoch.

Historical research studies include the use of primary sources and additional evidence-based sources such as secondary sources to acquire information of historical significance (Gilderhus, 2003). This method permits investigating significant historical events and correspondences that depict the roles portrayed by historical figures such as Dr. Player as a pioneer in higher education who was also the lifeblood of the civil rights demonstrations in Greensboro, North Carolina.

The challenge with examining primary and secondary historical artifacts is the need to eliminate both your personal and subjective bias from the analysis (Gall et al., 2003). There is also a need to validate the sources used to make informed hypotheses grounded in historical evidence. The analysis process further develops the students' comprehension skills and determines the validity of the interpretations deriving from the data collection process. "For example, identifying the author or source of a historical document or narrative and assessing its credibility (comprehension) is prerequisite to comparing competing historical narratives (analysis)" (UCLA History, 2020, para. 4). Understanding this process is significant because many historical research studies exclude human subjects or the application of a randomization technique (Davis, 2016). Therefore, the best historians have developed the ability to differentiate between expressions of opinion, no matter how passionately delivered; and understand these

studies must preserve as much impartiality as possible to maintain validity (UCLA History, 2020).

Historical research differs from various types of commonly used research methods because researchers discover data by only examining historical materials such as printed and written primary materials, relics, and other quantitative records necessary to complete the analysis. In contrast, quantitative research methods gather data and generalize it across groups of people or explain a particular phenomenon (Babbie, 2010; Muijs, 2010). Quantitative research focuses on present or future outcomes, whereas historical study's primary focus is preceding events, occurrences, people, places, or things. Percy Scott Flippin (1923), an American historian, wrote about the importance of historical research to the teaching of the social sciences. He believed that History and the social struggle are closely intertwined because human beings have much to do with creating social conditions. Because the ways and habits of human beings change slowly, there is a need to know more about the past to understand better the origin of the modern day's social conditions. He also stated:

> History is the search for truth. It is an effort to ascertain the hopes, the aspirations, the ideals, and the purposes of a people, who, through their endeavors, performed services and achieved results which deserve to be permanently recorded. The historian, in his search for truth, must strive not only to record the events but also to so correlate cause and effect as to show clearly why the events occurred and what their consequences were. History is the book of the life of mankind. Historical interpretation means the selection of those relevant factors out of the mass of past events which stand in significant relation to the present moment. (Flippin, 1923, p. 51)

There is reason to believe that by humanizing Dr. Player and uncovering her life and leadership

legacy, Black women interested in the college presidency can learn and be empowered by her journey when considering their own. Black women will be moved by her confidence and inspired by her transparency.

In pursuit of these objectives, the usage of a historical research method was critical to the success of this study. The study employed historical research as the primary research method—"the use of the literature review in order to critically examine the data identified in the historical sources while at the same time reconciling contradictions and filling the gaps in the extant literature" (Davis, 2016, p. 43). This research method warranted the investigator to focus on critical or key events drawn from the archival documents and primary and secondary sources. The study also used critical discourse analysis because of its semiotic dimensions of power, injustice, abuse, and political-economic or cultural changes in society (Fairclough, 1997, p. 357). Critical discourse analysis is helpful in this study because it is a problem-oriented interdisciplinary research method used for the meaning-making of social structures, identities, relationships, and issues of power through language. The use of critical discourse analysis uncovered Dr. Player's role in the reorganization of Bennett College and the local Civil Rights Movement in Greensboro, North Carolina.

The initial phase of my study was to investigate the lack of sufficient literature containing her leadership contributions' depth in higher education, Bennett College, and the local Civil Rights Movement in Greensboro, North Carolina. The development of the problem statement consists of several sentences or pages that disclose where the problem originates, how it would fill in the current literature gaps, and why it is significant (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The problem statement initiates the study's meaningfulness and provides the foundation for its context, significance, and purpose. My study was conducted by employing qualitative research

methods to uncover imperative data and analyze, describe, and interpret the meaning of Dr. Player's manuscripts, archival transcripts, documents, and records. The second phase involved searching historical documents, archival materials, and other significant data consistent with the study's intentions. The materials were analyzed, summarized, and categorized to be later theorized following the data collection process. The final phase consisted of a narrative exposition of the findings (Berg & Lune, 2016).

Historically, Black American narratives have been excluded and erased from historical records, usually narrated by dominant academic perspectives. Historical research is unique because each generation reinterprets its past (McMillan & Schumacher, 2016), and "the ascent of race, class, and gender studies make it natural to revisit the past in the hopes of recovering neglected voices" (Gold, 2012, p. 16). Therefore, the use of revisionist historical methodology provided an opportunity for this study to "ask new questions, use a greater variety of sources, analyze the past with a wider range of social science concepts, and apply qualitative or quantitative procedures when appropriate" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2016, p. 418). In 1999, the College Composition and Communication journal published the essay *History in the Spaces Left*; authors Jacqueline Jones Royster and Jean C. Williams argued that Black Americans are inadequately represented in historical narratives because there is a systematic commitment to resist the preeminence of authenticated narratives. They also argued:

> Composition histories show that when we consistently ignore, peripheralize, or reference rather than address non-officialized experiences, inadequate images continue to prevail and become increasingly resilient in supporting the mythologies and negative consequences for African American students and faculty, and also for their culturally defined scholarly interests, which in their own turn must inevitably push also against

> prime narratives. (Royster & Williams, 1999, p. 582)

In due course, my study's use of revisionist historical research methods hopes to give voice to under-examined people and communities, such as Dr. Willa Beatrice Player.

A research study based on the historical research method guided by Critical Race Theory (CRT), Black Feminist Theory, and the Nexus of Black Leadership Efficacy (NOBLE) model created an opportunity for me to gain an in-depth understanding of Dr. Player's life and leadership legacy. Dr. Player's intersectional experience as an African American woman represents a clear illustration of the groundbreaking contributions that shaped her higher education success. Understanding Dr. Player's pathway to the presidency sheds light on Black women's professional and educational advancement and the exploitation they endured with more significant opportunities. Historiography provides the best method to address the questions guiding this research. McMillan and Schumacher (2009) further described historical research as follows:

> Historical research provides knowledge about the so-called roots of educational ideas, institutions, leaders, policies, and practices. Knowledge of the past informs educational professionals, policymakers, and members of general society about education and its role in US society. By examining the results of past solutions to enduring problems, decision-makers may become more realistic and moderate in their claims and more informed in their choices. (p. 417)

The design of my research examined the experiences of Dr. Player's time at Bennett College as a policy enforcer and decision-maker. From this study, my hope is to understand better the social mobility of Black women in the college presidency.

The Theoretical Framework

This research study used a combination of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Black Feminist Theory (BFT), and the Nexus of Black Leadership Efficacy (NOBLE) model as its theoretical framework to gain an in-depth understanding regarding Dr. Willa Beatrice Player's leadership style and vision for Bennett College and how it impacted the institution and community. Understanding Dr. Player's pathway to the presidency sheds light on her professional and educational advancement and the exploitation she endured with more significant opportunities. CRT focuses on the importance of race, gender, and class because by fundamentally challenging all historic or essentialist notions of "woman,"—it neatly captures all the main elements of the debate on "intersectionality" (Brah & Phoenix, 2016).

Critical Race Theory

Upon the initial examination of the roles of race, racism, and power in American culture, the advocates of CRT argue that for Black women, race, gender, and class are not distinct and isolated realms of experience. According to Crenshaw (1988), as cited in Parker and Lynn (2016):

> The experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism. Because of their intersectional identity as both women and of color, women of color are marginalized along the lines of gender and race at the same time. Moreover, in the case of Black women, race does not exist outside of gender, and gender does not exist outside of race. (p. 146)

Viewing this study through a critical race lens is beneficial because it offers connections from the past that need to be understood to see how hierarchical relationships of power protect the legal interests of Whites or enable elite Americans to continue discriminating against Black women.

The first feature discussed within CRT is that race is difficult to address or cure because it is often not acknowledged. The concept of equality expressed in rules or formal settings remedies only the most deliberate forms of discrimination. Critical race theorists are responsible for educating American citizenry in understanding that race is a social construct used to manipulate minoritized groups when convenient. Unfortunately, much of society benefits from racial injustice and has little incentive to eradicate it. Critical race theorists want to change the existing social construct of race, not just to benefit one particular group (Davis, 2016). White society may resist an orderly progression toward power-sharing, particularly in connection with upper-level and technical jobs, police agencies, and government (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Unfortunately, this type of systematic change requires society to distribute information, resources, access, networks, and evaluation to understand better differentials affecting successful advancement in marginalized groups.

To provide equitable opportunities for marginalized groups, CRT proposes that we encourage the unique voice of color. The legal storytelling movement urges Black and brown writers to recount their experiences with racism and the legal system and apply their unique perspectives to assess the law's master narrative (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This movement provides marginalized groups a pathway to counter historical myths and stereotypes to transform the oppressive system through diverse voices. Given the different histories and experiences of Black, American Indian, Asian, and Latino American writers and thinkers, the voice-of-color thesis holds that because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, they may be able to communicate to their White counterparts matters that the Whites are unlikely to know.

Dr. Player's leadership style did not conform to traditionally perceived roles, with men being task-oriented and women being nurturing and socio-emotional. With no other

representation to follow in this role, Dr. Player demonstrated a new way to challenge sexual identity and gender politics in higher education. Critical Race Theory argues that intersectionality in the social movement has the power to alter social perception. Critical Race Theory also has historical and theoretical roots in Black feminism and women of color activism; intersectionality is a concept forged to address concerns relating to inclusivity and representation in social movement (Evan et al., 2017). Therefore, this theory is critical in understanding Dr. Willa Beatrice Player's leadership style and vision for Bennett College and how it impacted the institution and the Greensboro community.

Critical Race Theory is essential to historical research methods because it enabled me to review the contemporary historical legal narrative of Dr. Player's leadership at Bennett College. Critical Race Theory empowers the researcher to develop a well-defined theoretical framework for reexamining the existing historical narrative (Gall et al., 1999). In addition, it introduces multiple perspectives for interpretation in a manner that provides more accurate accounts of significant historical events (Davis, 2016).

Black Feminist Theory

To understand fully the significance of Dr. Willa Player's leadership style and vision for Bennett College and how these impacted the institution and community and, additionally, why her story is unexplored within the historical narrative of Black women in the college presidency, we need to understand the impact of the social construct of racism but also sexism in the 1950s. Therefore, Critical Race Theory was expanded with Black Feminist Theory and the Nexus of Black Leadership Efficacy (NOBLE) by including the social construct of sexism on Dr. Player's leadership and how it influenced the institution and community. Collins (2000) argued:

Black feminist theory is the convergence of all of these factors—the suppression of Black

> women's voice by dominant groups, Black women's struggles to work within the confines of norms of racial solidarity, and the seeming protections offered by a culture of dissemblance— influences yet another factor shaping patterns of silence. (p. 125)

Unfortunately, Black women's historical suppression of their work and ideas is yet another form of oppression. Black women's exclusion from positions of power within mainstream institutions has led to the elevation of elite White male ideas and interests and the corresponding suppression of Black women's views and interests in traditional scholarship (Collins, 2000, p. 5). Black feminists believe in empowerment through self-definition and self-determination.

During Dr. Player's career trajectory, her relationship with students and community members was not intended to dominate or control. Instead, her purpose was to bring people along, to "uplift the race" so that vulnerable community members could attain the self-reliance and independence essential for resistance (Collins, 2000, p. 193). Activist mothering is a concept often misunderstood or used derogatorily. "The concept often called 'maternal politics' within North American and European-influenced feminist patterns of Black women's political activism associated with community other-mother traditions, as well as the power and recognition offered by such women by African Americans, become derogated" (Collins, 2000, p. 193). In Julia Wells's article Maternal Politics in Organizing Black South African Women, she argued that maternal politics refers to "political movements which are rooted in women's defense of their roles as mothers and protectors of their children" (Wells, 1998, p. 251). Wells also proposed that the force behind public political actions and social movements is derived from women's ideal of their roles as mothers (Collins, 2000, p. 193).

Dr. Willa B. Player walked the radical line of cultural and societal change at Bennett College. Many of those challenges still appear today. Because Bennett was one of the few

colleges in the country designated to educate and serve women, Dr. Player made sure Bennett's curriculum would provide the students the freedom to attain the quality of life they desired. She established a holistic educational approach that included interracial exchanges to enrich the students' cultural competence, career readiness, a commitment to service, and social and political intelligence.

Her educational philosophy was grounded in the principles of education for the service of others while also developing the self. She believed in instilling in her students the value of empowering women. She also believed in leadership, outreach, and independence, which further strengthened their professional and personal values. An example of her philosophy in action was Operation Door Knock, a voter registration drive where Bennett College students registered 1,478 residents of Greensboro. Dr. Player influenced her students far beyond the classroom, which later resulted in the students becoming change agents in the world.

The omission of her work in the literature can be attributed to gender, race, and class biases. The unrealistic representation of Black women as heroines is not helpful with humanizing Dr. Player's story. This only minimizes the actual costs of oppression and can foster the perception that Black women need no help because they can "take it" (Collins, 2000, p. 287). Dr. Player remodeled the construct of gender to be something significant, as she displayed a balance of leadership, being assertive and demanding respect while remaining flexible and poised. She could not let her being the only woman in the room deter her from what needed to be done. She refused to be intimidated by being the only woman. Dr. Player (1962) believed women realized more than ever that their contribution could not be made as a woman disguised as a man; she must be herself to gain self-fulfillment. Dr. Player's intersectional experience as an African American woman represents a clear illustration of the groundbreaking contributions that shaped

her success in higher education.

The Nexus of Black Leadership Efficacy

To better understand Dr. Player and her leadership, this study used the Nexus of Black Leadership Efficacy (NOBLE) model. According to Hinton (2012), "NOBLE was developed to understand how African Americans administrators' experiences informed their leadership and professional presence." Hinton (2012) also proposed a theoretical model that suggests the journey to senior-level leadership begins long before graduate school, academic environment mentoring, and educational leadership programs. "The model recognizes four themes related to leadership and professional development of women, such as marginalization, support/network, lack of support, survival and coping strategies, and transition and growth" (Hinton, 2012, p. 74).

Hinton (2012) reported the NOBLE theoretical model used the following themes as connections to African American administrators and their leadership:

> Connection 1: family background and early education: Connection 2: higher education experiences: Connection 3: career experiences: Connection 4: transitional and growth experiences. These connections represent the nexus that links the developmental process from early childhood experiences through career opportunities. (p. 72)

African American women face an insurmountable wall of discrimination during their childhood and adult life. These experiences often influence their passion for spearheading movements that provide educational and economic opportunities for Black Americans. Dr. Player's historical relationship with the Methodist Church and her administrative leadership resulted in her eventual presidency at Bennett.

According to Hinton (2012), Dr. Player found that during early childhood and educational periods for girls, several experiences could be considered defining moments that

may have impacted their decisions when making career choices. The Long Walk: The Story of The Presidency of Willa B. Player at Bennett College by Brown (1998) retold a story about a young Willa Player writing an article describing her disapproval of her experiences in Akron. The Players had attended church one Sunday, and the Reverend suggested the abysmal conditions they were facing in Akron were due to the Great Migration. Dr. Player left church disappointed in the Reverend's message and decides to express her thoughts in an article to the local black paper. She titled the piece "Local Pastor Insults Congregation." She was fifteen years old. The article explained that the pastor was spreading racial prejudice in the church, which contradicts the Lord's message. Her early exposure to racial prejudice can be tied to her role as a social justice activist using the NOBLE model.

Research Question

The questions that guided this study are:

1. What is the life story of Willa Beatrice Player?
2. How did Dr. Willa Beatrice Player's leadership style and vision for Bennett College impact the institution and the Greensboro community?

Methods

Research Design

This research study has a historical research design. Critical discourse analysis is one of the principal data analysis techniques in historical research. It enabled me to cover a wide range of sources and extract the most relevant and appropriate form of data. This study will use the literature review to improve the quality and validity of the collected data from various historians and scholars as a part of historical research.

"Historical research provides knowledge of past educational events, clarifies present discussions with interpretations of the past with detachment, revises historical myths, and creates a sense of common purpose about education in U.S. society" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2009, p. 427). "Although historical research can demythologize idealized notions about past events, most interpretations of such events reflect the fundamental belief that public education in the United States has served and continues to serve a common good" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2009, p. 417).

Solomon (1985) investigated the historical connection between American colleges and women's demands to be educated. She found that although the social change was a constant in the American republic, women were expected to be the stable, unchanging element in a changing world. However, with the increased demand to gain equal access to education, women found themselves aspiring to confront the changing ideals of their gender. Solomon (1985) believed, "whether as students, teachers, or scholars, women were a part of the intellectual and social processes that modernized higher education" (p. 87). Unfortunately, the history and impact of women in higher education are often disregarded in historical research. Educated women serve as change agents, and individuals continue to benefit from their increasingly progressive attitudes. "While the impact of women's education has had revolutionary implications for society, educated women have still not achieved equal status with men either within or outside the sphere of education" (Solomon, 1985, p. xvii). To maintain and propel momentum for equitable access for women in higher education, it is vital to understand their complex history.

Structure

My study started with an in-depth description of the early stages of Dr. Willa Player's life. This better educates the reader on where she was from and how her upbringing shaped her

character and prompted her to pursue a higher education career. There is also focus on her skills, training, career trajectory, and insights into barriers during her pathway to the college presidency. I conclude with the significance of Dr. Player's role in the reorganization of Bennett College and the Civil Rights Movement in Greensboro.

Data Collection

I used archival exploration to address the questions guiding this research by identifying and reviewing primary sources and artifacts as the main data collection method. Archival research involved the examination of artifacts found at Bennett College in the Holgate Library's archive. “Artifacts are objects in the environment that represent some form of communication that is meaningful to participants and/or the setting” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 162). This study also examined documents from the Greensboro Public library and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's digital archive. “The advantages of utilizing documents enable the researcher to obtain the language and words of participants and can be accessed at a time convenient to the researcher” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 188).

Dr. Player's archive at Holgate Library can be partially accessed online. To enrich the data collection process, I needed to visit Bennett College, Holgate Library, and Greensboro Public Library to use primary and secondary sources to build and support the research. Bennett College also has a collection of personal documents written by and received from Dr. Player. Documents provide a historical explanation of past events. McMillan and Schumacher (2009) stated:

> Documents comprise both hand-written and printed materials and maybe official or unofficial, public or private, published or unpublished, prepared intentionally to preserve a historical record or prepared to serve an immediate practical purpose. As such,

documents may be letters, diaries, wills, receipts, maps, autobiographies, journals, newspapers, court records, official minutes, proclamations, and regulations. (p. 420)

This historical research explored Dr. Player's life, leadership, and influence at Bennett College. The study was framed as a historical analysis in part because her time at Bennett spanned two significant historical periods, the Great Depression and the Civil Rights Movement in Greensboro, NC. Primary and secondary documents elucidated her persistence through experiences that challenged her as a college president and matriarch for her students and the Greensboro community. The archival data will be used primarily to help develop understandings of the content within Dr. Player's pathway to the presidency.

Data Analysis

The data analysis approach in this research study focused on narrative analysis and content analysis of historical legal facts. I utilized a critical discourse analysis approach using historical materials such as printed and written primary materials, relics, and other quantitative records necessary to complete the analysis. Flick (2014) described the process of data analysis as "the classification and interpretation of linguistic (or visual) material to make statements about implicit and explicit dimensions and structures of meaning-making in the material and what is represented in it" (p. 5). I consciously utilized a constructivist paradigm to establish credibility. The ontology or nature of reality using the constructivist paradigm is that individuals construct multiple realities through their own experiences, points of view, or vantage points (Hatch, 2002). I also sought to capture themes from the artifacts and documents.

Outline of Study

This dissertation consists of five chapters. Chapter Two reviews relevant literature on the history of college access and leadership for women with an explicit focus on Black women.

Finally, the chapter discusses the combinational use of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Black Feminist Theory (BFT), and the Nexus of Black Leadership Efficacy (NOBLE) as my theoretical framework to gain an in-depth understanding regarding Dr. Player's leadership style and vision for Bennett College and how it influenced the institution and community.

Chapter Three highlights the biographical aspects of Dr. Willa Beatrice Player's personal life and the significance of her leadership during her career. The chapter will also explores her formal education and identifies vital individuals who influenced her early life, leadership philosophy, and career trajectory. Chapter three concludes with a dialogue regarding her leadership philosophy and strategies that have aided her as a Black woman in her career.

Chapter Four focuses on the factors that influenced Dr. Player's personal development and professional career as an educator, college administrator, civil rights activist, federal appointee, and first woman president of Bennett College. So many of Dr. Player's beliefs and principles are closely related to her mother and father. Her relationship with her sister also showed itself to be impactful in her early stages of leadership. The chapter ends with an overview of Dr. Player's time working with Dr. David Dallas Jones as her mentor. Both shared the ideals of preparing students for life experience and reframed the purpose of education for Black women.

Chapter Five discusses the critical absence of Black women in leadership and higher education. I engage in dialogue regarding her leadership philosophy and strategies that aided her as a Black woman in her career. The chapter concludes with a discussion regarding the study's theoretical frames, recommendations for Black women in leadership, and future research.

Conclusion

Chapter One reviewed relevant literature on the history, legacy, and prominence of Black

women exploring the college presidency. This chapter also briefly introduced the reader to Dr. Willa Beatrice Player and explained the study's intended purpose, guiding research question, and significance. Chapter One also included the qualitative research design methods used to study the importance of Dr. Player's life, leadership, and influence at Bennett College. The chapter also contained information regarding archival exploration by identifying and reviewing primary sources and artifacts as the main data collection method. Lastly, Chapter One conferred the data analysis procedures, including critical discourse, narrative analysis, and content analysis of historical legal facts.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW: WOMEN IN THE WORLD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The purpose of this study is to explore Dr. Willa Beatrice Player's life, leadership style, and vision for Bennett College and how these impacted the institution and women interested in pursuing the college presidency. Chapter two unfolds a discussion on women's role as leaders in higher education and the college presidency. The first section provides a historical overview of college leadership in higher education. The second section provides the context for women in leadership in higher education. In addition, attention has been paid to Black women as college leaders and presidents. The chapter will close with information regarding the theories used to conceptualize women's identity development patterns in leadership.

Historical Context of College Leadership

The start of American higher education began in 1636 with the founding of Harvard University. Harvard University dedicated its mission to educating the literate, articulate, and responsible American White male elite. Harvard's original curriculum focused on philosophy, classical languages, and literature. All these subjects were believed to be suited well for developing a young gentleman in the arts. The major components of the curriculum were logic, ethics, politics, and Latin and Greek literature. Latin was the language of instruction and communication so that students had to read, write, and speak it as a condition for admission (Geiger, 2015). John Thelin (2011), an historian in higher education, argued:

> Early collegians were sons of privilege who, at the same time they were expected to inherit grave responsibilities as leaders and men of influence in a new world where their religion was central and not subject to government or ecclesiastical constraints. (p. 24)

Although college education was not crucial for the professional and career advancement of sons of prosperous merchants and wealthy planters, college alumni would be disproportionately influential in politics and national affairs (Thelin et al., 2019). In Frederick Rudolph's (1990) *The American College and University: A History*, he explained:

> Harvard intended for its students to lead lives no less than the purest, aspiring to serve God and their fellowmen in the fullest, acknowledging a responsibility to the future. They could not afford to leave its shaping to whim, fate, accident, indecision, incompetence, or carelessness. In the future, the state would need competent rulers, the church would require a learned clergy, and society itself would need cultured men's adornment. A religious commonwealth required an educated clergy, but it also needed leaders disciplined by knowledge and learning, it needed followers disciplined by leaders, it needed order. For these purposes, Harvard was absolutely essential. (p. 7)

These students' characteristics revealed a great deal about the purposes of colleges and the reasons for colonies being established in the first place (Thelin, 2011). Rudolph (1990) further described the purpose of colleges to be as follows:

> A college develops a sense of unity where, in a society created from many of Europe's nations, there might otherwise be aimlessness and uncontrolled diversity. A college advances learning and combats ignorance and barbarism. The college supports the state; it is an instructor in loyalty and citizenship in the dictates of conscience and faith. The college is useful: it helps students to learn the things they must know to manage the

> temple affairs of the world; he trains a legion of teachers. All these things a college was. For all these purposes, a college served. (p. 13)

The sole purpose of these institutions was to support the advancement of men. Much like the goals motivating the role served by these institutions, only White men could matriculate as college leaders.

Administrative Leadership

Colonial colleges followed British tradition by giving their university leaders various titles such as principal, warden, rector, provost, dean, master, or president. Durnin (1961) declared the highest office in a British university was that of the chancellor. The chancellor position was usually occupied by an exalted rank, a non-resident of the university, who appeared only at convocations of significant importance. The title of the college leader also varied by institution. More commonly used in the modern-day is the title of president.

Durnin (1961) believed college presidents were often clergymen whose role was an extension of their work in the church. The college presidency derived from their role in the church. Referencing Schmidt (1930), Rile (2001) reported during the colonial era through the Civil War and Postbellum period (1636-1785), the college president's duties included presiding over faculty meetings and academic ceremonies, preaching and leading daily prayers, teaching society's sons, serving as a disciplinarian, and tending the land from which the institution often raised food for faculty and students. Lupton (2018) reported that the president's role eventually grew to encompass risk management, fundraising, friend-raising, politics, and leadership. Early colonists could not have predicted how the role would evolve.

Colonists originally envisioned a college entirely controlled by Congregational ministers, who could be trusted to preserve the "purity of religion" (Geiger, 2015, p. 9). According to

Rudolph (1990),

> The president of the college was often thought to be responsible for the difference. His office was the creation of conditions peculiar to the American experience with higher education. He conducted it in a manner to lead one historian, albeit with considerable exaggeration, to conclude that "the president was by all odds the greatest single educative force encountered by the students. In most institutions, the president was the dominating influence and the greatest single force in college life. (p. 164)

The president served as the leader of the college faculty and the spokesman and representative of a male-led Board of Trustees. The role of the college president was challenging and ever-evolving. After World War II and the GI Bill passage, a surge in student enrollment required presidents to build more extensive and more formal administrative structures (Bradfield et al., 2017).

In 1997, a study conducted by the American Council on Education on the typical American college president, found the typical college president was a White man, married, and within the age group of 50-59 (Green, 1997). In 1986, when the study was first conducted, 92% were White, and 91% were male (June, 2007). According to a later study for the American Council on Education, 86% of presidents were White, and 77% were male in 2006. Not much had changed regarding the demographics of leadership in higher education. Men still reigned as preferred leaders in higher education.

Men's career paths to leadership are unlike any other. They arrive at positions that take women twice as long. Male faculties tend to have professional experiences that enhance the possibility of becoming college presidents (Waring, 2003). “On average male faculty receive tenure in less time, earn more money, leave faculty positions less often, and have been faculty

members longer than have women faculty" (McElrath, 1992, p. 273). Within American colleges and universities, 80% of departments are chaired by men (Niemeier & Gonzalez, 2004). McElrath (1992) also noted that "women tend to occupy staff positions that are marginal to the institution (counseling, positions for women, and positions for other minorities). However, their educational background is not significantly different from men" (p. 275). "The fact that women are in different positions results in a cumulative disadvantage" (Johnsrud & Heck, 1994, p. 25). Leal Filho et al. (2020) argued:

> The discussion of gender, women in leadership positions, has gained increasing interest in research. That is since women in many countries represent almost half of the workforce, but are underrepresented in leadership positions. The industry sector and the role performed inside the company are influencing factors for women in top-positions, and much has been discussed about the effectiveness of leadership composition. (p. 5)

Although women have made progress, there is still much work to be done.

Women in Academic Leadership

Historically, women faced discrimination attending coeducational institutions, being hired as faculty, attaining tenure, and being promoted to full professorship in higher education. "By 1860, at least forty-five institutions offered collegiate degrees to women" (Thelin, 2011, p. 83). During this time, institutions named various things after women, such as women's seminary, normal schools, college, academy, and literary institutes. Their curricula ranged from vocational training to genteel finishing-school programs, from professional education to the liberal arts (Thelin, 2011, p. 84). "Social, economic, and intellectual changes between the 17th and 18th centuries fanned the political revolution and introduced new questions about the position of women and their education" (Solomon, 1985, p. 2). Women's role in education as students,

faculty, and administrators was negligible and limited to grammar school until the early 19th century (Gordon, 1997).

The first opportunities for women in higher education emerged as part of this need for teacher training (Radke, 2011). As women students entered coeducational institutions in greater numbers at the turn of the century, some feared women's effects. In particular, male "top-level administrators, began to fear that these new women students would drive men out of the College of Letters and Liberal Arts" (Narad, 1999, p. 10). However, Solomon (1985) explained that women were persistent in their urge to be educated the same as men, even if their education was not valued:

> Female collegians (unlike male) were caught between the attraction of using their education in professional ways and keeping in mind that a woman's usefulness was not equated with professionalism. Educators of women invoked the old seminary precept that liberal education would enable women to deal with any circumstances that life brought forth but was not intended to train them for any particular situation. Yet scientific developments in the increasingly industrialized society not only created new demand for the university training of professional men but generated needs in service fields that trained women could fill. Despite the emerging opportunities, women's progression in academic studies continued to reflect the divided sentiment about the goals of female education. (p. 83)

Coeducational institutions responded to women students' arrival at the turn of the 19th century, initiating specialized roles for women leaders to oversee women students (Pasque & Nicholson, 2012). Dean of Women was the first administrative position offered to women in coeducational institutions (Parker, 2015). Pasque and Nicholson (2012) also noted deans of women were

sometimes appointed to counter fears that enrolling women would feminize male students or institutions (p. 35). Historically, women served as Deans of Women in the early 1890s (Schwartz, 1997). “These positions became necessary because of the sharp increase in the female population on college campuses” (Parker, 2015, p. 7).

Though faced with many closed doors, women persisted during this time. A woman’s ability to self-educate was essential to her career development (Rubin, 2004). Their most enriching developmental practices were their own life experiences. This resulted in most institutions creating domestic studies to appeal to their women students. At Wellesley, president Caroline Hazard welcomed economics as a field of study, noting:

> Women have not had the business training their brothers have inherited, and now that women are called upon to take a more important place in the active world, the usual business principles that are imbibed by men must be carefully instilled into the minds of girls. (Solomon, 1985, p. 84)

Thelin (2011) reported that although women made educational advances, the discrimination and loneliness they felt as professionals were immeasurable:

> Unfortunately, these statistical gains in university access for women were offset by two recurring patterns: women students were often pigeonholed and thwarted in the curriculum and campus life; and, most invidiously, those who completed advanced degrees encountered blatant discrimination in the academic job market. Those women who pursued a life of professional scholarship in coeducational institutions between 1890 and 1910 were at times called "pioneers." According to research by Geraldine Johncich Clifford (1989), their journals and autobiographies reveal that they also describe themselves as a "lone voyagers" — isolated within the university faculty culture. (p. 143)

Women faced marginalization at every turn. Research shows that in addition to navigating the academic career pathway, women have difficulties finding mentors, balancing work and family life, and attaining administrative proficiencies to best serve as president (Horn, 2018). The need to balance these many things is also used against women and their pathway to leadership. Those things are seen as distractions, whereas men do not have to juggle as much. Though women continue to be discriminated against, they are often viewed as more effective leaders because of their willingness to include subordinates in decision-making and empower them to do more for the group or organization (Waring, 2003).

Black Women in Academic Leadership

Higher education was an essential tool of liberation for Black women. African American women gradually acquired higher education and educational attainments in the 19th century (Evans, 2007). By 1837, Black women gained continuous admission to higher education institutions but did not gain leadership of these institutions in significant numbers until the late 20th to early 21st century (Robert W. Woodruff Library, 2013). African American women who attended college did so intending to return to their communities to teach (Howard-Baptise & Harris, 2014). However, African Americans at the turn of the 19th century, whose living ancestors were recently freed slaves, viewed education (significantly higher education) as a means to equality and a better life for the entire race (Dagbovie, 2014; Peeples, 2010).

Before the Civil War, higher education for African Americans was limited to some northern institutions that closely held and practiced their religious origins and mid-western church-based institutes and academies (Lupton, 2018). The establishment of the Freedmen's Bureau immediately following the Civil War and the solidifying of the second Morrill Act of 1890 created new opportunities for African Americans to obtain an education (Levine & Levine,

2014). The Freedman's Bureau of the second Morrill Act of 1890 further supported the concept of self-sufficiency of African Americans (Lupton, 2018). An equal support clause within the statute mandated that to receive federal funds, states must provide admission to African Americans to existing colleges or universities or build for them separate institutions of higher education (Cohen, 2012).

> At the 1899 Hampton Negro Conference, Lucy C. Laney argued that educated colored women had the responsibility to help Afro-Americans develop more hygienic habits for their homes and persons, to assist those who were imprisoned to help eradicate the burden of prejudice (Boukari, 2005, p. 2).

Unfortunately, Black women simultaneously carried the load of wanting to be educated while also struggling to receive equal treatment that White men and women obtain. “Feeling positioned as 'the lowest of the low' contributes to the ongoing reconstruction of classed identities, while also reinforcing the identification of these jobs as low paid women's work, and the workers themselves as dispensable/interchangeable” (Leathwood, 2005, p. 20). Many Black leaders feel invisible, no matter the role in which they serve. Respect is never reciprocated but often demanded.

> Some of the research also provides evidence to suggest that the vestiges of the past linger such that race and gender-related issues make equity, mutual respect, and full participation in all areas of the academy difficult for African Americans and other administrators of color to achieve (Holmes, 2004, p. 22).

Despite the circumstances and negative portrayals as mammies and maids, African American women are a “composite of cultural richness and entertainment genius, entrepreneurial spirit and inventors, civil rights and social justice advocates, religious leaders, political thinkers, educators,

and mentors of national visionaries" (Harley, 2008, p. 20). Their work in higher education creates an invaluable blueprint for generations to come.

African American women have faced insurmountable discrimination in their upbringing, their expectations, and their professions. African American women have always made it their responsibility to participate and spearhead movements that provide Black Americans educational and economic opportunities. Boukari (2005) referred to the influence of Black women on education by stating:

> When dealing with African American women's education, one cannot do so without mentioning the socio-historical context in which girls were educated, and the Black women's actions not only to transform African American educational and economic situation but also to impact the general sociopolitical institutions in the US at the turn of the twentieth century. (p. 1)

Boukari (2005) also stated, "Black women's struggles in different fields were for improving Black people's conditions of life to 'uplift the race' (p. 1)." Educational advancement was an "expression of political activism not because education allowed slaves to become better slaves, but because it offered skills essential in challenging the very beliefs of slavery itself" (Boukari, 2005, p. 1). It was not until 1837 that Black women had gained continuous admission to higher education institutions, but they did not gain these institutions' leadership in significant numbers until the late 20th to early 21st century (Harley, 2008). Women of color are the most underrepresented within senior administrative leadership in higher education. However, reflecting the country's changing demographics, projections for the future college population suggest that the most significant growth will be racially and ethnically diverse populations. In contrast, the white population is expected to decline (Stamm, 2009).

Women as College Presidents

Women have a difficult time matriculating to senior administrative roles in higher education, such as college president. Historically, white men served in the roles of president, principal, chancellor, Board of Directors, Overseers, and/or Trustees, leaving women absent from policy leadership positions (Jackson & Harris, 2005). Rudolph (1990) explained men's view of women as:

> The colonial view of a woman was simply that she was intellectually inferior–-incapable, merely because of being a woman, of great thoughts. Her faculties were not worth training. Her place was in the home, where men had assigned her several useful functions. (p. 308)

Currently, women make up 30% of college presidents (ACE, 2017). Although more women are applying for the presidency, there is no decrease in gender bias (Bilen-Green et al., 2008).

University presidents traditionally shape their institution's educational philosophy, direction, and culture (Blumenstyk, 2014). “University presidents are predominantly chosen from the positions of the provost or chief academic officer; however, these positions require a certain level of administrative experience and are more easily realized with the assistance of a mentor” (Horn, 2018). Despite this, some activities and opportunities assist in career progression. However, many are often afforded this opportunity due to the low number of women serving as university presidents. “For instance, leadership development programs are an important means through which women can gain the knowledge and training needed to become university presidents” (Madsen, 2012).

Dean of women became the first role women could serve in as university leaders. “Because of this large increase in women on college campuses, college presidents began to hire

women to serve as faculty, advisors, and counselors for the women students" (Parker, 2015, p. 7). The dean of women's role was the perfect role for women to advance in as leaders in higher education. As enrollment grew, so did the dean's responsibility. Dean of women "were the first to oversee the relatively new minority population of women, which involved insulating the men from the women and, at the same time, protecting and guiding the women. Most deans were faculty, so their primary responsibility was teaching" (Parker, 2015, p. 7). "These deans had the scholarly development of women at the forefront of their concern" (Schwartz, 1997, p. 419). "Many presidents and college leaders continued to be uncomfortable with women on campuses, so the deans of women were the solution to providing segregation and assuring that the women would remain separate from the males" (Parker, 2015, p. 7).

Though women's enrollment seemed to increase steadily, the Great Depression and World War II caused the nation's focus on education to decline. This resulted in a decrease in overall enrollments and, concomitantly, a decrease in the role of Dean of Women becoming Dean of Students. There was no longer a need for a dean specific to women because there was a steady decline in female enrollment. Parker (2015) explained how the loss of the dean of women's position affected women's pathway to leadership:

> The threat to the role of Dean of Women came not only in eliminating the position in some cases but also in the loss of authority. Prior to this transition, the position was most often filled by a woman who reported directly to the university president. This provided an opportunity to sit on policy-making committees and to be a strong voice for female students and faculty. Losing the direct line to the president caused the position to be much less influential (p. 9).

The loss of this role indicated a loss of power and otherwise made it much harder for women to

advance in leadership.

Women did serve as leaders in seminaries, colleges, and academies designated for women's education, but they were too often compared to high schools. Frances Elizabeth Willard, Lucy Haines, Mary McCloud Bethune, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Janie Porter, and Mary Elizabeth Branch are all known for pioneering women's pathways as college presidents. Unfortunately, not much research has been done on women matriculating to the college presidency. Women have made their strides in higher education. “However, despite this high representation of women as students, by 2012, about 86% of all presidents, provosts, and chancellors were male, and 75% of full professors were males” (Parker, 2015, p. 9).

Wheat and Hill (2016) conducted a study to shed light on women university administrators' and presidents' experiences in what was previously a male-dominated field. “Three main themes emerged from the study related to (a) pluralistic leadership styles and practices; (b) the salience of gender in shaping women leaders' perceptions and experiences; and (c) the influence of women's intersecting identities in shaping their leadership” (Wheat & Hill, 2016, p. 6). Some of these themes mirror women's experiences globally in the workplace; however, something that stood out in this article was the women's confidence to use their differences to aid them in career climbing. “Despite women's gains in presidential appointments, among all institutional types, women remain the least likely to lead doctorate-granting universities by representing only 22.3% of public and private presidencies” (ACE, 2008, p. 11). The push for anti-discrimination laws and organizational policies that strived to close the gap in leadership and encouraged women to enter the workplace with equal opportunities was needed for them to advance. The authors conducted face-to-face interviews with 10 women participants. Many of their participants were married with children and noted the balancing of work and their

family added to the challenges they faced. “The women's portrayal of their leadership styles and practices revealed how the salient aspects of their positionality—such as motherhood, academic discipline, educational attainment, or spirituality—had influenced their leadership styles and practices” (Wheat & Hill, 2016, p. 7).

Black Women as College Presidents

Women generally are underrepresented in the talent pool for leadership positions in higher education (Herrback & Mignorac, 2012).

> In contrast to an increasingly diverse student demographic, the profile of college and university presidents has hardly changed in more than a quarter-century, and there is a consensus that higher education should better reflect the diverse population it serves to prepare students to enter an increasingly globalized and pluralistic society. (Oikelome, 2017, p. 22)

Oikelome (2017) also stated:

> Diversification of the college presidency brings a variety of thought, innovation, and divergent perspectives to address the needs of a dynamic student population and helps colleges navigate the various challenges facing higher education, including affordability, decreased funding, changing pedagogy, disruptive technologies, and retention, to name just a few (p. 24).

With African American women only making up 8% of college presidents, growing only 2% since 2007 (ACE, 2017), it is striking these leaders possess the knowledge, skills, abilities, characteristics, and talent to contribute to the demand for viable presidential leadership in today's complex higher education landscape (Shepherd, 2015); yet, there is a dearth of research on the leadership development of the Black women executive leaders in academic environments

(Williams, 2018).

"During the 1970s and 1980s, researchers noted that women who sought leadership positions in administration faced many barriers, but the bulk of these studies focused mainly on white women" (Jackson & Harris, 2005, p. 7). Legislation, such as the Equal Pay Act, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and Title IX of the Education Amendment, later demanded equal treatment of men and women to help eliminate barriers. Furthermore, Wilson (1989) found that Black women faced double oppression as women and as people of color and have only recently been recognized as a phenomenon in need of study. Due to access and equity issues in US higher education, there are few African Americans who are admitted to and persist through doctoral programs, greatly limiting the applicant pool for a faculty position and yielding a shortage of African American faculty (Anderson et al., 1993). African American women are experiencing racial battle fatigue and are also refused acceptance due partly because they are immersed in a male-dominated area.

"Gender is systematically reproduced in hierarchical levels. Jobs and tasks higher in the hierarchical structure of the organization are associated with masculinity and men. In contrast, jobs and tasks lower in the hierarchy are associated with femininity and women" (Leathwood, 2005, as cited in Benschop et al. 2001, p. 3). African American women find they must work twice as hard to be recognized while also enduring poor treatment from colleagues and pupils. Women administrators reported being assigned to more intensive work on less powerful committees, being prescribed supportive roles instead of leadership roles, and having a lack of support services from the institutions (Bilen-Green et al., 2008). Women have found many ways to cope with their mistreatment in higher education. Clayborne and Hamrick (2007), in their study of the leadership experiences of African American women in midlevel student affairs

positions, noted that many respondents identified off-campus resources such as a church, family, and/or spirituality as the support structures that helped them make sense of work-related concerns. Unfortunately, they face so much scrutiny because they are Black women.

Black women are held to a higher standard than their White counterparts. Howard-Vital (1989) reported that African American women in higher education must pursue a doctoral degree to advance their careers. Jackson and Harris (2005) said that the Board of Trustees committees do not favor African American women seeking the college president role. As a result, Black women must also acquire more administrative experience and mainly arrive at the college presidency when invited.

Demographical Context

Bennett College

Bennett College was founded in 1873 in the unfinished basement of Warnersville Methodist Episcopal Church. Before the creation of Bennett College, the church was known as St. Matthews United Methodist Church. Seventy young men and women started elementary and secondary level studies (Brown, 1998). In 1878, a group of emancipated slaves purchased the church for Bennett College. It was following this that college-level courses and permanent facilities were added. During David C. Jones' presidency, the Women's Home Missionary Society joined the Board of Education of the church. These women were the first in the Methodist Church to foster the power of women and emphasize what women can accomplish (Brown, 1998). This resulted in the decision to make Bennett College a women's college. Dr. Player's historical relationship with the Methodist Church and her administrative leadership resulted in her eventual presidency at Bennett. During this time, traditional roles and norms for African American women were challenged and changed.

Bennett College's mission in 1899 was focused on the vocational needs of Bennett students through the program of teacher education and later evolved into college-level academic academics. In the early 1920s, nearly 90% of Bennett College's graduates became teachers in small towns and rural areas in North Carolina. Dr. Willa B. Player was honored to be offered her first teaching position at the institution in the fall of 1930 and continue the institution's legacy. Histories of women's education rarely address Black women's higher education experiences at either Historically White Institutions or the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) that serve them. I hope to provide a clear understanding of the relationship between African American education, African American women's education, and activism at higher education institutions. Bennett College was among many HBCUs that provided unique educational opportunities, which were widely acknowledged by the African American community.

Greensboro, North Carolina

Bennett College is in Greensboro, North Carolina. Social movements and activism were significant in Greensboro in the 1950s and 60s. In an effort to understand Dr. Player's leadership at Bennett College, it is essential to revisit one of Greensboro's most tumultuous times. Prior to the Civil Rights Movement, Greensboro was viewed as a progressive place that concealed the White privilege denying equal access to the advantages of citizenship. However, Greensboro had a history of racial injustice, and it was only a matter of time before residents of the community responded. Brown (2013) explained:

> At the same time that White leaders of Greensboro wanted to see it as a "liberal community," they appear to have been terrified at the prospect that a disruption of the status quo would cause chaos in bloodshed in the same city that was supposed to be so

> liberal or, to put it another way, the story they wanted to tell about themselves was that their city was nice at the same time that it maintained white supremacy. (p. 43)

Dr. Player was no stranger to social movements. However, her first encounter with activism occurred when she returned to America in 1937 after studying in France. She advised a civil rights action that led to the social movements in downtown Greensboro regarding segregated movie theaters and racist portrayals in film. The student she was advising was none other than Frances Jones, daughter of Bennett College's President, Dr. David C. Jones. Unfortunately, it was not until 1960 that Greensboro's culture had consisted of fostering civility within a system of second-class citizenship as long as Black people went quietly about their business and did not ruffle the waters of White privilege (Brown, 2013, p. 43). Dr. Player was asked by historian Eugene Pfaff (1979) if she believed Greensboro was the liberal city it portrayed itself to be:

> Well, I think that it was erroneous to think of Greensboro as a liberal city. It wasn't—it was really not a liberal city, but it did just enough to appear to the outside community to be less segregated than other cities in North Carolina. For example, with the colleges, we were invited to a tea at the University [of North Carolina] at Chapel Hill, an afternoon tea and discussion. There were just enough of these things to have one feel that the city was pretty genuine and pretty liberal, but it remained pretty conservative for a good while. I believe that it was not until the fifties that we began to see Greensboro really branching out as a more liberal city. I think it was even in this period that I received, as the first Black person in the community, the award that was given by the National Conference of Christians and Jews [NCCJ] in the city of Greensboro. I don't remember what year that was, but—well, I think it came about because there were people in the community—among the Black community, especially—who were pretty courageous and pretty

> upstanding people. There were people in the professions, there were ministers who were really hard at work with the city fathers on getting some of the situations changed in Greensboro. They were backed up pretty largely by faculties who were at A&T [North Carolina A&T State University] College and at Bennett College, and a particularly forthright president at Bennett College in David D. Jones who just dared to do a number of things that were unheard of in the community. (p. 2)

Greensboro was among one of the only cities that had a prominent Black community. The community's support greatly impacted the institution and the new initiatives used to promote it.

Theoretical Framework

This research study used a combination of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Black Feminist Theory (BFT), and the Nexus of Black Leadership Efficacy (NOBLE) model as its theoretical framework in order to gain an in-depth understanding of Dr. Willa Beatrice Player's leadership style and vision for Bennett College and how it impacted the institution and community. Understanding Dr. Player's pathway to the presidency sheds light on her professional and educational advancement and the exploitation she endured with greater opportunities. CRT focuses on the importance of race, gender, and class because by fundamentally challenging all historic or essentialist notions of "woman" — it neatly captures all the main elements of the debate on "intersectionality" (Brah & Phoenix, 2016).

Critical Race Theory

Upon the initial examination of the roles of race, racism, and power in American culture, the advocates of CRT argue that for Black women, race, gender, and class are not distinct and isolated realms of experience. According to Crenshaw (1988), as cited in Parker and Lynn (2016):

> The experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism. Because of their intersectional identity as both women and of color, women of color are marginalized along the lines of gender and race at the same time. Moreover, in the case of Black women, race does not exist outside of gender, and gender does not exist outside of race. (p. 146)

Viewing this study through a critical race lens is beneficial because it offers connections from the past that need to be understood to see how hierarchical relationships of power protect the legal interest of White or elite Americans to continue discriminating against Black women.

The first feature discussed within CRT is that race is difficult to address or cure because it is often not acknowledged. The concept of equality expressed in rules or formal settings remedies only the most deliberate forms of discrimination. Critical race theorists are responsible for educating American citizenry in understanding that race is a social construct used to manipulate minoritized groups when convenient. Unfortunately, much of society benefits from racial injustice and has little incentive to eradicate it. Critical race theorists want to change the existing social construct of race, not just to benefit one particular group (Davis, 2016). White society may resist an orderly progression toward power-sharing, particularly in connection with upper-level and technical jobs, police agencies, and government (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Unfortunately, this type of systemic change requires society to distribute information, resources, access, networks, and evaluation to understand better differentials affecting successful advancement in marginalized groups.

To provide equitable opportunities for marginalized groups, CRT proposes that we encourage the unique voices of people of color. The legal storytelling movement urges authors of color to narrate their understandings with discrimination and the legal system and apply their

distinctive views to measure the law's principal narrative (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This movement provides marginalized groups to counter historical myths and stereotypes to transform the oppressive system through diverse voices. Given the different histories and experiences of Black, American Indian, Asian, and Latino American writers and thinkers, the voice-of-color thesis holds that because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, they may be able to communicate to their White counterparts matters that the Whites are unlikely to know.

Dr. Player's leadership style did not conform to traditionally perceived roles, with men being task-oriented and women being nurturing and socio-emotional. With no other representation to follow in this role, Dr. Player demonstrated a new way to challenge sexual identity and gender politics in higher education. Critical Race Theory argues that intersectionality in the social movement has the power to alter social perception. Critical Race Theory also has historical and theoretical roots in Black feminism and women of color activism; intersectionality is a concept forged to address concerns relating to inclusivity and representation in social movement (Evan et al., 2017). Therefore, this theory is critical in understanding Dr. Willa Beatrice Player's leadership style and vision for Bennett College and how it impacted the institution and the Greensboro community.

Critical Race Theory is essential to historical research methods because it enables the researcher to review the contemporary historical narrative of Dr. Player's leadership at Bennett College. Critical Race Theory allows me to develop a well-defined theoretical framework for reexamining the existing historical narrative (Gall et al., 1999). In addition, it introduces multiple perspectives for interpretation in a manner that provides more accurate accounts of significant historical events (Davis, 2016).

Black Feminist Thought

To understand fully the significance of Dr. Willa Player's leadership style and vision for Bennett College and how it impacted the institution and community and, additionally, why her story is unexplored within the historical narrative of Black women in the college presidency, we need to understand the impact of the social construct of racism but also sexism in the 1950s. Therefore, Critical Race Theory was expanded with Black Feminist Theory and the Nexus of Black Leadership Efficacy (NOBLE) by including the social construct of sexism on Dr. Player's leadership and influenced the institution and community.

> Black feminist theory is the convergence of all of these factors—the suppression of Black women's voice by dominant groups, Black women's struggles to work within the confines of norms of racial solidarity, and the seeming protections offered by a culture of dissemblance— influences yet another factor shaping patterns of silence (Collins, 2000, p. 125).

Unfortunately, Black women's historical suppression of their work and ideas is yet another form of oppression. "Black women's exclusion from positions of power within mainstream institutions has led to the elevation of elite White male ideas and interests and the corresponding suppression of Black women's views and interests in traditional scholarship" (Collins, 2000, p. 5). Black feminist thought believes in empowerment in forms of self-definition and self-determination.

During Dr. Player's career trajectory, her relationship with students and community members was not intended to dominate or control. Instead, her purpose was to bring people along, to "uplift the race" so that vulnerable community members will be able to attain the self-reliance and independence essential for resistance (Collins, 2000, p. 193). Activist mothering is a concept often misunderstood or used derogatorily.

The concept often called "maternal politics" within North American and European-

> influenced feminist patterns of Black women's political activism associated with community other mother traditions, as well as the power and recognition offered by such women by African Americans, become derogated (Collins, 2000, p. 193).

In Julia Wells's article Maternal Politics in Organizing Black South African Women, she argued that maternal politics refers to "political movements which are rooted in women's defense of their roles as mothers and protectors of their children" (Wells, 1998, p. 251). Wells also proposed that the force behind public political actions and social movements is derived from women's ideal of their roles as mothers (Collins, 2000, p. 193).

Dr. Willa B. Player walked the radical line of cultural and societal change at Bennett College. Many of those challenges still appear today. Because Bennett was one of the few colleges in the country designated to educate and serve women, Dr. Player made sure Bennett's curriculum would provide the students the freedom to attain the quality of life they desired. She established a holistic educational approach that included interracial exchanges to enrich the students' cultural competence, a focus on career readiness, a commitment to service, and social and political intelligence.

Her educational philosophy was grounded in the principles of education for the service of others while also developing the self. She believed in instilling in her students the value of empowering women. She also believed in leadership, outreach, and independence, which further strengthened their professional and personal values. An example of her philosophy in action was Operation Door Knock, a voter registration drive where Bennett College students registered 1,478 residents of Greensboro. Dr. Player influenced her students far beyond the classroom, which later resulted in the students becoming change agents in the world.

The Nexus of Black Leadership Efficacy

To better understand Dr. Player and her leadership, the study used the Nexus of Black Leadership Efficacy (NOBLE) model. According to Hinton (2012), “NOBLE was developed to understand how African Americans administrators' experiences informed their leadership and professional presence.” Hinton also proposed a theoretical model that suggests the journey to senior-level leadership begins long before graduate school, academic environment mentoring, and educational leadership programs. “The model recognizes four themes related to leadership and professional development of women, such as marginalization, support/network, lack of support, survival and coping strategies, and transition and growth” (Hinton, 2012, p. 74). These experiences often influence their passion for spearheading movements that provide educational and economic opportunities for Black Americans. Dr. Player's historical relationship with the Methodist Church and her administrative leadership resulted in her eventual presidency at Bennett.

According to Hinton (2012), she found that during early childhood and educational periods for girls, several experiences could be considered defining moments that may have impacted their decisions when making career choices. Noted in the Long Walk: The Story of The Presidency of Willa B. Player at Bennett College (1998), retells a story about a young Dr. Willa Player writing an article describing her disapproval of her experiences in Akron. The Players had attended church one Sunday, and the Reverend suggested the abysmal conditions they were facing in Akron were due to the Great Migration. Dr. Player left church disappointed in the Reverend's message and expressed her thoughts in an article to the local Black paper.

She titled the article "Local Pastor Insults Congregation." She was fifteen years old. The article explained that the pastor was spreading racial prejudice in the church, which contradicts the Lord's message. Her early exposure to racial prejudice can be tied to her role as a social

justice activist using the NOBLE.

Conclusion

Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature on the history of college access and leadership for women with an explicit focus on Black women. Finally, the chapter then discusses the combinational use of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Black Feminist Theory (BFT), and the Nexus of Black Leadership Efficacy (NOBLE) as its theoretical framework in order to gain an in-depth understanding regarding Dr. Player's leadership style and vision for Bennett College and how it influenced the institution and community.

CHAPTER 3

THE POWER OF THE PERSON

"The Black woman is expected to be a superwoman without acting like one."
Dr. Willa Beatrice Player

Introduction

This chapter highlights aspects of Dr. Willa Beatrice Player's professional life and the significance of her leadership during her career. She began her service at Bennett College in the fall of 1930 as a Latin and French professor. By 1955 she had started her journey as the first woman president of a fully accredited, four-year, liberal arts institution. The chapter begins with a brief overview of Dr. Player's professional roles such as Latin and French Professor, Registrar, Dean of Instruction, Interim President, President, Director of the Division of Institutional Development, Board/ Committee Member; her role as a Civil Rights activist and her decision to support her students during the 1960s Greensboro Sit-ins; and explores in greater depth her role as a campus professor and administrator, influential college president, and her emergence as the first federally appointed Director of the Division of College Support in the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare at the duration of her tenure at Bennett College.

Dr. Player dedicated her personal and professional life toward the advancement of Black Americans in Education, activism, and politics. She worked tirelessly to provide integrated, holistic education that resulted in better access to higher education programs and degrees for women. Her contributions to the reorganization of Bennett College, the local Civil Rights

movement in Greensboro, North Carolina, and Higher Education have not been examined in great detail. In pursuit of these goals, the study will focus on many "critical or key events drawn from archival research and the review of other primary and secondary sources for illustration with the understanding that no researcher as a fieldworker can ever hope to get the whole story" (Wolcott, 1994, p.17). Chapter 3 is primarily about her professional roles.. The chapter discusses Dr. Player's career trajectory, her life as an educated Black woman in America, and her role as a civil rights activist. Chapter 3 concludes with a dialogue regarding her leadership philosophy and strategies that have aided her as a Black woman in her career.

Educational and Professional Pioneer

Black women who aspire for or are currently in leadership positions experience racism, sexism, and classism like no other race or gender. The adverse effects of intersectionality between race and gender, for Black women, are often interlocked socially, politically, and professionally; thus, making it even harder to navigate their way to ascended leadership roles. “Gender is not only socially constructed, but it is a set of assumptions and beliefs on both individual and societal levels that affect the thoughts, feelings, behaviors, resources, and treatment of women and men” (Bell & Nkomo, 2001, p. 16). “In predominantly White organizations, power dynamics may cause disempowering experiences for African American women that can occur in the form of challenging, resisting, resenting, undermining, or even ignoring a person’s authority” (Stanley, 2009, p. 552). In 2019 CUPA-HR released their annual report about professionals in higher education. They reported that women hold 69% of leadership positions in academic affairs and 66% in student affairs (CUPA-HR, 2019). According to the American Council on Education (2017), minority presidents grew from 13.6% in 2006, to 12.6% in 2011, to 16.8% in 2016. The growth can be attributed to the appointments of Black presidents.

Black presidents grew from 5.9% to 7.9% in 2016. Thus concluding that Black leaders, overall, have better "learned how to recognize, respond, and react to issues emerging from sociocultural realities that have challenged their leadership experience" (Stanley, 2009, p. 553).

Dr. Willa Beatrice Player mastered the strengths that she later used to climb the professional ladder. She had great roots of success earlier and credited her upbringing in Akron, Ohio, as one of the reasons she was most successful. "It just seems everything started tumbling down after I got 'discovered' in Akron," Dr. Player said with a chuckle (Player, 1985, p. 25). Dr. Player, who preferred to keep a low profile, could be one of Akron's best-kept secrets (Lumpkins, 1985, p. 25). She was the first Black cadet teacher for East High School in Akron and "was the first Black woman from Akron, Ohio to receive a doctorate" (Woman educator honored, 1948, p. 19). Dr. Player emerged as one of the great, idiosyncratic leaders in her tenure, not just because she was charismatic but also with clear values, priorities, and standards. Historically, Black women were perceived as underqualified for leadership roles and were often passed over during appointments. Dr. Player devoted her life toward constructing a new path for young women to follow. She persisted through the many challenges she faced and demonstrated that not only are Black women exceptionally capable of serving in leadership roles, but also they are able to do so without overexerting themselves.

Stanley (2009) conducted a study regarding the perspectives of Black women in leadership. He argued that Black women spend so much of their time trying to deconstruct stereotypes of people's expectations of them in the workplace rather than working to create an environment that encourages growth and professional improvement. Stanley (2009) wrote:

> History has created and engrained stereotypical images of African American women in subservient roles that are not the traditional perception of who leads in predominantly

> White organizations. Therefore, when an African American woman enters to lead in these types of environments, she is often challenged to distort these images and prove that she is qualified to lead before she is accepted as the leader. (p. 556)

Dr. Player defied the historical imagery of Black women and, as a leader, devised succession planning strategies to foster career development and gender-based independence for the students of Bennett College. Dr. Player was an incomparable leader "in demand as a speaker and resident expert on Higher Education, mainly when it concerns Black Colleges and Universities" (Lumpkins, 1985, p. 55). Her career ranged from educator to federal appointee. She set the new standard for Black women in leadership.

Latin and French Professor

In 1930, Dr. Player graduated with her Master's degree from Oberlin College and was soon hired to serve as a Latin and French Professor at Bennett College. Historically, Black Americans relied on education to escape poverty and enhance their chances for employment. Dr. Player's father encouraged her decision to teach. In the 1920s, there grew a growing demand for Black professors as many HBCUs like Howard, Fisk, and Atlanta Universities expanded their professional programs. Unfortunately, Black professors had trouble finding employment at predominantly White institutions no matter how qualified they were. Dr. Player was faced with this same challenge, as Bennett College was the only institution to respond to her request of being employed. "Many Afro-American educators, intellectuals, and leaders demanded that only Black scholars, formally trained, should be hired to teach at Black institutions. Those blacks who were hired as teachers often served as administrators while also fulfilling their teaching obligations" (Boukari, 2005, p. 4). Dr. Player capitalized on the many roles she served while at Bennett. Each position prepared her for the chance to serve as president.

Dr. Player was most inspired by the heritage and orientation of Bennett College. The college had a rich history deeply rooted on the soil of Greensboro's past and unforeseeable future. Although Dr. Player was no stranger to challenging the injustices facing Black people even in an unfamiliar environment, she focused solely on becoming better acclimated with Bennett College and Greensboro. "When I went there [Greensboro] in '30, I was twenty years old, and I was so busy teaching French I didn't know what was going on in the community." (p. 12). As a professor, Dr. Player also served as Director of Religious Activities and taught Sunday school and violin exercises to students in the chapel. "There was always something new to learn. I wanted to teach Latin and French in a college, and that was challenging because lots of students spoke a southern dialect" (Player as cited in Brown, 1998, p. 79). In 1935, she took a leave of absence to pursue her postgraduate studies. She received a Certificat d'Études at the University of Grenoble in France. Upon her return, she began serving as the Director of Admissions.

Registrar and Director of Admissions

Eddie Cole's (2020) text recounting Black college presidents' and campus leaders' historical narratives provided a compelling description of the registrar's role. Cole's profound recollection of Dr. Martin D. Jenkins experience as past president of Morgan State University, showed that the duties of the role are similar to those of today. In the chapter, Cole (2020) explained that in the 1930s, Jenkins' had the responsibility of researching and discussing "implications for curriculum development based on his national survey findings" (p. 24). His detailed account of Jenkins' role provided a better understanding of the evolving role of the registrar and the growing responsibilities placed upon the person in this role.

Harvard University was the first institution to implement the role of a registrar. Initially, the registrar was a part-time duty assigned to faculty members. Over time, enrollment grew at

colleges and universities, and the role of the registrar changed. “By 1880, 10% of the institutions of higher learning had full-time registrars, 42% by 1900, 76% by 1910, and over 90% by 1920” (University of West Florida, 2020., p. 1). According to Shanken and Sauter (2017), the role of the registrar has evolved:

> As the academic service leader of an institution, the registrar is responsible for development, documentation, appropriate interpretation, and enforcement of academic policy; under the direction of senior institutional leadership, manages complexities and ambiguities of and clearly defines policy for students, parents, staff, faculty, alumni, and other government, governing boards, and institutions interacting with the registrar’s home institution; translates policy into processes and procedures for faculty and students; maintains records of exceptions to established policies, documenting situational decisions that impact an individual student and/or group; approves all new courses to meet institutional standards and oversees official records supporting all course changes; is a primary authority regarding student records and the expert on program progressions; and maintains institutional academic documents as a historical and legal record of each transaction. (p. 1)

Dr. Player was appointed to the position of registrar in the 1940s. She was entrusted with the institution's responsibilities to understand the complex nature of the institution and produce new best practices for institutional and student success. Today, the historical responsibilities for record maintenance, registration, and institutional and organizational records have been expanded to include admissions, enrollment management, and student information technology. Dr. Player’s professional experience within the registrar role made her very knowledgeable of the everyday needs and quality of students Bennett College attracted. This information aided her

in her decision-making process as she had first-hand knowledge of the diverse and interconnected community at the institution.

Dr. Player (left) with a student as Registrar, 1944

During Dr. Player's tenure as Director of Admission, enrollment increased year by year. According to the article Bennett College (1941) written in the Mobile Weekly Advocate, Dr. Player announced that Bennett College had reached its quota of students for the semester, and anyone who wished to apply for the semester beginning in September of 1942 is advised to send their applications for admission immediately. "In 1931, the student body numbered 155; in 1936 it had increased to 310, and for the fall opening 375 had enrolled… Miss Player also announced the stabilization of the Bennett enrollment at the 375 figure for some years, pending internal curriculum study and changes" (Bennett College, 1941, p. 1). To further her outreach and understanding of the role, she served as the only Black woman on the sub-committee on Women in College and Defense of the National Committee on Education and Defense (Pittsburg Courier, 1942). The sub-committee advised Black college women students interested in entry-level laboratory technicians, statisticians, and mechanical draughtsman positions.

Serving as Director of Admissions, Dr. Player was tasked with collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data on best ways to recruit and retain potential students at Bennett College. There

she realized the expectations for women in education and professional settings were steadily evolving and requiring more women. In her (1944) text, *Goals for Educated Women*, Dr. Player wrote:

> While our changing civilization has expanded women's sphere of opportunity, it has also enlarged their areas of responsibility. Today their functions reach beyond the home into the community and the nation. They are called upon to share the privileges and the obligations of citizens. Every woman no matter what her vocation has a community responsibility inherent in the fact that she is a citizen. Today, that community responsibility has widened to a world community. Mechanical inventions have made the world a neighborhood and have placed upon women as well as men the task of being good neighbors carrying with it the idea that our civilization can survive only in the spirit of good will toward all. This requires an intelligent understanding of the idea of democracy and a dedication to the job of building a society where democracy can function. (p. 7)

She was interested in helping women develop holistically. She also stated:

> In thinking this problem calls for the redesigning of a curriculum which will combine general and vocational education in such a way as to preserve ideals of equality and justice and at the same time evoke the maximum use of talents in achieving high vocational goals. (p. 7)

In 1948, Dr. Player completed her doctorate at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her dissertation subject was the institution, and she entitled her work, “Improving College Education for Women at Bennett College.” Her study sought to analyze the needs of women students and improve the curriculum from 1940 to 1948 and make recommendations for further

development and improvements. Her research opened the door for her to be promoted to the acting Dean of Instruction and Chairman of Religious activities at Bennett in 1952. Unfortunately, at this time, women were not made Deans. Out of fear that the male professors and administrators would resign in protest, President Jones named her the Coordinator of Instruction instead of Dean of Instruction. She later became the Acting Dean.

Dean of Instruction: Importance of Education for Black Women

As Dean of Instruction, Dr. Player was charged with tasks of monitoring the collective needs of young Black women and creating an environment and curriculum that addressed growing trends in postsecondary education. "The College was moving toward an expanded vision which is somewhat inclusive of the original mission, but wider and more responsive to the contemporary life of that time" (Brown, 1998, p. 56). Dr. Player's dissertation on improving the educational needs for Black women stood as a guide on how to restructure best and transform the institution toward this new mission. She believed:

> There are three major objectives in the higher education of women which would seem to be most important. First of all college training should prepare every young woman to earn a living; second, it should help her to become an efficient home-maker; and third, it should train her for leadership and worthy citizenship in the community in which she lives and in the larger world community. (Player, 1948, p. 9)

During her time as Dean, she recommended the College's exploration of "new courses; including more field study in the curriculum; opening Home Economics to all, not just majors; making sure the Homemaking Institute is functional and establishing a core curriculum" (Brown, 1998, p. 57). This meant better understanding the ever-changing needs of Black women in education precisely. She was also challenged with addressing the faculty's needs as Bennett was

undergoing a significant shift in its administrative organization. The adverse effects of World War II called for faculty to return to service, which resulted in the need for a "more democratic administration" (Player, 1944, p. 134). In her dissertation, she noted:

> Colleges have been criticized again and again for failing to develop in their students a sense of social responsibility . . . In answer to the query on how the college could offer more assistance to students in fitting them for community leadership, the following pertinent suggestions were made:
>
> 1. Allow students to do practice teaching in the types of communities in which they are to work.
> 2. Acquaint students more fully with programs of various agencies, national and civic, which are working for community betterment – how they function and who directs them.
> 3. Permit students to study average communities rather than ideal situations.
> 4. Have more visits to community agencies, under supervision.
> 5. Teach students to help very poor families to make their home and surroundings more livable and attractive with practically no money but ideas and good hard work.
> 6. We "learn by doing." Send students into real life situations. (Player, 1994, p. 50)

In addition to these interim practices, nine categories were selected after Bennett College students explained the topics they found most interesting and helpful during their academic careers. They listed Community Leadership and Citizenship; Earning a Living; General Negro Problems; Consumer Education; Home and Family Life; Health: Mental and Physical; Communication; Recreation; and Religion and Philosophy of Living as the areas of study that

highlighted the importance of the social and racial issues Black Americans faced (Brown, 1998). It was important for Dr. Player to prepare students academically and build campus morale, uplift the Greensboro community, and empower students to confront and be proactive when they noticed problems persisting in their community. Dr. Player believed, "The college is equally responsible for training the intellect as for developing the total personality" (Player, 1944, p. 208). She needed students to understand that being an educated Black woman was not just being successful in the classroom, but a woman that tends to the needs of others. Bennett College students were provided the luxury of obtaining a college degree. Therefore, they have a responsibility to serve and do their part to uplift the suffering Black community.

Vice President and Interim President

Under Dr. Jones's continued mentorship, Dr. Player was faced with new challenges and exciting experiences. He mentored her deliberately as if he always knew she would be his successor. In 1955, Dr. Player became the Vice-President of Bennett College, and her professional relationship with Dr. Jones blossomed. The two shared similar purposes for the overall mission of the college. This made it easy for Dr. Player to transition to the college's Interim President when Dr. Jones grew ill. On October 14, 1956, Dr. Willa Beatrice Player was inaugurated as President of Bennett College. She was the first African American woman to serve as president of a four-year accredited liberal arts college. She remained President for 10 years.

ACE (2007) conducted a study regarding Black women's ascension to leadership positions in higher education which later revealed the prolonged climb Black women were facing. Following this report, Traci Alexander (2010) wrote an article on the roots of leadership for Black women leaders in higher education, "Today the "doors" of education have been pried open because of trailblazers such as Mary McLeod Bethune" (p. 195). She went on to say that

ACE's study revealed the small percentage of Black women in leadership and she expressed the hope it would encourage institutions to assist in Black women's pursuit of leadership in higher education. The exciting thing about both texts is how there has not been much progress in Black women being appointed into leadership roles in higher education, and decades later, there is still a tiny number of Black women serving in leadership roles. Dr. Player was the only woman during the 1950s serving as Vice President of a 4-year liberal arts institution, where she later served as the first Black woman to become president.

She was the first of many things, and that brought on many challenges for her. Men often tested her credibility and qualifications. She also grew frustrated with the need for Black women to have to fight to be in spaces where they were overqualified. During her sorority's Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Founder's Day celebration, she spoke to the many disadvantages facing Black women. She encouraged the women to be mindful of their rightful place in society, as the world's growing demands required their assistance. She stated:

> Any of us could compile a small list of horrors illustrating the fact that despite the progress we seem to be making, women still retain a nebulous if not subordinate status in society today. The important thing to emphasize is that women have become a factor to be reckoned with in our time. Although we are making commendable progress in many areas of life, it is not enough. We are still only tokens. We are still on the periphery, too distant from policy development and decision-making. We are still overworked, underpaid, isolated, uncertain, and powerless. (Player in 1985, as cited by Brown, 1998, p. 53)

Dr. Player was able to speak to these concerns because even as accomplished and educated as she was, she still had to clarify her presence in male-dominated spaces. There was no need to

focus on the ignorance of those still looking to further the gender gap but to lead and serve with love because, through that, you are genuinely on the way to complete self-fulfillment. Dr. Player's reign as Vice President was short-lived as she quickly had to transition into the Interim President role because Dr. David Dallas Jones's health increasingly declined.

President With a Social Justice Platform

On October 14, 1956, Dr. Player was inaugurated as Bennett College's new president. She became the first Black woman to serve in this role. University presidents continuously raise funds and recruit students for their institution to provide a valuable collegiate experience. Along with finding more hours in the day, Bowen (2011) encouraged presidents to accept that there is never enough time to complete all that needs to be done. Unfortunately, Black presidents are expected to work around the clock. Black women, especially, are expected to exist in this role while juggling the many tasks they face daily. Cole (2020) provided an in-depth explanation of the tasks set out for Black presidents. He also spoke to the importance of their role during the Civil Rights Movement. Cole wrote:

> Black college presidents were critical actors in the shaping of racial policy and practices across the South within the federal government . . . Black presidents also molded public discourse around the governance of Black colleges. And notably, they often championed the direct action campaigns and student demonstrations that challenged segregation; however, much of this work was done with extreme caution and out of plain sight. (p. 16)

Black women leaders were at the center of activism during the Civil Rights Movement. They stood without being recognized, appreciated, or credited. Dr. Player used her platform to push the agenda of student activism further and support their social justice and equity efforts.

The college president's role is being transformed, and regardless of their background, college presidents are expected to lead, counsel, and fundraise while also upholding educational values. Believed to be one of the most challenging jobs globally, a 2017 survey conducted every five years by the American Council on Education stated the average tenure for college leaders was 6.5 years in 2016, down from 8.5 years a decade before (Thomason, 2018). This study concluded college presidents are no longer staying in the role like they used to.

College presidents have been forced to address demands that previously were not of significance, thus making the job more challenging. Not only are the needs more significant, but so are the exceptions placed upon them. The way college presidents respond is also being watched under a microscope, and they need to perform in the role strategically. K. Johnson Bowles (2013) explained the role of the college president to be as follows:

> How a president deals with a crisis – how swiftly, how professionally, how ethically and transparently, how compassionately – is crucial. A president must know the law and have excellent counsel, ensure that the institution acts with integrity and honesty, and must show appropriate due diligence and empathy. A president, like a police officer, protects and serves. (para. 13)

“The presidency role is very complex, and with time and gained experience, the president becomes more proficient” (Birnbaum, 1992, p. 73). The leadership characteristics of African-American female college and university presidents have rarely been studied. The lack of research in this area is due, in part, to the absence of African-American females in leadership positions at four-year higher education institutions (Wilson, 1998). The great underlying draw of American higher education for Black women is the embedded notion that education is a "great equalizer for upward mobility and acceptance within society" (Lederman, 2012, para. 2).

Effective leadership is always critical for higher education institutions, particularly as institutions face significant challenges that may drastically influence their ability to provide high-quality education (Stamm, 2009). Leadership and representation are vital for achieving the vision and guiding the institution toward addressing its current challenges. Despite slight progress, the typical college president remains a White man in his early 60s, according to the latest edition of the American College President Study published by the American Council on Education (Samsel, 2017). Although women are increasingly visible in senior administrative leadership roles in higher education, the percentage of minority college presidents has slowly increased over the last 30 years. However, women of color are the most underrepresented in the presidency (American Council on Education, 2017). Reflecting the country's changing demographics, projections for the future college-age population suggest that the most significant growth will be racially and ethnically diverse populations.

In contrast, the White population is expected to decline (Stamm, 2009). Where does this leave African American women? The pathway to college presidency for Black women is immensely challenging and requires a great deal of adapting and coping. Black women often are the matriarch of an organization but are cast away when they have resolved the lingering issues. Black women are seen culturally and in society as vital; the Black woman is generally thought to innately possess the power expected to singularly maintain family, help others, overcome obstacles, and suppress weakness (Abrams et al., 2014).

In the year 2015, as the representation of Black women in higher education administration remains virtually unchanged, an examination of the "social constructs, identity work, and organizational factors towards increasing their leadership development" within such institutions should be revisited (Carroll & Levy, 2010; Cross & Staler, 1994). The leadership

characteristics of African American female college and university presidents have rarely been studied. The lack of research in this area is due, in part, to the absence of African American females in leadership positions at four-year higher education institutions (Wilson, 1998). African American women are continuously discriminated against for being both female and African American, making their work environments almost unbearable. Due to their constant mistreatment and underrepresentation, there is a shortage of African American female college presidents.

In 1957, the Greensboro branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People sent a request to various venues in Greensboro to host Dr. Martin Luther King. He was denied by churches, high schools, and other universities. Among the venues requested, Bennett College had the smallest facility but was the only place willing to allow him to speak. It was an intense climate for the country. Rosa Parks had just been arrested and jailed.

Emmett Till had been brutally murdered. The ruling for Brown v. Topeka Board of Education had just been settled. Dr. Player recounted the reasons Greensboro was hesitant to host Dr. King, and she stated, “There was no place, not even in the black high school, that would allow Martin Luther King to deliver an address” (Chafe, 1977). Dr. King led the Montgomery Bus Boycott, encouraging African American domestic workers to go on strike. He seemed very dangerous because he attracted crowds of what appeared to be angry black people. However, on February 11, 1958, true to Bennett tradition, he spoke in the Annie Merner Pfeiffer Chapel. Dr. Player remembered saying, “This is a liberal arts college where freedom rings, so Martin Luther King can speak here” (Chafe, 1977). Bennett College surrounded the campus with police protection, and Dr. King spoke to a packed crowd. When asked to reflect on the decision for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., she stated:

> And later on during my presidency, Martin Luther King was invited to speak. And there was no place, not even in the black high school, that would allow Martin Luther King to deliver an address. And true to the Bennett tradition, I said, “This is a liberal arts college where freedom rings, so Martin Luther King can speak here,” you see. So we surrounded the campus with police protection, and Martin Luther King came and spoke. That's another illustration of the, you know, outreach. (Player & Chafe, 1977, p. 2)

She also explained:

> The whole community, because, you see, they had gone everywhere before they came to Bennett because Bennett had the smallest chapel, you see. And they had gone to all of these auditoriums and everything, and then when everybody refused them, then that's when they came to Bennett. (Player & Chafe, 1977, p. 10)

Dr. Player set the tone for institutions in the South to pave their way. She was not too afraid to stand alone, which set her apart from the other university presidents.

Greensboro Sit-Ins

"Every little contact where you express deep regard for the dignity and worth of the person is contributing to the unfinished business of democracy" (Player, 1960, p. 11). Dr. Willa Beatrice Player challenged the crowd at the Atlanta University Center Convocation of 1960. Dr. Player not only believed these words but also acted on them as she stood at the center of social activism in her very own backyard in Greensboro, North Carolina. It was not uncommon for women to be at the forefront of these movements. “African American female members found ways to critically shape social justice groups and to assume key leadership roles” (Berry & Gross, 2020, p. 189).

Dr. Player first encountered activism when she returned to the U.S. from Grenoble in 1937. She advised a civil rights action that led to the boycott and protest of segregated movie theaters and racist portrayals in film offerings in downtown Greensboro. The student she was advising was none other than Frances Jones, daughter of Bennett College's President, Dr. David D. Jones. When Dr. Player was asked why she chose to participate in the 1960 Greensboro Sit-ins but opted not to during past demonstrations, she recalled:

> See, when I was there in the thirties, I was in my early twenties, and I was so busy teaching French I didn't know what was going on in the Community. Until I got up a little – been there a little and people began to know me, and I began to associate with the administration, but in those early days, the only thing that I can remember is that we – because we were so anxious that there should be student involvement that everybody – everything should be open to everybody, that my main concern was being sure that the girls understood why they didn't have sororities, you know. That is what I could control. (p. 12)

The following year in 1959, the women of Bennett College met to discuss boycotting the Carolina Theater because of its segregation policy. The famous Greensboro sit-in at the Woolworth's lunch counter took place on February 1, 1960. Several students explained boycotting had occurred before in 1937 and recommended that different plans were needed to get the most effective response. Bennett's Student Government president Gloria Brown and Edward Pitt of the University North Carolina A&T co-chaired the Student Executive Committee for Justice, which served as the planning committee for demonstrations. Due to Gloria Brown's relationship with Dr. Player, she received counsel from her regularly regarding direction about leading a protest. Dr. Player had expectations that the students would put to practice what they

have learned in the classroom. She assured them that if they participated in non-violent protest, she would not penalize them. The most striking result from the data is the distinction between what is often narrated of the events leading up to the Greensboro sit-ins and how the students described these same events at Bennett College.

According to the students at Bennett College, their involvement was hidden, ignored, distorted, falsified, and denied by the media (Brown, 2013). The school's NAACP chapter met recurrently from September to November of 1959 to discuss the strategies needed to implement their goals. Dr. Player advised the students to wait until after the Christmas break to start the protest. She also explained it would be worthwhile to include male students from A&T to ensure safety. Upon arriving back to campus after the Christmas break, students from Bennett and A&T met to discuss, refine, and finalize their strategies. The plan was for them all to go down to Woolworth's lunch counter and refuse to leave. A Bennett sit-in participant recalled in *Belles of Liberty: Gender, Bennett College and the Civil Rights Movement*:

> What occurred on February 1, 1960, was not the result of a casual dormitory conversation on the campus of A&T College. It was the culminating point of an idea rigorously thought through, meticulously debated, and refined by a handful of courageous young women on the campus of an all-women's college where learning and social activism were inextricably intertwined and endorsed. (Brown, 2013, p. 56)

It has been challenging to piece together what occurred on the morning of the sit-ins. Historically, Black women were overlooked during these movements. Black women were the only group fighting two fights simultaneously. They were fighting for Black Americans and also Black women. According to Berry and Gross (2020),

> African American women from every stratum, especially those active in civil rights and Black power, found themselves caught between wanting to support Black men and Black communities while at the same time carving out a space for their immense talents as leaders, strategists, protestors, and grassroots organizers. (p. 188)

Dr. Player can be credited for her assistance in these movements.

Franklin McClain, an original Greensboro Four member, disagreed with the stories as explained by Bennett students. He denied the fact that Bennett students were involved in the early planning process of the sit-ins. He speculated that Dr. Player would never allow her students to participate in what could have been a dangerous protest. McClain stated, "The honest truth is the Bennett girls had no idea what we were going to do, and neither did Dr. Player. The only way they were involved after women students from the University of North Carolina, Greensboro was involved" (Brown, 2013). Although there is no clear understanding of who the originators of the sit-ins were, what can be understood from each story among the students is that there was an apparent racial divide in the city of Greensboro.

When Bennett students were asked why they never contested the stories of the Greensboro Four or the media, it was summarized that the idea that the Greensboro Four being the sole initiators of the sit-ins wass inaccurate, but they were not surprised. One Bennett participator explained, "But in order to not create any confusion about what was happening, we agreed we would not say anything about the role we played . . . in order not to create any conflict between the women of Bennett and the men at A&T" (Scher, 2011). The unity between the students and the organization of the demonstration is part of what made it successful. The purpose of the sit-ins was to achieve equality and receive integrated treatment in restaurants.

There was no need to humiliate or discredit publicly other black students to prove which story is correct. It simply was not as important as the primary goal.

Director of the Division of Institutional Development

After serving the Bennett College for 36 years, Dr. Player was ready for a change. In 1966, Dr. Player was appointed by President Lyndon Johnson to serve as the Director of College Support for the Department of Developing Institutions in the U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare was created on April 11, 1953, when the Reorganization Plan eliminated the Federal Security Agency. The Director of College Support was responsible for appropriating federal grants or loans for land grant institutions.

In 1971, many Black institutions did not receive any federal funding. Dr. Player was saddened that Black schools were facing competition with White institutions. In an article in the Baltimore Sun (1971), she expressed, “This has been a dismal situation . . . Black schools have been terrorized and pauperized, but the land-grant laws changed . . . It is the last gasp of a dying system” (p. 1). Dr. Player’s passion for HBCUs can be credited to her lengthy career at Bennett College. She saw Bennett College transition through so many periods. The institution had been faced with financial and enrollment issues. She worked tirelessly to transform Bennett College and brought that same passion to her role as the Director of College Support for the Department of Developing Institutions in the U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

When she reflected on her experience, she explained she faced many challenges as the first woman Director of the Bureau of Higher Education in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. She stated:

> Many at HEW gave me a challenging time as I served as the Director of College Support. I would state my ideas, and they would reply, "That's just ridiculous!" I always had to defend everything, but fortunately, I always did my homework. The men were always taken aback when I knew more about something than they did. You just have to be secure in knowing what you're talking about. Those men would ask me, "Well, what do you know" and I would reply, "THIS is what I know. (p. 87)

Through this role, Dr. Player spearheaded 400 million dollars in funding for programs for Black colleges.

Player Philosophy of Leadership

Dr. Player's leadership style did not conform to traditionally perceived roles, with men being task-oriented and women being nurturing and socio-emotional. With no other representation to follow in this role, Dr. Player demonstrated a new way to challenge sexual identity and gender politics in higher education. Warren Bennis (1980), in his essay, *False Grit*, explained, the impact of the organization is much more significant than gender differences when it comes to success or failure. Dr. Player (1962) believed women realized more than ever that their contribution could not be made as a woman disguised as a man; she must be herself to gain self-fulfillment. Dr. Player's intersectional experience as an African American woman represents a clear illustration of the groundbreaking contributions that shaped her success in higher education.

Dr. Player's leadership was like none other during her time, and there has yet to be another as accomplished as she was. This is not to take away from the achievements of other Black women, but it is an important point to highlight how monumental her leadership and legacy was and continues to be. Following her presidency at Bennett College, Dr. Player

spearheaded 400 million dollars in funding programs for Black colleges. She also received seven honorary doctorate degrees in 18 years: Doctor of Laws, Ohio Wesleyan University (1953); Doctor of Laws, Lycoming College (1962); Doctor of Laws, Morehouse College (1963); Doctor of Laws, Albion College (1963); Doctor of Humane Letters, Keuka College (1967); Doctor of Humane Letters, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (1969); and Doctor of Public Service, Prairie View A & M University (1971). Dr. Player consistently worked to improve the quality of education at Historically Black Colleges and Universities worldwide. The conversation regarding higher education revolves around the sacrifices made by Dr. Player. She served Bennett College and influenced the youth significantly. When asked about the legacy she would leave, she said, "Our aim is to achieve in this area: that we will leave a universal legacy to generations yet unborn and thus hold the way open for others who may seek to follow our pathway" (Brown, 1998). Dr. Player will always be remembered as the most influential president at Bennett College and a civil rights advocate for students and the community of Greensboro.

One of the most significant roles that Dr. Player served in was during the local civil rights movement in Greensboro, North Carolina. She believed:

> We cannot advance educationally unless we face the fact that we as persons are losing our sense of identity and purpose. At no point in our history has human fulfillment been so seriously threatened . . . A materialistic society with all of its gadgetry has so relieved us of the responsibilities which made us essential that we are overcome by a sense of uselessness and detachment. (Player as cited in Brown, 1998, p. 130)

Dr. Player's time at Bennett spanned across two major historical periods, the Great Depression and the Civil Rights Movement. These periods helped prepare Dr. Player for the upcoming years.

She was about to go on a journey that challenged her as a college president and the matriarch for her students and the Greensboro community.

Although there was much going on in the city, in 1962, Dr. Player became the first woman president of the National Association of Schools and Colleges of the Methodist Church. In the following years, students at Bennett continued planning, demonstrating, and marching on movie theaters in Greensboro. The frustration grew in the African American community, and this heightened the tension in the city. In May of 1963, the mass arrests of students and citizens of Greensboro, marches, and demonstrations escalated from hundreds to thousands. Dr. Player can be remembered for bringing homework down to her students to keep them updated with their schoolwork.

Due to the increase of arrests, the jail was filled. To detain the students, they were held in the Old Polio hospital. Dr. Player explains, “I found out that when you use an old building, it has to be inspected, but I didn’t know where the codes were” (Chafe, 1977). She found the codes at the library and interpreted them herself. Dr. Player found that it was illegal to place students in the old polio hospital because it had not been inspected. She met with the local police department and the governor to explain what she had found. She ensured them that she had no intentions to stop trying to get her students released safely. And after a couple of days of her consistently visiting the Governor, the women were released.

Her Spirituality

Spirituality is interwoven within a person’s multilayered identity, and for Black women, spirituality has served as a vital source of support and relief. Black women’s spiritual relationship stems back to slavery. “African American women were forced to develop specific skills for coping with their negative experiences from slavery and their ongoing oppressive

experiences" (Thomas, 2001, p. 1). Dr. Player had a long-lasting relationship with religion. As a child, the Players were very active in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and her mother was a dynamic church leader. As a growing adult, her spirituality sustained her throughout life's challenges. As cited in Brown (1998), "It was pretty difficult when I wasn't made dean because President Jones feared the men would leave. And then I was the only woman president visiting foundations to ask for money" (p. 89). No pathway had been laid for her to follow. She had to be grounded in her faith to persistent throughout her life. She recalled times where it was only her faith that helped when she was discouraged and disappointed. She stated:

> It was pretty difficult when I wasn't made dean because President Jones feared the men would leave. And then I was the only woman president visiting foundations to ask for money. Often the men felt I didn't know anything. When I went to the Ford Foundation to ask for a grant of over a million dollars (the biggest Bennett College had ever received), I went into a church on Wall Street and prayed before I went in there… And I prayed before I accepted the presidency of the National Association of Methodist Schools and Colleges. You had to work up to these things. (Player, 1992, as cited in Brown, 1998, p. 89)

Dr. Player has been described as empathetic, kind, strong, patient, and detail-oriented. She also believed everything you do should come from a place of love. The anchor for those attributes was her faith. It helped see her through her tough times and allowed her to help students navigate their challenges. The students at Bennett College continued to watch her break boundaries, and once they leave the college, she hoped they would aspire to do as well. She believed that is how the cycle began, and she allowed her influence to model the way. She knew education should always cater to the student's needs, even in a world not built to support or love them.

Her Look

Historically, skin tone or shade within the Black community has played a significant part in determining how Black Americans perceive themselves and how other races recognize and categorize them. “In the eighteenth century, Carolus Linnaeus, a Swedish botanist, created a pyramid that categorized all living organisms. In the nineteenth century, European scientists expanded the pyramid to divide humans by categorizing them into red, yellow, black and white categories, representing Native Americans, Asians, Africans, and Europeans, respectively” (Perkins, 2014, p. 22). Unfortunately, from this study, lighter-skinned Americans were favored as America’s ideal preference.

The concept of colorism further shows how “skin color is associated with individuals’ preferences as well as their outcomes” (Hochschild & Weaver, 2007. p. 2) is so deeply embedded in America’s outlook of Black Americans. During the 1850s, biracial or lighter-skinned slaves received better treatment than those of a darker complexion. Unfortunately, this treatment permeated a wedge between the slaves, thus the “creation of a color hierarchy through systematic privileging of light-skinned African Americans over darker-skinned African Americans” (Hunter, 2005, p. 18). This colored hierarchy also affected the educational system and social class. “Many historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), such as Wilberforce, Howard University, Fisk University, Atlanta University, Morgan State University, Hampton University, and Spelman College, instituted skin color tests for admission” (Perkins, 2014, p. 28). “In 1916, it was estimated that 80 percent of students attending HBCUs were light-skinned and/or of mixed ancestry” (Russell et al., 2013, p. 63). Unfortunately, dark skin was associated with lower socioeconomic status, therefore making lighter-skinned Black Americans more superior.

Before Dr. Player's presidency, only two other women served in the role at their respective colleges. Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune and Dr. Mary Elizabeth Branch, both full-figured, darker Black women, served as college presidents when they were widely discredited because they were both Black and women. The objective is not to deny their work. However, my study only hopes to highlight how Dr. Player's reign as president superseded a Black man that could pass as White. Passing as White suggested the ability "to conceal (i.e., pass) cover, and/or accent aspects of one's racial ancestries, and the individual and structural- level factors that limit the accessibility and/or effectiveness of some strategies" (Khanna & Johnson, 2010, p. 380). During this time, Black Americans who looked White or measured up to White America's beauty standards were more palatable for White Americans. "These privileges allowed light-skinned African Americans to gain entry into predominantly white organizations, including institutions of higher education and places of employment, as their light skin tone signified White ancestry and made them less threatening to Whites" (Sims, 2009, p. 3). Luckily, Bennett College had Black presidents before Dr. Jones and Dr. Player; however, reports following their tenure, specifically Dr. Charles Grandison, Bennett College's first Black male president, was described " as an uncompromising and unwavering Black nationalist. (Favors, 2019, p.71)

Dr. Player was a fair-skinned, fine-textured hair, Black woman serving a college for Black women. She was brilliant, organized, and ambitious. She worked hard for everything she accomplished, but one can assume that her appearance aided her and her climb to success. Please make no mistake in crediting her success to her appearance. The hope is to highlight how White men and women and Black males were more compelled to tolerate her brilliance because she was deemed attractive.

The Player Legacy

Dr. Willa B. Player walked the radical line of cultural and societal change at Bennett College. Many of those challenges still appear today. Because Bennett was one of the few colleges in the country designated to educate and serve women, Dr. Player made sure Bennett's curriculum would provide the students the freedom to attain the quality of life they desired. She established a holistic educational approach that included interracial exchanges to enrich the students' cultural competence, a focus on career readiness, a commitment to service, and social and political intelligence. Her educational philosophy was grounded in the principles of education for the benefit of others while also developing the self. She believed in instilling in her students the value of empowering women. She also believed in leadership, outreach, and independence, which further strengthened their professional and personal values. An example of her philosophy in action was Operation Door Knock, a voter registration drive where Bennett College students registered 1,478 residents of Greensboro. Dr. Player influenced her students far beyond the classroom, which later resulted in the students becoming change agents in the world. She also served in many national organizations such as:

- Mott Foundation Trustee
- Beta Beta Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.
- Kappa Delta Pi, International Honor Society in Education
- Pi Lambda Theta, National Honor Society for Education Majors
- The South Atlantic Regional Philosophy Education Society
- North Carolina and National Teachers Association
- National Council of Negro Women
- Women's Planning Committee
- St. Matthews Methodist Church

- Japan International Christian University Foundation, Inc.

Ohio Wesleyan elected her as trustee, the first Black woman to hold the post at the school. Dr. Player also was the first woman president of the National Association of Schools and Colleges of the Methodist Church. She was inducted into the Ohio Hall of Fame in 1984 and the Ohio United Methodist Hall of Fame in 1985 (Price, 2021). When asked about how she felt about the duration of her life and legacy, she responded, "I've had a good life" (Player, 1985, p. 27). Past president Dr. Gloria Scott requested her appearance at the inauguration activities for the Eleventh President of Bennett College. "I don't feel up to participating in those special activities…There are a number of top flight women out there now who can give us a rest" (Player, 1988, p. 1). The most significant part about Dr. Player's life and leadership legacy is her desire to empower other women, her willingness to pass the torch of leadership, and the push to level the playing field for women in education.

Conclusion

Chapter 3 highlighted the biographical aspects of Dr. Willa Beatrice Player's personal life and the significance of her leadership during her career. The chapter began with a brief overview of Dr. Player's professional roles such as Latin and French Professor, Registrar, Dean of Instruction, Interim President, President, Director of the Division of Institutional Development, Board/ Committee Member; her role as a Civil Rights activist and her decision to support her students during the 1960s Greensboro Sit-ins. It explored in greater depth: her role as a campus professor and administrator, influential college president, and her emergence as the first federally appointed Director of the Division of College Support in the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare after the duration of her tenure at Bennett College. Chapter 3 was primarily about her professional roles, and concluded with a dialogue regarding Dr. Player's

career trajectory, her life as an educated Black woman in America, and her role as a civil rights activist.

CHAPTER 4

BIOGRAPHICAL INFLUENCES

"Freedom rests in intelligent citizenry."
(Player, 1955)

Introduction

Chapter 4 focuses on the factors that influenced Dr. Player's personal development and professional career as an educator, college administrator, civil rights activist, federal appointee, and first woman president of Bennett College. Specifically, the chapter will discuss Dr. Player's upbringing with the influences of her familial relationships, the nature of the social environment of Greensboro, North Carolina, and a historical overview of Bennett College and how its past set the tone for her term as president. The chapter begins with a brief overview of Dr. Player's childhood, along with the personal and professional relationships that impacted her leadership development. The relationships discussed reveal how she mustered enough courage to move to Greensboro, North Carolina as a French and Latin professor at Bennett College to end her postsecondary educational career as President. The chapter ends with an overview of Dr. Player's time working with Dr. David Dallas Jones as her mentor.

Family Background and Early Life

Dr. Willa Beatrice Player was no stranger to hard work, and her familial lineage is one example of the significant influences she had in her life. She was not afraid to challenge herself and take the road less traveled, even if that meant she had to do so alone with no example to

follow. She was valiant. Much of Dr. Player's strength and work ethic was influenced dramatically by the values her mother, Beatrice, and father Clarence instilled in her. Brown (1998) quoted Edith, Willa's older sister, on their father's lessons about being educated and self-sufficient. She stated, "Be prepared to take care of yourself . . . . Don't depend on a man to take care of you." (p. 49). Edith remembered her father as a man who only supported academic areas being considered a respectable profession. To them, education mainly represented access to cultural progress and economic and political freedom. Edith recalled:

> At its heart," he further claims, "the teachers' expectation of racial elevation through education implied moving their race toward equality, raising them to a higher social and economic plan, and inscribing them within boundaries previously denied to them. (Brown, 1998, p. 49)

Clarence believed self-sufficiency provides independence and confidence, two things he wanted his children the freedom to experience. Unfortunately, Clarence and Beatrice lived a life that varied greatly from Black families. During the 1920s, Black families in Akron did not have the same access to educational opportunities, economic advancements, or social luxuries. In addition, the racial climate in Ohio, specifically in Akron, met Black residents with discrimination that further hindered them from advancing politically, educationally, socially, and economically.

> By the early 1920s, racial barriers had been erected to the extent that blacks 1) were not served in Akron's finer restaurants; 2) were requested to sit in the balcony in theaters; 3) could not swim in local swimming pools; 4) were refused to lodge in the city's hotels; and 5) were invisible' in both managerial business positions and in administrative posts in the local government. (McClain, 1975, p.171)

The Player sisters were fortunate to have such an innovative father that did not wait for opportunities to come to him; he produced his own. His children later displayed this type of courage as both went on to be the first of many things.

Clarence and Beatrice Player

Like many other families, Christmas for the Player family was a time to give thanks, bond with one another, and create new memories. Luckily, many family members lived on the same street, so there was no long commute for anyone outside of Willa, traveling seven hours to be home. In the Player household, everyone would celebrate Christmas morning at Clarence and Beatrice Player's home, where they could expect a large spread of food. Dr. Linda Brown described it as a Mississippi breakfast. There were pork chops and gravy, grits, biscuits, bacon, scrambled eggs, ham, potatoes, and sausage. As a precursor to enjoying this grand meal, Clarence would kneel in prayer as the family's patriarch. During the prayer, he would give thanks for the opportunity to continue this tradition and highlight knowing what to do and how to behave to stay alive within the height of America's racism. A tale he knew far too much about.

Clarence Cromwell Player was born in 1881 in Gainesville, Florida. As a growing child, he realized he had a passion for plastering and construction. Clarence also had an excellent appreciation for property and the means of up-keeping it. He believed owning property was how one could make a respectable living, as told by his granddaughter, Linda Brown, in personal correspondence. Clarence had grand ideas, and Beatrice was able to help him execute them with her creative expertise. They were the perfect team and best role models for their children. Brown (1998) quoted Edith on their parents' influence, and she stated:

> Mother was a leader in the church, member of the women's program. Dad was a businessperson who always owned property. He had this vision of an investment club of

> Black men and tried to get several men to go in with him to build capital. Mother never worked outside our home, and she was always reading, playing the piano, crocheting, and learning things, even though her formal schooling stopped at the 6th grade. They wanted us to be ambitious, 'to be somebody.' We got a very clear message that we were supposed to be more than ordinary. (p. 48)

In Brown (1998) interviewed Beatrice and Willa Player. Both described their father, Clarence, as someone who was good with his hands and was equipped with a keen understanding of business. He knew there was more out in the world to be accomplished. Therefore, Clarence decided it was time to explore his skills further and move to Jackson, Mississippi, hoping to find consistent work doing what he loved.

Shortly after relocating to Jackson, Clarence met Beatrice Day at church, singing in the choir. Beatrice was born in 1884 in Jackson, Mississippi, and is remembered for her artistic creativity that her children later inherited. She enjoyed gardening, crocheting, sewing, and singing in the church choir. Though much of her work was domestic, her ability to demand order in a gentle but resolute way later revealed her to be the family's driving force.

Clarence knew the first time looking at Beatrice that he would marry her. So much so that the night he saw her in the choir, he bet his friends that he could get her to marry him. Beatrice was enraged when she learned of this bet and promised never to speak to Clarence again. He later apologized and asked if they could start over, and Beatrice agreed. Over time, Clarence and Beatrice fell in love and decided they could commit to one another. The year was 1900, Clarence was 18 years of age, and Beatrice 16. The coupled feared they would not receive support for their decision to wed. Therefore, Clarence and Beatrice decided to elope. Three years later, the couple welcomed their first child Clarence Cromwell Player, Junior. They were delighted to

become parents, and in 1907, Clarence and Beatrice welcomed their second child, Edith Amelia Player, into the world. The couple could not have been happier to add a daughter to their family. Clarence and Beatrice decided to expand their family once more, and on August 9, 1909, Willa Beatrice Player was born. Their family was complete.

Both Clarence and Beatrice knew they had to leave the South for their children to experience greater opportunities in America. Although the Player family was among some of the most fortunate Black families in Jackson, Mississippi, there was no escaping the fact that they were Black while raising their children during the height of virulent racism in the South. With Clarence's understanding of business and Beatrice's innovative ideas for execution, the Player family had better options to survive. Both also knew their talents would excel best in the North.

In the early 1900s, Black Americans grew frustrated with the current conditions of the South, and they wanted more for themselves and their families. Until this point, Black Americans had experienced being eliminated from the political process, undervalued for their industrial and commercial labor, and recurring violence. They had to be strategic to survive and knew the South was no place to house their talents and skills. Issues surrounding politics, education, labor, immigration, and industrial and agricultural necessities were among the greatest problems hindering Black Americans from the point of possible social equality.

Living conditions for Black Americans in the North and South were vastly different. World War I caused a shortage of industrial laborers because of European laborers' restrictions and stricter border regulations. This provided an opportunity for new social and political avenues for marginalized groups. Black Americans capitalized on this new normal caused by the war and migrated north to fill in the gaps, earn higher wages, and better political and social opportunities. In the South, Black Americans were confined to low-wage jobs, poor social and economic

opportunities, and racist ideology resulting in widespread violence. While in the North, they still were socially unequal, but Black Americans thrived with higher paying wages in their professions and skilled occupations. Black Americans were attracted to cities like Chicago, New York, St. Louis, and Detroit because, by law, they were granted the opportunities and privileges of the White Americans, and the workforce offered higher wages and permanent prospects. Although not consistently enforced, Black Americans experienced better living conditions similar to those that have oppressed them for centuries.

In A.H. Airhart's (1908) An American Negro and Social Equality, article about the disenfranchisement of Black Americans in the South and White Americans' undeniable superiority, he challenged the readers to be fair. He knew the inconsistencies between the North and South would cause more harm than help for Black Americans. He argued:

> The main difference between the North and the South on the race question is, that the latter is more humane toward the Negro than the former. In the South, the Negro is made to know from the start that he is a Negro and that he must keep in a Negro's place, and that his place is not among White people except as a servant. By means of this attitude taken by the White southerner, the Negro keeps his place and does not aspire toward those things which he cannot hope to have. In the North, he is given practically all the privileges granted to the white man, and these swell his head and cause him to strive for the white man's prizes. Just before reaching the goal, however, he is shut out in the same manner as he is shut out in the South. (p. 11)

Airhart recognized that White Americans offer misleading climatic conditions, such as contending for more education for Black Americans but are aware they never intend to grant opportunities that will better Black American's living conditions. "Education puffs a negro's head

full of windy, empty theories and unrealizable hopes. He is still a Negro. He will always be a negro, no matter how much educational whitewash philanthropist and sympathizing citizens may splash onto him" (Airhart, 1908, p. 11). Airhart understood that no matter how many opportunities were created for Black Americans, White Americans were not willing to interrupt the systematic policies that burden the forward movement of the Black population.

The year 1916, an influx of Black Americans suddenly moved from southern to northern states. According to the article the *Negro Migration from the South Still Unabated* (1916), “Of the 9,109,153 Negroes native to the south in 1910, 8,668,619 were still living there, while 440,534, or 4.8%, were living outside of the South, 415,533 having migrated to the North and 25,000 to the West" (p. 12). “A similar migration occurred in 1879, when Negroes moved from Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Alabama, Tennessee, and North Carolina to Kansas. The origin of this earlier movement, its causes, and manner resemble in many respects the one which has so recently attracted public attention” (Chicago Commission on Race Relations, 2019, p. 79). Clarence and Beatrice were well aware of the risk of relocating but were ready for a change. Edith's encounter with being chased and stoned by an angry White mob and the death of Clarence Jr. solidified their decision to leave Mississippi for good. Clarence knew to protect his family best, they must move his family North. In 1917, during what we know now as the Great Migration, they relocated to Akron, Ohio, hoping for better jobs and educational opportunities. During this time, an article by the New York Age stated:

> Negroes are migrating to the North in unprecedented numbers and are preparing to come in greater numbers in the spring. They are attracted by the larger wages offered and by the opportunities to enjoy larger personal, political, and civil freedom. In some sections

> of the South, they stand in constant dread of personal violence and are leaving to escape oppression. (p. 1)

The Player family knew this to be true. From the beginning of their time in Akron, their family flourished. They owned a car and their two-story home on 754 Euclid Avenue, which was a historical anomaly for that time. Black families rarely had cars or their own property. Clarence was fortunate enough to start a plastering and contracting company, resulting in the building and later owning many homes. Beatrice was a home economist and leader in the church. The Player family lived a very privileged life.

Edith Amelia Player Brown

Black women's socially approved relationships with close family members, such as mothers, sisters, aunts, or friends and colleagues, can often affirm, support, and renewed their identity. According to Collins (2000), Black women as mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends affirm one another's humanity, specialness, and right to exist (p. 103). Through these formal relationships, there is a transference of essential knowledge and wisdom shared to empower one another and enlighten them with the best ways to survive as Black women. Willa experienced this same comfort within her magnetic relationship with her sister, Edith. "They spoke on the phone every day up until my mother's death in November of 1999. They were the best of friends. It was such a great loss for all of us," explained Dr. Linda Brown (2020), daughter of Edith A. Player Brown. The Player sisters took care of one another. When Dr. Player would travel abroad or for work engagements, Edith would accompany her to assist with her affairs. She wrote to Jean Simi, Executive Assistant to the President and Corporate Assistant Secretary, regarding her apprehension about traveling alone and the need for her sister to accompany her during the

Charles Stewart Mott Foundation's upcoming board meeting in Chicago. Dr. Player (1990) wrote:

> I hope I will be able to make the Chicago trip. My health problems are more and more precarious, and it is suggested that I not travel alone anymore. That puts me in a real bind with my current commitments. I will check with my sister regarding her schedule and availability to assist with my travel. (para. 1)

Edith served as her caretaker until 1997 when Willa "became ill and needed nursing care when Raymond and Edith Brown could no longer provide at their age" (Haferd, 1999, p. 19). The sisters were very close and shared many of the same experiences.

Edith and Willa both attended the segregated Crouse Elementary School. Both were also graduates of West High School in Akron, Ohio, with Edith graduating in 1924 and Willa in 1925. That same year, both Edith and Willa left home to attend college. Edith attended Oberlin College, and Willa attended Ohio Wesleyan. There, Dr. Player studied Latin and French with aspirations of becoming a teacher. In the 1920s, women held jobs as teachers, nurses, librarians, and house cleaners because these jobs were non-threatening to White Americans. During the Civil War, African Americans were given opportunities to go south and teach through institutions such as the American Missionary Association and the Freedmen's Bureau – a federal program created in 1865 to aid former slaves on a wide range of issues: getting an education, signing labor contracts, obtaining legal protection, finding relatives (Vallier, 2014). Run by northern agents, the Bureau helped found several Black schools, colleges, and universities. Like many other African American women educators, Dr. Player had a strong sense of responsibility for the African American community. She was firmly committed to that mission to serve, and historical circumstances continued to push her toward her interest in school.

In 1929, Dr. Player graduated from Ohio Wesleyan with a bachelor's degree and received a master's from Oberlin College a year later. In the fall of 1930, she began her teaching career at Bennett College as a Latin and French professor. This was her first teaching assignment. Dr. Player stated, "I wanted to teach Latin and French in a college, and that was challenging because most of the students spoke with southern dialects" (Brown, 1998, p. 79). To broaden her teaching and outreach to students, Player taught Sunday school and violin exercises to students in the chapel. Both sisters had accomplished lives. According to an article in the Akron Beacon, "both were noted achievers as Black women in Akron" (Haferd, 1999, p.19). Edith was a successful musician, professionally recognized painter of abstract works, choir director, and Willa, who was best known for her contributions to postsecondary education.

Edith married Raymond Brown, who served as the Director of the Akron Community Center and Urban League. Together they shared four children, Barbara Brown Tazewell, Dolores Brown Smith, Dr. Linda Brown, and Raymond Player Brown. Though Willa did not decide to marry, she lived a fulfilling life and enjoyed the chance to invest in her nieces and nephews. When asked by her niece, Dr. Linda Brown (1998), her stance on marriage, Player explained that while other women her age were thinking of marriage, she was focused on a career, and at that time, she did not see them as a choice she could combine.

Akron, Ohio

The Player family relocated to Akron, Ohio, in 1917 to provide a better life for their children than they would have in the South. Clarence also hoped for better employment opportunities. During this time, there grew an increase of Black Americans migrating North with the same intentions. Unfortunately, once Black Americans arrived to Akron, Ohio, they were met with racial hostility rather than an amiable welcome. According to Karl Grismer (1952), an

American historian from Akron, Ohio, the racial climate in Akron was extremely inimical. Racial discrimination further brought about obstacles upon the Black residents of Akron. He stated:

> Akron had less difficulty assimilating the newcomers from foreign countries than it did Negroes from the South, not because the colored people were less adaptable or less desirable but because of racial prejudices. Prevented by the antipathy of the Whites from living in good residential sections, they were forced to take squalid quarters in the worst districts. For the first time in its history, Akron got extensive slums, and the slums bred disease and crime. (p. 402)

Before the Great Migration, Black and White residents of Akron lived separate lives comfortably. Local Black residents were accustomed to the climate of Akron and were content as long as their daily needs were met. However, once the surge of new Black Americans started, lifelong Black residents of Akron were greatly affected, and they were threatened to move from their homes and warned not to purchase any more houses or land (McClain, 1975). According to the *Ku Klux Klan is organized on North Hill,* an article in the Akron Beacon Journal (1913), White citizens were so determined to keep their community segregated and they formed a "removal committee" to oust their Black neighbors. When the Black residents failed to adhere to their threats, the removal committee would visit their homes with signs that read "First Warning" (Negroes will resist, 1913). J. W. Murray and William Anderson, two Black residents of Akron, Ohio, appealed to Mayor Rockwell for protection after 120 Ku Klux Klan members visited their newly purchased homes and asked them to move (Ku Klux Klan, 1913). Mayor Rockwell responded with the statement:

> We want no Ku Klux Klan as practiced in the south, started in this city, and any attempt to injure these people will be met with police resistance. Those people as long as they are law-abiding citizens, have just as much right to live there as White people and will be protected. (Ku Klux Klan, 1913, p. 1)

Shortly after the incident involving J. W. Murray, William Anderson, and the Ku Klux Klan, the Black citizens of Akron held a meeting to discuss what actions need to be taken against the White residents for their unlawful behavior. These actions were submitted to the Mayor and later published in the local newspaper. *Negroes will resist plan to oust them* (1913) article in the Akron Beacon further explained that the Black citizens of Akron grew fearful of their livelihood and requested more protection from the Mayor and local government. Their requests and resolutions detailed in the article stated:

> Whereas, We the colored citizens of Akron, O., feel aggrieved at the action of certain men, White citizens of North Hill, in unjustly and unlawfully going to the homes of certain of our brethren, who live there and who own their homes there, and giving them notice to vacate and leave their homes; and,
>
> Whereas, these White citizens have made unlawful and intimidating threats against our brethren to cause them to leave their homes, to their great loss, inconvenience, and humiliation; and,
>
> Whereas, We feel that such action, if carried into effect, would tend to deprive us of all the prestage we have gained, and would make it next to impossible for us to obtain property elsewhere in the city and would give the whole of our citizens an unenviable reputation abroad; and,

> Whereas, We know those people, William Anderson, J. William Murray, their families, and others to be respectable and law-abiding citizens, in whose neighborhood any person or persons might live without trouble or fear; and,
>
> Whereas, Many of us are direct taxpayers and all of us indirectly so; therefore be it Resolved, That we, the colored citizens of Akron, O., call upon the Honorable Mayor and city government for protection for our people all over the city and especially, at this time, for those who live on North Hill. (p. 1)

Over the course of three weeks, the White citizens of Akron decided to settle their disputes after gallows demonstrations and consistent threats made no progress. In response to their settlement, the Black citizens of Akron formed political organizations to address their concerns of mass discrimination against the local Black residents. The work set forth for the political organizations was an uphill climb. It was not until the 1970s, following the local responses to the Civil Rights Movement, that the Black citizens were finally recognized and respected.

Clarence was among many successful Black entrepreneurs in Akron, and the opportunity and chance to grow professionally were exceedingly high. By the late 1920s, Black Americans experienced an influx of Black-owned businesses within their communities. According to Opie Evans (1927), creator of *The Akron Negro Yearbook*, there was an increase and expansion of Black-owned companies in Akron. Clarence was among those successful businesses. In 1926, The Akron Negro Business League, affiliated with the National Negro Business League, "was founded to secure commercial operations among blacks and induce blacks to patronize legitimate Negro enterprises" (McClain, 1975, p. 180). The Business League's push to assist, sustain and cultivate Black businesses by "providing them with resources that include technical and professional assistance, access to capital, surety bonding, and connection to business

opportunities" (*The Akron minority business development center*, 2020, para. 4). Although the Black residents of Akron were faced with an immeasurable amount of financial, racial, and political obstacles, they were undeterred in their pursuits to be economically independent. The Player family was fortunate to have Clarence leading their home and instilling the value of hard work in their family. Outside of their financial stability, the Player family relied on their spirituality to help them through their challenging times in Akron.

Spirituality has served as emotional and psychological support within the Black community for many decades. Dr. Player proved herself an empathetic, kind, strong, patient, detail-oriented, God-fearing woman. The anchor for those attributes was her faith. It helped her through her challenging times and allowed her to help students navigate their challenges. Following the end of the Civil War, Black Americans were fighting to become more independent economically, socially, and politically. There also grew the need to find a sacred place to worship. "The need for unification and spiritual strength undoubtedly influenced some of Akron's Black citizens to join together and form their own church" (McClain, 1975, p. 96). Akron's first Black church, Zion Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church, was established in 1866 when there grew the need for a larger space to worship when a small group of Black Americans continuously gathered privately in their homes (African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, 1888). Throughout Ohio, churches excluded Negroes more often than they admitted them, thus causing Blacks to establish separate churches or sit in the "Negro gallery – separate pews for colored persons" (Wesley & Ohio Civil War Centennial Commission, 1962, p. 7). Initially, the Players were very active in the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church in the Akron community. However, the family faced hardships as Northern-born Black Americans were not as welcoming to Southern-born Black Americans. Northern Black people believed that

the increase of the African American population caused more racial tension and violence within their community.

Akron, Ohio to Greensboro, North Carolina

When Dr. Player first arrived in Greensboro, North Carolina, the small town was segregated but appeared more progressive than most southern states. “With a history of small farms with few slaves, an active Underground Railroad station, the presence of two Black colleges, and the practice of Black voting rights, Guilford County was a center of moderation in the antebellum South” (Pfaff, 2015, p. 1). However, like the rest of the nation, Greensboro was faced with a more intractable form of separation that was deceptive but not criminal. It was an unwritten social custom preferred by the White citizens of Greensboro and heartbreakingly obeyed by the Black citizens. Guilford County was separated by an invisible color line that exposed “a clear pattern of racially-based neighborhood development that remains visible on the city’s landscape even today” (Slane & Szcodronski, 2020, p. 10). Greensboro practiced and enforced strict segregation laws in churches, schools, businesses, other public places, and neighborhoods exclusive to only Whites citizens. The color lines symbolized understood societal rules of areas that dare not be crossed by the local Black citizens of Greensboro or else. Warnersville was the first planned neighborhood for the Black citizens in Greensboro and was the founding community for Bennett College’s start in the basement of Warnersville Methodist Episcopal Church.

When Dr. Player arrived at Bennett College, she had recently received her bachelor’s degree from Ohio Wesleyan University in 1929 and the following year received her master’s degree from Oberlin College. In the fall of 1930, she started her first teaching assignment at Bennett College as a Latin and French professor. As the nation recovered from World War I,

race and educational equality emerged at the forefront. With the creation of the Rosenwald Fund in 1917, North Carolina proved it recognized Black North Carolinians' dedication to education and supported it. Unfortunately, the fund dissolved in 1932 and left the state with more than 800 Rosenwald Fund buildings. The teachers paid from this fund were trained and compensated by the Anna T. Jeanes Fund, another northern philanthropic society, or found employment at the local colleges and universities. The state's investment in Black education provided resources and improved educational facilities. It opened the door for better educational opportunities for Black students, resulting in an increased demand for Black teachers. By the time Dr. Player arrived at Greensboro, Bennett College was knee-deep in reconstructing its mission. Dr. David Dallas Jones invited instructors passionate about the inherently unequal and unjust educational system.

During an interview with Eugene Pfaff (1977), Dr. Player noted the following regarding the state of race upon her initial arrival in Greensboro:

> When I first went to Greensboro, the city was pretty tightly segregated. We were having problems—the women in the community were having problems with being called by their first names, the restaurants were—well, really no one was allowed to eat in the restaurants in the department stores or downtown stores when I first went there. The drinking fountains were marked "white" and "colored." The station had a white waiting room and a colored waiting room. Dr. David C. Jones had such a good rapport that we never had to go in and out of Greensboro on segregated railroad cars. However, regarding dining on Pullmans, we had to wait until everyone was served before we could eat. Buses, of course were segregated; we had to ride in the back of the buses, and it was a segregated situation. (p. 2)

The year before Dr. Player's arrival in Greensboro, the social practice of segregating neighborhoods, churches, movie theaters, or any gathering place for their Black citizens was eradicated. This made Greensboro the cornerstone of the enlightened mystery because it sat as the perfect place for the new ideals of the institution. After all, there was a new willingness lawfully to focus on its Black citizens' well-being and forward movement.

Bennett College

The history of Bennett College is important to understanding why Dr. Willa Player found this appointment interesting and important. In 1946, President David Dallas Jones said, "We are determined to teach students and not courses. Whatever the needs of our students were and are, that has been the determining factor in building our curriculum" (p. 1). Bennett College, from the very beginning, prioritized the needs of its students. The institution worked to prepare its students to navigate a world where they might be met with many challenges. Bennett College has endured financial and admission hardship but never strayed away from its tradition or mission.

I found several newspaper articles that detailed developments in the life of Bennett College. In 1859, the Freedmen's Aid and Southern Education Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church was formed during the American Civil War by the American Missionary Association. The purpose of the society was to create and teach in schools in the South for freed slaves and their children. Many northern religious denominations relocated to the South following the war to help educate and evangelize emancipated slaves. The Methodist Episcopal Church was most successful in rooting itself in North Carolina. By the Freedmen's Aid and Southern Education Society's tenth year in existence, they had served over 3,170 pupils and chartered five colleges, three theological schools, one medical school, and thirteen seminaries (Bennett Seminary, 1878, p. 3). Of those 13 seminaries, Bennett College, formerly known as

Bennett Seminary, was created in 1873, in honor of Lyman Bennett, Esq., of Troy, New York, because he "gave the first ten thousand dollars for the purchase of land and the erection of a building large enough to house the classrooms and also served as a dormitory" (Bennett College, 2020, para. 2). Lyman Bennett later gifted the institution with a 257-pound bronze bell in 1878 that is still used. At the start of Bennett Seminary, it was operated as a coeducational day school in the basement of Warnersville Methodist Episcopal Church under the direction of Reverend W. J. Parkinson in 1874. The school's goal was entirely devoted to training teachers and ministers among all denominations. There grew a greater demand for the education of Black Americans in North Carolina post-Civil War. So much so, a call for citizens interested in attending the new normal school was placed in the article, *Normal School* in the Greensboro North State (1873) newspaper:

> The colored citizens of Greensboro, and as many of the whites as are interested, are requested to meet tomorrow, (Wednesday) night, at the Warnersville church, to consider the question of the establishment in Greensboro, of a colored Normal School or College. This institution will be established under the auspices of the M.E. Church North, somewhere in the State. The object of the meeting is to advocate the claims of Greensboro. The citizens of Wilmington, High Point, and Thomasville are all desirous of having the school located within their boundaries. (p. 3)

There is no record of the exact number of attendees for the meeting. However, the following year the small day school was in full operation.

Warnersville Methodist Episcopal Church (Bennett College, 1950)

For many reasons, Greensboro served as the perfect site for the new normal school because "the geographical location of Greensboro, being in the central portion of the state and on a direct railroad line with Richmond, Virginia, and Atlanta, Georgia, was a distinct advantage; the people of Greensboro and the surrounding area were receptive to education for both Whites and Blacks; Pre-Civil War restrictions upon the education of Negroes were opposed in Guilford County; and the large Black population in the Greensboro area" (Sutton, 1969, p. 25). The institution was well on its way to being a driving force of academic development and financial stability for the community of Greensboro.

Within a few years of 1873, a group of emancipated slaves purchased a new twenty-acre plot at the cost of $2,156.37 (Sutton, 1969) for the permanent location of the Bennett College. As reported by Bennett Seminary (1878) in *Greensboro North State*:

> The Seminary grounds comprise twenty-seven acres of land, beautifully located to the right of the N.C.R.R., just beyond Col. McMahon's factory. Seven acres in front of the building are to be laid out as a lawn, and planted with trees and shrubbery. The building is very handsome and forms one of the most conspicuous and attractive objects in the environs of the city. It is substantially built of good brick and is eighty feet long by forty feet wide and three stories high, with a fine basement commodiously arranged. The basement is eleven feet high, and contains two kitchens sixteen feet square, a dining-room sixteen feet by thirty-two, and two school-rooms eighteen feet by thirty-two. The first floor contains the chapel thirty-eight feet by thirty-two, and fours teacher's room, all of which are twelve feet pitch. The two upper stories contain eight dormitories sixteen feet square. The building will afford comfortable accommodation for sixty-four pupils besides the teachers. (p. 3)

Bennett Hall, 1878 (Bennett College Archive, 1930s)

Unfortunately, following the institution's expansion, in November of 1875, Rev. W. J. Parkinson was transferred to pastor a church in the North (Local News, 1875). Rev. Edward Thayer of

Chelsea, Massachusetts, immediately assumed the position as Principal in December of 1875. Under Thayer's leadership, Bennett Seminary began offering college courses in the fall of 1879. Student interests changed, and there grew a need to enhance the curriculum to attract a diverse body of students. English, teacher preparation, and Theology were offered to students. The decision to add collegiate courses was to continue the excellent quality of the school, following the addition of collegiate courses that influenced an expansion in the student body that resulted in permanent facilities being added to the institution. During Edward Thayer's leadership, there was a record number of students enrolled at Bennett Seminary, approximately 250 students (Freedmen's Aid Society, 1879, p. 39). Bennett Seminary excelled under the direction of Edward Thayer and his assisting faculty. The city of Greensboro and the seminary were sad for him to accept a position of college president of the Atlanta University Center in Atlanta, Georgia but trusted his successor with the institution's future, as told by the *Daily Battle-Ground* (1881), a local newspaper in Greensboro.

In 1881, Wilbur Fletcher Steele became Bennett Seminary's principal and served in that role for eight years. During his leadership, he challenged students in the classroom while working alongside distinguished faculty who nurtured and prepared Bennett's students for real success. Principal Steele was encouraged by the Women's Home Missionary Society to establish a curriculum that would teach standard and industrial courses that equip young women with the skills to prepare the unadulterated Christian households (Sutton, 1969). The Kent Model home derived from this advice, and by 1888, 13 girls lived in the house. The young women were taught how to sew, make dresses, housekeep, and cook. The Kent Model Home experience later influenced the Homemaking Institute developed under the David Dallas Jones administration.

Principal Steele served at Bennett Seminary when the day school experienced its most significant transition. In March of 1889, the state of North Carolina Legislature declared Bennett Seminary as a state school. In 1890, the institution's name officially changed from Bennett Seminary to Bennett College after the institution's consistent development of the student's intellectual and personal abilities. The chartering of the college provided the institution with privileges through the trustees, to:

> Acquire and may hold at any one time real and personal property not to exceed five hundred thousand dollars, which property shall be exempt from all taxation; may convey the same underseal: may sue and be sued in any court of the State; may prescribe courses of study, literary, technical, professional or otherwise, and confer degrees; and may have all the powers, rights, and privileges granted or to be granted to any institution of learning in the State or belonging to corporations. (Laws and resolutions of the State of North Carolina, 1889, p. 926)

The year 1889 brought many privileges and vicissitudes for the city of Greensboro and Bennett College, for how they knew the school changed forever.

Bennett Seminary was among one of the trailblazing institutions of its time. The school can be credited for being one of the first to appoint a Black man as president, not only at their institution but also as the first Black person to lead any of the twenty-one Freedmen's Aid and Southern Education Society schools. Dr. Charles Nelson Grandison, a former slave, became the first Black president of Bennett College. Before his promotion to president, he served as a professor at the institution. He also heavily invested in the infrastructure of the grounds at Bennett College. “Grandison cast a long shadow across the country, and he was well known as one of the best orators on the Black lecture circuit” (Favors, 2019, p. 71). The institution was

growing, and so was the need to have more teaching and industrial training facilities. Dr. Grandison was "the first administrative head of Bennett to stress the need of industrial training for the Negro race; his strong belief in is shown in his own words" (Sutton, 1969, p. 47), mentioned in the Freedmen's Aid and Southern Education Society's annual report in 1891. He stated:

> With his own skilled hands, guided by a richly furnished and thoroughly disciplined brain, the black man of the South must carve out his material fortune, and thus take his place alongside of the civilized peoples of earth, in industry, thrift, economy, and wealth, and the much mooted Negro problem will have found its only abiding, because only true, solution. (Freedmen's Aid and Southern Education Society, 1891, p. 206)

Dr. Grandison reimagined the way people viewed Black Americans as leaders of post-secondary institutions. He spearheaded more significant opportunities for future Black presidents to serve at colleges and universities and set the tone for the acceptance of America's first Black woman college president of a four-year liberal arts institution, Dr. Willa Beatrice Player.

There is something to be said about how Bennett College flourished, and it did from the 1870s through the early 1890s in Greensboro, North Carolina, as if it was almost acceptable to the White community. The community of Greensboro spoke highly of Dr. Grandison. They found him to be very respectable and continued Bennett's success in the right direction. An article was written in the Greensboro North State (1890) stated, Grandison and "his strong educators have many reasons to feel proud of the extensive work they have done . . . it could not have been surpassed" (D.B.Y., 1890, p. 8). Through Dr. Grandison's leadership, Bennett College grew in size and maintained its successful reputation throughout the country.

With Bennett College's growing success and no indication of slowing down, Dr. Jordan D. Chavis joined the lineage of presidents having large shoes to fill. Chavis attended Bennett Seminary during Wilbur Steele's leadership and later succeeded Dr. Grandison's presidency in 1892. During Chavis's 13-year presidency, Bennett College grew significantly. Faculty, staff, and administration doubled in numbers, as well as the number of students. By 1900, Bennett College had 248 students enrolled, ten faculty members, two main buildings, and one primary building (Bennett College, 1900). Faculty and students lived among one another, but the institution's current size could no longer house them. In previous years, many of the students attending the school were not also boarded. However, as the popularity of Bennett grew, the need to house more students grew as well. Unfortunately, Bennett was unable to keep up with the expenses of the institution. Faculty were underpaid; buildings on-campus ceased repairs and construction, and funding from the Freedmen's Aid Society decreased significantly. This caused a great deal of stress for President Chavis. In Bennett College's Annual Report (1900), Chavis spoke of the loyalty of the faculty, many of whom offered their salaries toward the construction of the new building and how, through their willful sacrifices, the institution can still operate. He noted:

> I feel that too much could not be said here as to the hard work, sacrifice, and loyalty of the teachers who have stood by us during these past three or four years. Truly, they have borne the burden in the heat of the day. All of them have worked cheerfully, notwithstanding that salaries had to be "cut down," in some cases to one-half. They have been, in the fullest sense, loyal to the institution and its president. Our work has been in the most perfect harmony and accord. (p. 6)

The faculty's willingness to invest in Bennett's physical and academic well-being further depicts the institution's culture. It is safe to assume that Bennett College was founded on the principles of educating a diverse demographic of students by any means necessary, and the faculty entrusted Dr. Chavis's vision for the school. Dr. Chavis served Bennett College for five more years, making his presidential tenure last over thirteen years. Following his departure in 1905, he furthered his leadership aspirations by moving to a church in Wheeling, West Virginia, leaving the college in the hands of Dr. Silas Peeler.

Dr. Silas A Peeler began his journey at Bennett College in 1887 as an English instructor and later served as Bennett College's sixth president until 1913. He received his master's degree from Clark Atlanta University and his Doctor of Divinity from Gammon Theological Seminary (Bennett College, 1912). Past presidents struggled to balance the expenses of the college. However, Dr. Peeler is credited for his ability to remove the institution's tremendous amount of debt and gather funds to start constructing a president's home. President Peeler made the checks and balances of the institution his main priority. So much so, he advised students not to come to Bennett if they could not pay their fees at least a month in advance. In Bennett College's (1912) Annual Catalogue, Peeler stated:

> We cannot run the school on the credit system and therefore cash will be required for everything. Students who cannot pay for at least one month in advance after they have made the necessary deposits and paid their special fees are advised not to come. Our aim is to collect in advance for the year and therefore offer an inducement. (p. 18)

Peeler's new financial system was new to Bennett and the Board of Trustees. However, his commitment to ridding Bennett of the burden of financial debt, the executive committee of the Freedmen's Aid Society elected James E. Wallace of South Carolina to succeed him (Bennett

College opens with, 1913). According to an article in *Bennett College opens with new president*(1913), the officers of the Freedmen's Aid Society and members of the North Carolina Conference wanted to head in a different direction regarding the leadership of Bennett College. They felt Professor James Wallace would be more suitable and a worthy leader.

In a statement announcing the departure of Dr. Silas Peeler and the arrival of James E. Wallace, the Freedmen's Aid Society and members of the North Carolina Conference spoke highly about the future of the institution under Wallace's leadership. The article stated,

> Professor Wallace comes [in 1913] to Bennett College from Clafin University, Orangeburg, S.C., where for the past eleven years he held the chair of English and was dean of the Normal Department. Previous to his being called to Claflin he had served in various capacities in other schools and educational associations in the State of South Carolina. He, therefore, brings to his new field of activity a full and ripe experience in the educational work, strengthened by a progressive spirit. (Bennett College opens with, 1913, p. 2)

Unfortunately, Wallace only served as president until his resignation in 1916.

"In between Wallace's three-year term and President Trigg's nine-year term, Professor W. B. Windsor took charge of the college" (Sutton, 1969, p. 74 as cited by Minutes, 1915). W. B. Windsor served as the interim president from September of 1916 until 1917, pending the election of Frank Trigg. According to the article, *Frank Trigg elected the head of Bennett* in the Greensboro Daily News (1916), Trigg was neither the Freedmen's Aid Society nor the North Carolina Conference's first choice. They had the desire of a Greensborean serving in the role in hopes that someone local would stay in the role long-term. However, Trigg's professional

background as an educator, principal, and president proved him to be a viable candidate. The article stated:

> Much time had been spent in effort to secure a local man as president of the institution to the satisfaction of the North Carolina Conference. It was hoped that Dr. R. B. McCrary, of Lexington, who is a member of the board of the Freedmen's Aid Society, would accept the presidency, as tendered him by the board. It was greatly regretted that owing to personal business, it was impossible for him to accept. Every effort was then exerted to secure other men of the state with sufficient experience to place the school on a better plane to success, but all have been in vain to the regret of Dr. Penn, secretary of the Freedman's Aid Society and the board as a whole. It has been the desire of the Freedmen's Aid Society, to please the patrons of the school in every way possible and every effort in that direction was exerted, and it was admitted the next most logical step was to secure the most proficient man from without the state, and Frank Trigg, who for 35 years has been an educator as principal of the high school at Lynchburg, Va., principal of Princess Anne Academy, Princess Anne, Md., and at present the principal of the Virginia Collegiate and Industrial Institute, proved to be the most available as well as the most experienced man. (Frank Trigg elected the head of Bennett, 1916, p. 12)

Frank Trigg served as president of Bennett College until 1926. He "was born a slave in the Governor's mansion in Richmond, Virginia" (Sutton, 1969, p. 75) and later graduated from the Hampton Institute in hopes of having a promising and profitable career. As noted by the article, *Frank Trigg Elected the head of Bennett* in the Greensboro Daily News (1916), Trigg was well-equipped for the presidency at Bennett, and it was shown in its increase in enrollment to 300 students during his esteemed leadership.

While president, Trigg worked to create an environment at the institution that "held up the guidance of its students" (Trigg, 1922). In an article titled, *One of the best equipped plants for Negroes in South* (1922), Trigg proclaimed:

> Bennett College attempts more than the transfer of knowledge to its students. It maintains, in an atmosphere of Christian reverence, the highest possible standard of clean living. We try to put cleanliness next to godliness, believing that clean bodies in clean quarters induce clean mindedness; and we know it produces clean living . . . The White race of North Carolina will find in Bennett-trained boys and girls a real asset; minds and hands trained to work efficiently. (p. 81)

Before President Trigg's departure as president, Bennett College, which historically operated as a co-educational institution, started the conversation with the Board of Education (formally known as the Freedmen's Aid Society) and the Women's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church (Bennett College to be college for women only, 1926) to transition the institution to an all- women's college and offer standard high school junior college and teacher training courses (Bennett college for women will open, 1926). It was not until the presidency of Dr. David Dallas Jones that the institution completed the transition, and Bennett College was formally known as Bennett College for Women (Bennett College, 1926). Dr. David Dallas Jones forever changed the trajectory of Bennett College's success.

Dr. David Dallas Jones

The presidency of Dr. David Dallas Jones requires a more in-depth synopsis due to his long-lasting relationship with Bennett College and his mentorship of Dr. Willa Beatrice Player. Dr. David Dallas Jones was born in Greensboro, North Carolina, on November 19, 1887. He was the son of a shoemaker-father, Sidney Dallas Jones, and Mary Jane Holley Jones, the first

colored teacher in Guilford County, NC (Association for the Study of African American Life and History, 1956, p. 179; Flowers, 2017, p. 91). Dr. Jones is the younger brother of Robert E. Jones and Minnie Arleta Jones Gilmer. The Jones children were extraordinarily gifted and brought great success to the family name. Robert Jones is most known for his role as the first Black man elected as a bishop in the Methodist Episcopal Church, while David and Minnie both set along their paths to be also the first to accomplish such great tasks. The Jones family were no strangers to success in academia. In 1911, David graduated from Wesleyan University in Middleton, Connecticut, and later received his Masters of Art in College Administration from Columbia University in 1930. In 1937, Dr. Jones received his LL.D. from Howard University. Upon his departure from Wesleyan University, Dr. Jones relocated to St. Louis, Missouri, where he met and later married his wife Susie P. Williams. The latter also later worked alongside her husband at Bennett College. Together they share four children, David, Frances, Frank, and Paul.

While in St. Louis, Dr. Jones worked at the Young Men's Christian Association (Y.M.C.A.), and while there, he was able to strengthen his communication, fundraising, and administration skills. Dr. Jones is credited for raising enough money to build the Pine Street Y.M.C.A location and earned the privilege to serve as Executive Secretary. He had a very successful career with the Y.M.C.A., where he was later promoted to Executive Secretary. Unfortunately, "he could never stand the organization's perennial appeasement and hypocritical compromises on issues of race and religion" (Association for the Study of African American Life and History, 1956, p. 180). In 1992, he left the Y.M.C.A. and temporarily worked as Executive Secretary for the Standard Life Insurance Company in Atlanta, Georgia. Jones soon took his talents to work as a General Field Agent for the Southern Interracial Commission. When the job no longer challenged him professionally, the Jones family decided to move back to Greensboro,

where he accepted the position to serve as Bennett College's new president. His previous work experience had unintentionally prepared him for his 29 years of service at Bennett College. He would need all his skills because Greensboro and the state of historically Black colleges and universities were unrecognizable. The challenge Jones faced in accepting the leadership of a college for Black women in the segregated South was that by 1926 when he returned to Greensboro, philanthropic funds for missionary schools and colleges for Black people in the South had come to an end (Flowers, 2017, p. 95). He accepted the challenges he faced gracefully and changed the course of the institution's success forever.

Dr. David Dallas Jones served as Bennett College's ninth president until his unfortunate death in 1956. Under his administration, "he increased the college's enrollment to 467 students; erected eighteen modern college buildings in addition professor's homes and apartments at costs of thousands of dollars; left an endowment of one and one-half million dollars; and established the college's accredited standing among institutions of higher learning" (Association for the Study of African American Life and History, 1956, p. 180). Jones can be remembered as someone with a magnetic personality captivated and refined through his work at the Y.M.C.A., the Standard Life Insurance Company, the Southern Interracial Commission, and his work with the most ordinary people (Dr. David D. Jones dies, 1956). A text from the *Guilford Vertical Files* (1957) discussing Dr. David Dallas Jones's contribution to education stated:

> Though a young man when he came to Bennett, Jones had already made a unique contribution as a servant of the people. Out of a brilliant career, with the Young Men's Christian Association and the Atlanta Commission of Interracial Corporation, he was inaugurated in 1926 as the first president of the reorganized Bennett College, serving in the education of young women. He brought forth to this post, maturity and a sense of

> responsibility to an idea. He transplanted his idea into an educational philosophy which continues at Bennett as a lengthening shadow of a great personality. (p. 1)

Dr. David Dallas Jones also served as the first Black president of the National Association of Schools and Colleges of the Methodist Church, a member of the Board of Education of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the National Council of Churches of Christ, and as the Treasurer of the Jurisdictional Conference during his presidential tenure. He was an exceptional leader, and thankfully, he was rewarded for his work while he was alive. The article *Dr. David D. Jones dies* (1956) reported Dr. Jones' death, stating:

> The educator had received many honors and awards, but the one which pleased him most was his appointment in 1954 as the first member of his race to serve as a member of the Greensboro School board. He also was the only living person for whom a school here [Greensboro] was named when the David Jones School was dedicated last. Bennett College had 10 students and no bank account when Dr. Jones accepted its presidency in 1926. From the beginning, he formed an educational unit which now has buildings valued more than $2,500,000 and an endowment of $1,500,000. (p. 23)

Not only did Dr. Jones work to create a fair distribution of knowledge and opportunities for the faculty, staff, and students at Bennett College, but he also worked to confront racial and gender discrimination within the Greensboro community and the Methodist Church. His ties to the National Association Colleges of the Methodist Church, the Board of Education of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and his brother Robert Jones, who served as the first Black bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, provided him with exclusive access to rectify these issues. During Dr. Jones's 29 years of service at Bennett College, 25 of those years were spent mentoring a young and gifted, Black woman scholar, Dr. Willa Beatrice Player. She watched him raise

enrollment, fight for the institution's accreditation, and execute the developing vision of Bennett College. He modeled the perfect way to lead a college. At the decline of his health, Dr. Jones believed Dr. Player was the most prepared to serve as his successor. He knew the future of Bennett College would be the hands of someone he knew very well and could trust.

Jones-Player Administration

When Dr. Player first arrived at Bennett College, she noted that she was astonished by what she saw. She explained during her speech at the All Bennett Luncheon (1958) that the campus was exhilarating.

> When I came to Bennett, the campus exhilarated me. It was freshly green with spring. It was more than that. It was unbroken green. There were no bare spots. The unbroken was not by chance. It came about because Dr. Jones believed that the beauty of surroundings was part of the educational curriculum. A nurtured beauty had in it a quality of spiritual concern for the girl who walked the campus. Anything shoddy, anything second rate, even in the quality of grass seed was out. (p. 1)

The unbroken green symbolized a way of life: respect for the dignity of the person; a pattern of behavior in a gracious harmonious family; and a symbol of the continuity of life and vitality of your alma mater. Dr. Player continuously charged students to face the new responsibilities of democracy. She learned from Dr. Jones that unique occasions bring about new responsibilities (Player, 1955), and those who sit idle are complicit.

Dr. Player got her start at Bennett College for Women in 1930 as a Latin and French professor. She had recently graduated from Ohio Wesleyan with a bachelor's degree in 1929 and later received a master's from Oberlin College in 1930. Bennett College was the only institution to respond to her application to serve as an instructor.

So many of Dr. Player's beliefs and principles are closely related to Dr. David C. Jones. President Jones was determined to make Bennett an institution devoted to the concerns of life in the world; it would bring to its students' experiences that required learning from the world to Bennett as it could for the students and the community (Brown, 1998). Dr. Jones recognized Dr. Player's leadership abilities and was very influential in her professional development. Student Gwendolyn Rice in 2011 interviewed faculty member (alumna) Dena Scher, who personally knew Dr. Player when she was President:

> We all secretly wanted to be just like her. She was a big, big, big, big, woman, and I don't mean in stature, I mean in – physical stature – I mean in the shadow she cast over the campus when she walked it. She was quiet. She was very, very quiet, very dignified woman. But I believed – but we *all* believed, not I – we all believed that she was profoundly committed to making Bennett women, the girls who came to Bennett, into women who could stand in the world, strong women with a commitment to social justice (p. 6).

The ideals explained by Ms. Rice were modeled by Dr. Jones—under his direct mentorship, brought on new challenges and exciting experiences for Dr. Player. He mentored her as if he always knew she would be his successor. In 1955, Dr. Player became the Vice-President of Bennett College, and her professional relationship with Dr. Jones blossomed. The two shared similar purposes in mind for the overall mission of the college. This made it easy for Dr. Player to transition to the role of Interim President when Dr. Jones grew ill. On October 14, 1956, Dr. Willa Beatrice Player was inaugurated as President of Bennett College. She was the first African American woman to serve as president of a four-year accredited liberal arts college.

Dr. Jones admired Dr. Player for her boldness and explained that is the main reason he offered her employment at Bennett College, as said by Brown (1998, p. 80). He knew Dr. Player was unique, but he also knew she would struggle to receive the professional development she deserved because of the lack of women representation in senior administrative jobs. Dr. Jones was looking for a strong woman that shared his same passion for the future of the college. Bennett College was new to the idea of no longer being coed. He needed someone to help him better understand the needs of the students and college. Dr. Player's diverse academic background and relationship with the Methodist church made her the best candidate.

In her 1977 interview with Eugene Pfaff, Dr. Player recalled a challenging moment she had at Bennett as the Director of Admissions. Eleanor Roosevelt visited Greensboro in March 1945 to speak at the Nineteenth Annual Homemaking Institute held at Bennett College, upon invitation from President Jones. Her speeches addressed the Institute's theme of "The Veteran Returns to His Family," educating citizens on their peacetime responsibilities to their veterans. Mrs. Roosevelt stressed the importance of all citizens becoming familiar with the GI Bill of Rights and assisting their veterans in assimilating into civilian life (Brown, 1998). One way Bennett introduced students to this program was through its Home Economics Department. The Annual Homemaking Institute was a campus-wide learning experience spearheaded by the Home Economics Department. The purpose was for students to participate in community outreach, workshops, and worship. Dr. Jones invited all the school children to Greensboro. Mrs. Roosevelt's presence attracted the White school children, and the students and African American community did not accept this. Bennett was sacred to the African American community, and the community begged for him to cancel the event or state that the event was only for Black students. He did not withdraw, and the event went on as scheduled. Dr. Player believes that it

was his courage during that time that Greensboro needed to see. It made the city realize that they needed to make a change (Pfaff, 1977).

In 1948, Dr. Player completed her doctorate at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her dissertation subject was the institution, and she entitled her work, “Improving College Education for Women at Bennett College.” Her study sought to analyze the needs of women students and improve the curriculum from 1940 to 1948 and make recommendations for further development and improvements. Her research opened the door for her to be promoted to the role of Acting Coordinator of Instruction and Chairman of Religious Activities at Bennett in 1952.

Unfortunately, at this time, women were not made Deans. Out of fear that the male professors and administrators would resign in protest, President Jones named her the Instruction Coordinator instead of Dean of Instruction. She later became the Acting Dean.

Conclusion

Chapter 4 focused on the factors that influenced Dr. Player's personal development and professional career as an educator, college administrator, civil rights activist, federal appointee, and first woman president of Bennett College. So many of Dr. Player's beliefs and principles are closely related to her mother and father. Her relationship with her sister also showed itself to be impactful in her early stages of leadership. Dr. Jones recognized Dr. Player's leadership abilities and was very influential in her professional development. Dr. Player's upbringing, the influences of her familial relationships, the nature of the social environment of Greensboro, North Carolina, and a historical overview of Bennett College set the tone for her career trajectory. The chapter began with a brief overview of Dr. Player's childhood, along with the personal and professional relationships that influenced her leadership development. The relationships discussed revealed how she mustered enough courage to move to Greensboro, NC as a French and Latin professor at

Bennett College to end her postsecondary educational career as President. The chapter ended with an overview of Dr. Player's time working with Dr. David Dallas Jones as her mentor. Both shared the ideals of preparing students for life experience and reframed the purpose of education for Black women. In her 1959 speech at Senior Day, Dr. Player said:

> The quality of our surroundings must, as far as we are able, command the best that is within us – the beauty of the campus lawns, the cleanliness of the buildings, the quality of the students, the atmosphere in the classroom, the preparation of the faculty, the moral and spiritual climate of the Bennett family. (p. 7)

Dr. David Dallas Jones recognized her brilliance and knew she was ahead of her time. He trusted that Dr. Player would take care of Bennett as she always had during their time working together.

Chapter Four took a closer look into Dr. Player's professional life as Latin and French Professor, Registrar, Dean of Instruction, Interim President, President, Director of the Division of Institutional Development, Board/ Committee Member. In particular, her role as a Civil Rights activist and her decision to support her students during the 1960s Greensboro Sit-ins are explored. Finally, her roles as a campus professor and administrator, influential college president, and her emergence as the first federally appointed Director of the Division of College Support in the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare at the duration of her tenure at Bennett College were examined.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION: THE RULE NOT THE EXCEPTION

Introduction

Dr. Willa Beatrice Player is a trailblazer who spent her life advocating for social justice and equity. She was fearless, not just for her strength and radical candor, but because she was the first Black woman to serve willingly as an educator, college administrator, civil rights activist, federal appointee, and first woman president of Bennett College. When doors seemed closed to her, Dr. Player made her own rules. These are the rules to which she subscribed because she was a Black woman in a White, male-dominated field. She knew that simply surviving the White systems of the academy inadvertently perpetuated the injustices faced by marginalized groups. Therefore, she worked tirelessly to construct and implement innovative ways to challenge the system. Her legacy stands as the blueprint of eradicating the continuation of the oppressive nature of the academy.

There is much work to be done, and Dr. Player needs not be another Black woman whose work we glorify but do not learn from. Historically, the systems of the academy make Black women the workhorses in workspaces. According to Dr. Ashleigh Rosette and Dr. Robert Livingston's (2012) study, Black women tend to experience "double jeopardy" in the workplace—the adverse effects that Black women participate in the workplace as a result of the

combined consequences of being Black and female" (Cheeks, 2018). Their study also found that Black women are held to a different standard and reprimanded more severely than men and non-Black women when making the same mistakes in the workplace. So, as a result, Black women work twice as hard even to be considered half as good as their counterparts. Black women are tired. Dr. Player proved herself to be the rule and not the exception. She did not wait for a seat at the table; she created her own. Black women can use Dr. Player's experiences as guided wisdom to eradicate the structures that continuously work to silence, disregard, and ignore them.

This chapter will discuss the absence of Black women in leadership and higher education, Black women's role as college presidents, and the presidential gap between 1955 and 1974; the Black Superwoman complex; navigating professionalism as Black women and deconstructing professionalism in the field of Higher Education. Chapter 5 engages in dialogue regarding Dr. Player's leadership philosophy and strategies that aided her as a Black woman in her career, and it concludes with a discussion regarding the study's limitations and future research.

The Erasure of Black Women in Leadership: Revisionist Herstory Because History Often Erases Her Story

Historically, Black women have trail blazed social justice movements but are often relegated to the margins, replaced by men, and intermittently omitted from the movement's acknowledgments. Dr. Player declared that for women to get their rightful place in these spaces, other women must write about the contributions of women to reaffirm and validate their identity and experiences. Dr. Player (1980) said:

> I believe it will be up to women to interest themselves in research about women and to push for recognition in this field—for two reasons:
>
> 1. To reaffirm their (our) identity as persons.

2. To validate our history as principal participants in the creation of the quality of experiences we now enjoy. (p. 6)

Black women's collective over-participation transformed and mobilized these movements and encouraged social consciousness. Because they were women and Black, their contributions and existence during these social movements were disregarded or ignored.

Historian Charles Payne (1993) studied women's participation in the local civil rights movements incited in the Mississippi Delta and found "women canvassed more than men, showed up more often at mass meetings and demonstrations, and more frequently attempted to register to vote" (p. 2). Ella Josephine Baker (1970), a Black civil and human rights activist and founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, also detailed her experience participating in social activism in the fifties and sixties in her text, *Developing Community Leadership*. Baker (1970) wrote:

> The movement of the '50s and '60s was carried largely by women since it came out of church groups. It was sort of second nature to women to play a supportive role. How many made a conscious decision on the basis of the larger goals, how many on the basis of habit pattern, I don't know. But it's true that the number of women who carried the movement is much larger than that of men. Black women have had to carry this role. (p. 7)

The role of women has unremittingly been omitted from leadership literature. Still, Black women continue to bear the brunt of being left out of historical narratives regarding social justice movements because of their gender and race. About studies of race, Black men stand as the universal racial subject. In contrast, in studies of gender, White women are positioned as the

universal female subject (Glenn, 1998), further leaving Black women and their contributions to go unrecognized.

The point is not to discredit the contributions and success of men or non-Black women. Still, I hope to shed light on the historical pattern of the erasure of Black women's contributions, sacrifices, and leadership from the literature surrounding their roles in educational advancement, social justice movements, and grassroots organizations. Unfortunately, highlighting the proverbial "battle between the sexes and races" and the constant disregard for Black women has left researchers labeled as "race traitors" or "male bashers" (Gasman, 2007). Drs. Johnnetta B. Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftal (2003) spoke out against the backlash that comes when shedding light on issues of gender and when advocating for Black women's contributions to be recognized. They challenged the dehumanizing images of Black womanhood and activism and expressed disapproval of Black women's criticism when they began addressing their omission from historical literature. On March 27, 1980, Dr. Player recited a speech titled Equal Rights Activities: The Need to Know at the Workshop of the Consortium on Research Training in Atlanta, Georgia. During this speech, she highlighted that women are greatly underrepresented and under-researched in academic life and society as researchers and subjects for research. She explained that there is a "paucity of data on the contributions women have made over the years in the academic settings and more particularly in subject matter fields" and that there needs to be an equal distribution of resources for research surrounding Black women. Player (1980) explained:

> Since there is a paucity of data on the contributions women have made over the years in academic settings, and more particularly in subject matter fields, I have decided to focus our attention for a few moments on the initials E.R.A. Only this time, the letters say they

> mean Equal Research Activities: The Need to Know. Specifically, the topic is intended to highlight the fact women are grossly underrepresented in academic life, and in society, and in general . . . both as subjects of research and as prime researchers. Very little is known about who they [Black women] are or what their contributions have been except for those of yesteryears like Mary McLeod Bethune and Marian Anderson. But what is even more distressing, very little is being done in scholarship and research to correct this situation. This suggests that the "need to know" is outstanding. (Player, 1980, para. 3)

The idea that only highlights significant figures, such as Mary McLeod Bethune and Marian Anderson, and intentionally disregarding the unsung heroines whose stories have gone unexplored further widens the gaps in research regarding Black women and their achievements.

During the workshop, Dr. Player recalled the time she was perusing through the Ebony Success Library Volume I, and there were thumbnail sketches recorded called "One Thousand Successful Blacks. Unfortunately, after viewing the catalog, she found women only made up 17% of those highlighted. She further explained that the insignificant number of women featured in this catalog tells us about "the possible dearth of knowledge or information about Black women and their accomplishments in society" (Player, 1980).

Dr. Player was courageous because she used her platform to confront the unequal distribution of privilege, power, and oppression in education throughout Greensboro and the United States. She did so by speaking through the lens of her race, class, and gender. The late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s (1968) *Where Do We Go From Here* text is often cited because he informed the crowd that justice could not be achieved without radical changes in the structure of our society", a statement made by Dr. Player. King (1968) stated:

> White Americans must recognize that justice for black people cannot be achieved without radical changes in the structure of our society. The comfortable, entrenched, the privileged cannot continue to tremble at the prospect of a change of the status quo. This is a multiracial nation where all groups are dependent on each other. (p. 58)

Dr. Player used her platform to make radical changes in society. She also participated in programs that educated and trained future Black women activists. Her ability to engage the non-Black citizens of Greensboro and national organizations to join the fight for social justice further shows how deserving she is to be rightfully recognized as a pioneer in higher education and Black social activism, which was also the lifeblood of the civil rights demonstrations in Greensboro, NC. She was a leader beyond her years because she had no concern for the ground others had covered. After all, she planned to carve her way for social justice and equity. Therefore, for the sake of the forward movement of Black women and their presidential agendas, Dr. Player's life and leadership legacy deserve to be recognized and celebrated.

Dr. Player's niece, esteemed author, Dr. Linda Brown, dedicated time in her career to narrate Dr. Player's early life and time as an educator at Bennett College. She had an opportunity to spend a lot of intimate time with her Aunt Willa while she was president of Bennett College. Dr. Brown began her academic journey in the Fall of 1957, and Dr. Player was inaugurated as president in 1956. When asked how she would like for her aunt to be remembered, Brown (2020) explained:

> What I would like people to remember about my Aunt Willa is her courage and her willingness to take on this responsibility and leadership as a single Black woman . . . All of her accomplishments are important, but to remember someone for their

> accomplishments is not to remember them for what they sacrificed or for how much it took out of them. People don't ever know how much it takes out of the human being.

During this call, Dr. Brown recalled the many times she watched her Aunt Willa work tirelessly for the advancing movement of the Black community nationwide. Her hard work, along with her sacrifices, should not be overlooked. Black women continuously do all the work but never receive the proper credit they deserve. My hope is that this study will give Dr. Player her flowers as she very well deserves.

The Black Woman College President and the Presidential Appointment Gap

Sandra Jackson and Sandra Harris (2005) published an article in the *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership,* including a timeline of Black women college and university presidents. The authors also explained that because the appointment of Black women as college and university president started in 1904, they were able to list each Black woman appointed as president chronologically. They noted “five time frames or waves that appear to anchor the appointments of African American females. The five "waves" are: (a) 1903–1905; (b) 1955–1970; (c) 1970–1987; (d) 1987–1992; and, (e) 1992–2002” (Jackson & Harris, 2005, p. 10). The gaps in the waves indicate a presidential appointment ascending individually. At the conclusion of this study, they found more Black women were recurrently appointed as presidents following the 1980s. Davis et al. (2018) also included a timeline of Black women's principal and presidential appointments at four-year, public, and private Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in their study regarding the pathway to diversity, equity, and inclusion for underserved populations at HBCUs. There was some overlap in the Black women recognized. Dr. Player (1956) once stated, “The history of women’s leadership and education in America is marked by stages which follow quite closely the general trend of the times.” For this study and

the emergence of the Black women presidential appointment gap between 1955 and 1974, I combined both timelines.

Black Women College Presidential Appointments at Four year Universities and Colleges in the United States of America		
1923	Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune	Began as Founder and Principal of Bethune-Cookman College in 1904 but became President in 1923
1930	Mary Elizabeth Branch	Tillotson College
1946	Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune	Bethune-Cookman College
1955	Dr. Willa Beatrice Player	Bennett College for Women
1974	Dr. Mable McLean	Barber-Scotia College
1976	Mary Frances Berry	The University of Colorado at Boulder
1984	Dr. Yvonne Taylor	Wilberforce College
1986	Marguerite Ross Barnett	The University of Missouri-St.Louis
	Dr. Niara Sudarkasa/Gloria A. Marshall	Lincoln University
1987	Dr. Johnetta Besch Cole	Spelman University
	Dr. Gloria Dean Randle Scott	Bennett College for Women

The years following 1991 brought about consistent presidential appointments for Black women. Therefore the years from 1991 to present were not included in the figure.

Racial Justice Recoil

The gap between Dr. Willa Beatrice Player's presidential appointment and Dr. Mable McLean's appointment presents an opportunity to discuss the possibilities of why there is a 19-year difference. Historically, Black women were overlooked for serving in leadership roles in the church, education, and politics. Therefore, the appointment of Black women in these roles deserves to be acknowledged and celebrated. Derrick Bell's (1980) concept of interest convergence tells us that Black Americans (the oppressed) only achieve the advancement of their civil rights when their needs converge with the interests of White Americans (the oppressor). The emergence of Black women ascending to the college presidency aligned with the interests of White Americans. Mary McLeod Bethune, Mary Elizabeth Branch, and Dr. Willa Beatrice Player provided spaces for young, gifted Black students to thrive exclusively. There was no need

for Black students to attend schools made and maintained for White students. All three women proved to White students a new way for Black women to thrive at colleges and universities and their leadership roles.

But why did it take so long to appoint another Black woman to the college presidency following Dr. Player's appointment? I consider this a racial justice recoil—the phenomenon of Black Americans seeing periods of significant progress then immediately followed by sharp restrictions of personal liberties or eliminating the programs that facilitated that progress. For example, immediately following the Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil War, Southern states enacted black codes and pig laws that unfairly penalized and criminalized Black Americans. They were given freedom, but immediately following were restricted by codes and laws to keep them bound. The same can be said for the 1950s and 1960s; Black Americans saw powerful Black leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Reverend Al Sharpton, Fred Hampton, and Shirley Chisolm in the forefront during the Black Panther and Civil Rights movements. As a result of these leaders and their movements, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. They enacted an "equal-rights" bill, providing for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), new voting rights, and school desegregation. However, immediately following this breakthrough, the renewal of Jim Crow laws further spurred racist programs as well as the permutation of affirmative action that was meant to help minorities but positively impacted more White women. The refusal to address America's racist past makes it nearly impossible for racial disparities to decrease. When Black women started to serve as college presidents successfully, obstacles were continuously erected to hinder their professional progression. Dr. Player ended her presidential career in 1966. During this time,

racial disparities were reinforced and reproduced in new forms. As an example, the Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 703(a) of Title VII made it unlawful for an employer to:

> (1) fail or refuse to hire or to discharge any individual, or otherwise to discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, because of such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin; or
>
> (2) limit, segregate, or classify his employees or applicants for employment in any way which would deprive or tend to deprive any individual of employment opportunities or otherwise adversely affect his status as an employee, because of such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. (Civil Rights Act, 1964)

However, Section 703(h) of Title VII legislated a merit system where employers could require standardized and IQ tests for employment. These new requirements created the same outcome. Again, white Americans benefitted the most from this and further left Black Americans, especially Black women, caught in a never-ending whirlwind of catch-up.

The 1980s also proved to result in a recoil. The Reagan 1980s presented a divide between the haves and haves not. During the 1980s, governmental administrations worked to remove the equitable quotas that were established in the 1960s. The racial justice recoil is a concept that liberals also endorse. It is the belief that Black Americans have come so far, but realistically the racial pendulum swings from one polar end to the other. Once Black Americans have taken one step forward, they are set back through policy and initiatives meant to keep them in the same place or worse off than what they were.

The Black Superwoman Complex

In 1985, Dr. Willa Player was a keynote speaker for a conference in Wooster, Ohio. During her keynote address regarding the gains made by Black women in America, she stated, “The black woman is expected to be a superwoman without acting like one" (*Willa Beatrice Player*, 2003). With such a short statement, Dr. Player managed to sum up the experiences of most Black women in America. Black women are expected not to challenge organizational norms and be grateful while also working with poise or being perceived as angry Black women. Black women strive to overwrite the narrative descriptions of their identities that seem to range from two separate ends of the spectrum: angry Black woman to superwoman. They also face being overlooked, undervalued, and disregarded while also being met with a broader range of microaggressions.

> They are more likely to have their judgment questioned in their area of expertise and to be asked to provide additional evidence of their competence. They are also nearly two and a half times more likely than white women—and more than three times more likely than men—to hear someone in their workplace express surprise about their language skills or other abilities. (Lean In, 2020, p. 14)

These factors combined leave very few spaces where Black women can be themselves unapologetically because the workplace continuously perpetuates the role for Black women to serve as the “fixer.” They often carry the burden of being the world’s nurturers, saviors, and advocators. Unfortunately, society has not and is unwilling to relieve Black women of the continual demands that are slowly killing them.

Historically, whether in politics or education, leadership roles are overwhelmingly occupied by White men and women and, infrequently, minoritized women who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color. Black women are rarely considered or appointed when

leadership positions are available and are habitually believed to be unqualified due to systemic racism and sexism. Lean In (2020) is a national organization working to help women achieve their ambitions and create an equitable world. In 2020, the organization conducted a study on the state of Black women in corporate America. In this report, they stated:

> Black women are underrepresented in the workplace for many reasons. One big factor is a "broken rung" at the first critical step up to the manager. For every 100 men promoted to manager, only 58 Black women are promoted, despite the fact that Black women ask for promotions at the same rate as men. And for every 100 men hired into manager roles, only 64 Black women are hired. That means there are fewer Black women to promote at every subsequent level, and the representation gap keeps getting wider. (p. 6)

Black women are less likely to matriculate to leadership roles when up against White men and women and Black men. Still, they are more likely appointed when something needs to be restored, yet another way interest convergence emerges.

Within the last two years, the world has seen an increase of Black women serving in political roles. The United States also made history by electing its first woman of color, Kamala Harris, as Vice President. Candidates like Lori Lightfoot, Toni Preckwinkle, Carol Moseley Braun, Keisha Lance Bottoms, Marcia Fudge, Kim Janey, Shirley Weber, Julianna Stratton, and Stacy Abrams were also pursued and appointed into leadership positions with the "servant leader" and cleanup metaphors in efforts to win over the Black vote and clean up messes they did create. Though it is important to see more Black women serving in politics, stereotypic metaphors and images continue to represent a safe, non-threatening, capable/knowledgeable person who maintains and betters any environment. This exact portrayal of Black women simultaneously reduces them as acquiescent and demotes them to servile roles. The stereotypes

receive continual reinforcement through movies, television, and advertising. These metaphors illuminate how people are more psychosomatically prepared to accept the subservient Black woman, conversely removing the imagery presents the Black woman as a threat.

On the other hand, Black women are often asked to serve in roles that require a great deal of tenacity and courage. Black women are constantly asked to leave tables they will have to repair when things do not go according to plan eventually. They are asked to clean up messes they did not create and/or were overlooked when providing preventative information that would have stopped this mess in the first place. Throughout Oprah Winfrey's career, she has been continuously pestered into running for president of the United States. On multiple occasions, she has often respectfully and politely declined the offer to run. In 2018, Winfrey delivered a memorable speech during the Golden Globes as she endorsed Stacy Abrams and explained her lack of interest in cleaning up America's mess. Winfrey (2018) stated:

> I want to make it very clear to all the press, everybody, I'm not here because I'm making some grandstand because I'm thinking about running myself. I don't want to run, okay? I'm not trying to test any waters. Don't want to go in those waters.

Though delivered differently, Michelle Obama was also asked to run for President for the same reason. The exciting thing about the world requesting Michelle Obama to run is that she was tormented as First Lady of the United States (FLOTUS). Still, now she is seen as worthy to serve as President of the United States (POTUS). Though not asked to serve as POTUS, Dr. Player was appointed by President Lyndon Johnson to serve as director of the Division of College Support for the Department of Education in 1966. In this role, she was instrumental in leading initiatives, such as Strengthening Developing Institutions, that increased the financial support toward underfunded HBCUs. Dr. Player also help drive initiatives associated with the Higher

Education Act that created federal support for HBCUs. The Higher Education Act of 1965 was in response to the lack of opportunities provided to lower and middle-income families due to past president Lyndon Johnson's commitment to overhaul the federal role in American education.

In 1981, when Ronald Reagan because president, he believed that "education is the principal responsibility of local school systems, teachers, parents, citizen boards and state governments" (Reagan, 1982). Reagan's "state-first" policies represented a backlash to the Higher Education Act and other "liberal" policies passed under Johnson's presidency from 1963-1969. Reagan's efforts to redefine and restructure the federal government's role in education showed varied outcomes. Cutting federal funding targeted Pell Grant recipients, work-study, and loan programs for need-based college students. Most of the students attending HBCUs identified with these programs and were negatively affected, and the Johnson administration passed the Higher Education Act to assist. Shortly after, President Johnson appointed Dr. Player to help with his initiatives, where she went on to spearhead 400 million dollars in funding for HBCUs. She served in this role until she retired in 1977. Professionally, this was an exceptional role for a Black woman to serve in; however, the expectation was for her to come and undo the work done by past presidents. Historically, Black women are constantly asked to leave tables to repair when things do not go according to plan eventually.

A "Rare" Representation of A Black Woman: She Is Human

Surrounding the topic of Black women being superhuman, Dr. Player epitomized what many would consider a rare representation of a Black woman. In 1973, Dr. Player vocalized her disdain of the depiction of or the lack of visibility of Black women in leadership roles. She stated, "Women are in the pictures, but they are not at the podiums. Men assumed most of the media-friendly, highly visible leadership roles at marches and rallies, yet women did far more

than swell the ranks of civil rights demonstrations." Black women deserve their rightful place as the rule and not the exception regarding leadership, education, and politics. Yet, Black women continue to trail blaze initiatives and organizations. It is time to recognize the contributions of Black women and celebrate how influential they are in shaping history.

Dr. Player is seen and treated as this mythical innovator that reached heights that may never come again. Although she is a trailblazer worth celebrating, we have to acknowledge that more Black women are doing amazing work but do not have the same platform or do not have to the right "look" for the social movement. Black women are the mobilizers and the voice for many social movements and no longer have to be seen as superhuman. I charge you to humanize Black women and learn from them. You will find that extraordinary Black women are the rule and not the exception.

This study hopes to highlight the things that humanized her, such as her sacrifices and the things she found most important during her professional career. The first chapter of my study briefly addressed Patricia Hill Collins's (2005) concept of other-mothering. Othermothering is defined as "women who assist blood-mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities" (Collins, 2000, p. 178). "For Black women, what began as the daily expression of their obligations to their children and as community othermothers often developed into full-fledged actions as community leaders" (Collins, 2000, p. 191). After analyzing the data, I found a pattern of "othermothering" displayed by Dr. Player. Although she devoted her life to her career, she spent just as much time educating and supporting her family. The next section of this section will discuss Dr. Player's relationship with her family and how her role as Aunt Babe humanized her. This will also discuss the historical representation of the role aunts play in the Black community.

My Dear Aunt Babe: The Matriarch of the Family

Within the Black community, aunts and uncles have served as emotional, financial, educational, and social influences in the lives of their nieces and nephews (Langer & Ribarich, 2007). According to Pashos and McBurney (2008), maternal aunts, followed by paternal aunts, tend to be the most caring of all aunts and uncles. In this same case, Dr. Player stood as a secondary maternal figure for her nieces and nephews. She not only provided financial support for their academic endeavors but also mentored them professionally. She did not work to replace the relationship they had with their mothers but merely served as an extension of their mother. For example, Dr. Linda Brown (2020) described her relationship with her aunt as something special and unique because she looked up to her. She explained their relationship to be significant because Dr. Player also supported, mentored, and nurtured her professionally. She also went on to say, "My mother taught me how to be a wife and a mother, and it's my aunt who taught me how to be a professional woman." Brown (2020) continued:

> When I was a child, she was like the Queen of England. I mean, because she wasn't married. She wasn't my mother. She was not always there because she was here [Greensboro, North Carolina]. So I saw her in the summer. She would come for two or three weeks and Christmas. One of my memories of her summer visits was I spent the night at my grandmother's house, and I must have slept with her [Dr. Player] in one of those big old-fashioned big beds. I remember waking up in her room, and I remember watching her unpack, and I was in awe. She had slips with lace and fabulous kind of "not mother stuff." She was a single young woman . . . I didn't know she was young, but she was young. She was in her 40s. She was a single young woman, and she had these gorgeous underclothes with lace on them and nightgowns, and as a little girl, I was transfixed. I was like, she's not like mom at all, but she also had these very exotic stories

> to tell. She told stories about Bennett College, Dr. Jones, and her experiences somewhere else. She had also studied in France. So all that made her kind of exotic when I was a little person, and then when I grew up and went to Bennett, she was there to kind of advise me. She would say things like, "This is how you succeed," and "This is what you do," and even if I needed correcting. Which I tried to stay out of trouble all the time. There was this one experience . . . along with everybody else in the class . . . we all failed an exam—the whole class. Now, when the whole class fails, something is wrong, right? But I was beside myself because I was an "A" student, and it gave me a stomach ache. It was just awful, and I said to her, "He's gonna give us another test." She looked at me and said, "Probably not a bad thing you got that grade. Just to teach you, you don't always have to get an A." I was like, "What"? But that's just the way she was. She was going to give you the lesson, no matter what.

Dr. Brown spoke to her relationship with Dr. Player as one that demonstrated her love for education, knowledge of how the world works, and the wisdom to approach any situation with grace. She credits her aunt for her continued success and drive to keep going. She knew her aunt loved her, and she greatly appreciated it.

"Aunting is not a homogeneous activity, and how the role is enacted by women of various racial and ethnic groups depends on many factors, including the relationship between siblings, proximity in living spaces, siblings' marital status, and social" (Davis-Sowers, 2012, p. 234). Historically, Black aunts have served as much-needed support for Black parents (Collins, 2000). "This traditional source of support became even more needed in the 1980s and 1990s when increasing numbers of Black mothers saw their teenage children fall victim to drugs and the crime associated with it" (Collins, 2000, p. 179). Aunting looks nothing like that of any other

racial and ethnic group, and it is essential to note the distinction of aunting within the Black community.

Dr. Player did not take her responsibilities as an aunt lightly. She understood that being an aunt often included “daily care-taking or sporadic visits, intimate connections” (Soitirin & Ellingston, 2007, p. 442), correcting one's actions, handling affairs, and stepping-in as another form of othermothering. Dr. Player served as a mentor for her immediate nieces and assisted in the academic matters of her great-nieces and nephews. In April of 1972, Dr. Player wrote a letter to her niece Edith “Cookie” Smith regarding her disappointment in her behavior at Northfield Mount Hermon School. In this letter, she expressed that she had invested money and time in her education because she believed Edith could achieve anything if given the opportunity. In the letter, Dr. Player (1972) wrote:

> I have invested a lot of money in your education there this year. In fact, it has been much more than I am really able to do . . . I have continued to support you, having every confidence that you would do as well as you can in your studies and certainly behave and observe the regulations at the school. I don’t require you to thank me, but I do expect you to behave well . . . I don’t know what decision the committee will make. I hope they will give you a second chance. If they don’t, I guess you are getting what you deserve, and you brought it on yourself unnecessarily. If you do, I hope you understand that you can be in error and get a second chance, but only a foolish girl thinks there is a third chance down the road. There is not. My best advice to you is to observe whatever restrictions are imposed upon you without complaining but in good spirit of cooperation and to study hard with the hope that you will be able to recover your good reputation. I regret that this

> situation has to be a part of a year that held such promise and joy for us all up to the present time. (p. 2)

Though she expressed her disappointment in the letter, she also showcased her ability to correct her niece with love and advise her on the best way to handle the situation. Dr. Player juggled being a professional woman and being the breadwinner of the family. In a letter to Dr. Howard Jones, President of Northfield Mount Hermon School, Dr. Player (1972) responded to the adverse claims surrounding her niece's behavior and further explained her frustration and hopes to rectify the situation if he had any more trouble. Later in the letter, she also detailed the additional responsibilities she had as a caretaker for her own mother. Dr. Player (1972) wrote:

> I am embarrassed that you have to write about such matters and that I must admit that I have some pretty irresponsible nieces . . . I don't see why I continue to struggle with it, except that this is the role of an educator . . . I telephoned and "blasted" them last night, and I think the bill will be paid right away. If my efforts fail before the deadline which you have established, please call me, and I will send the check for payment and struggle with the responsibility from my end. (p. 1)

To many people, Dr. Player was a strong, kind woman that you knew not to mess with and at her core, she strived to lift her family as she climbed the professional ladder.

She, too, was faced with familial challenges and obligations just like many other Black families. Her role within her family was also expected within the Black community. Every year, social media platforms engage in discussion regarding the narrative surrounding the lifestyle of rich aunts. The debate is often coupled with the hashtag #richaunt and a meme or gif that depicts a carefree woman living lavishly. In 2020, the hashtag resurfaced, but the conversation

surrounding the actual responsibilities and role of the rich aunt is often never discussed. Nomonde (2020) wrote,

> The rich aunt aesthetic is the one that pays for all the cousins' school and university fees in the family, they bail people out of financial problems, builds or fixes the family home, pays for family functions and funerals, but live a quiet middle class life in the ‘burbs.

Many Black families have the aunt that is not married, has no children, and is often perceived as “well-off.” These aunts usually bear the brunt of the financial responsibilities in the family.

Further in the letter, she expressed her concerns regarding spending to the girls back in Northfield. She explained, “I still have that around-the-clock responsibility of providing for an ill mother with 2 people” (p. 1). She carried the obligations of her work and accepted the responsibility to ensure her family received care. This could not have been easy, but it shows that Dr. Player invested in her community and her family. She practiced what she preached. As a leader and educator, her personal obligations and professional responsibilities were interconnected.

Her Sacrifices

During Dr. Player’s professional tenure, she balanced gender and racial stereotypes within traditional professional roles. Yet, there is one striking question that people continuously wonder: What influenced her decision not to marry? In between Dr. Player climbing the professional ladder, starting as a French and Latin professor at Bennett College and ending her career as the Division of Institutional Development with the Bureau of Higher Education in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, many other women were getting married and starting their own families. Though Dr. Player encouraged students at Bennett to pursue their desires to be mothers, educated, and married, she did not choose to do so herself. “I didn’t have

time for men. I was too busy educating the youth" (*Bennett College will celebrate Sunday*, 1997). Dr. Player experienced her mother's unwavering love and watched how her sister devoted so much of her life to her family. She watched as both women worked to balance work and family, and she felt she could not do both. To be the amazing wife and mother she saw modeled by her mother and sister, she would have to scale back from her work demands. She sacrificed her desires for the advancement of the Black community, and not many people would be willing to sacrifice their needs for such a thankless career. She felt the demands of democracy outweighed her desires to start a family. Dr. Brown (2020) recalled on multiple occasions her Aunt Willa saying, "People think I never get lonely and I never get tired" when referring to her conscious decision not to marry. Brown (2020) also recalled:

> Back in the 1940s and 1950s, it would have been hard for a man to accept a professional woman, who in fact is on-call all the time and is responsible for a big amount of money to keep this institution going, raise money, the beck and call of the Board and Trustees, and all these different things. She was around campus enough to know what that was going to be like. Any man that she might have considered was not willing to work hard enough and was not ambitious enough for her, and those things matter.

Dr. Player recognized that her many accomplishments came with a price. She knew it would be hard to find a man not intimidated by her work—life routine. Black women are often put in a position to choose between work and marriage. Why should they have to choose?

In Dr. Player's (n.d) text titled the Education for Women, she implied that women find pleasure in striving to balance work and marriage. She also stated that women enjoy it so much that it may be compromising the historical role of women being home. Dr. Player (n.d) said:

> Perhaps the family has been the one institution in American which life has suffered most as a result of cultural change. The increasing tendency of college women to enter the professions has resulted in the neglect of home and family life. Those women who are married and engaged in a profession find this work so interesting and absorbing that the home and the task of rearing children become wholly unattractive. (p. 6)

It may be safe to assume that she identified with the working woman described above, which further influenced her decision not to wed.

In *The Milwaukee Journal*, Dorothy Witte Austin (1967) interviewed Dr. Player about the dilemmas faced by educated Black women. Dr. Player's statements regarding Black women and their disappointing pursuit to find equally educated men suitable for her also align with her decision not to wed, as stated by her niece. In the article, Dr. Player (1967) said:

> The Negro woman who is educated faces a dilemma. There are not enough educated Negro males to go around, and she must either accept a life partner of a lesser educational level or resign herself to a lonely life. (p. 4)

Dr. Player had a point. According to Fry and Cohn (2010) report on marital statistics, in 1970, only 37% of college-educated men had a wife with a similar level of post-secondary education. By 2007, the percentage rose to more than 70%, but it varied significantly by race. Black women were less likely to marry a man with similar educational attainment, choosing to remain single. Dr. Player (n.d.) wrote:

> Many women remain single because they are unable to better their condition through the opportunities which they have had for marriage. So many men are unprepared to give women the type of life which their education and experience demand. The number of well-trained men is considerably below that of women, and they have not been willing to

> compromise just for the sake of being married or of satisfying the urge to become a home-maker. Family life depends so largely for its success on a happy marriage that women would rather remain single than risk their happiness on insecure family circumstances. (p.10)

Whether the decision not to wed stemmed from not finding an eligible bachelor that complimented her or because she wanted to invest all her time into it, she decided marriage was not an option for her. To make this decision was challenging and not to be taken lightly. She single-handedly transformed Bennett College, mobilized the local civil rights movements in Greensboro, North Carolina, and served as the Director of Division for College Support, all without a helpmate. Her willingness to sacrifice her desires was unfathomable.

Discussion

The discussion section of this study will divulge a dialogue regarding the theories that validated the data collection and recommendations for Black women ascending to executive leadership roles. This section is also making application of the different threads of Dr. Player's life philosophy to present-day Black Women in Higher Education.

Theory to Practice

This historical research study used newspaper articles, letters, interviews, and internal university documents to describe Dr. Player's multiple roles in Bennett College's history, the local Civil Rights movement in Greensboro, NC, and higher education funding at the federal level. Critical Race Theory (CRT), Black Feminist Theory, and the Nexus of Black Leadership Efficacy (NOBLE) model were used as the study's theoretical frameworks to characterize Dr. Player’s life and leadership legacy. I also found constructs such as the Glass Ceiling, Whiteness as Property, and Global Leadership to be useful for framing her motivations.

The Glass Ceiling Theory

Eveline's (2004) study regarding gender discrimination in higher education revealed that although the career path for women has improved, there is a need to examine the complex nature of the cultural practices of colleges and universities. She coined the phrase "Ivory Basement of Leadership"—a concept about the invisible, lower levels of university life, where "those who occupy the basement have to make important daily decisions" (Eveline, 2004, p. 2) . . . but the collegial system does not consider that work as leadership. She furthered her explanation by stating, the work that is done in the ivory basement is "deeply gendered" and the ivory basement "is a place where the interests of employees and employers meet but also clash" (p. 3) because "the labor that underpins academic research, teaching and administration, the unspoken rules and values that create inequitable rewards and spaces, and the unrecognized forms of leadership that people enact in those spaces . . . is hidden, ignored and unseen" (p. 4). Women make up 46.8% of full-time faculty members at American colleges and universities, 53.9% of part-time faculty members (AAUP, 2020), and 60.5% of all professionals in higher education (Silbert & Dube, 2021). According to Bichsel and McChesney (2017):

> Men occupy the overwhelming majority of executive positions in higher ed. They outnumber women more than 2:1 among presidents and chief business officers. They outnumber women 4:1 among chief information officers and chief athletics administrators, and more than 9:1 among chief facilities officers. The only position in which women occupy the overwhelming majority of positions is that of chief HR officer, where they outnumber men nearly 3:1. (p. 11)

Although women have made strides ascending to senior roles, "the percentage of women in top executive positions still remains less than 30%" (CUPA-HR, 2017, p. 3). "Senior leadership

teams are the key decision-makers invested with authority who work collectively to achieve organizational goals" (Kezar et al., 2020, p. 103). Unfortunately, these statistics further show that women of color are still the most underrepresented in senior or executive leadership. Gronn and Lacey (2006) coined the term "cloning effect" that suggests that higher education institutions seek to appoint, clone leaders who are similar, or share the same values as those who have traditionally been in in place. Simon (1987) explained that our brains often look for similarities among other leaders or their predecessors to look for familiar patterns to simplify the complexity of decision-making processes, therefore seeking leaders with shared ideals. Unfortunately, because "white men represent the prevailing demographic among senior leaders in higher education, it is easy to see how the "cloning effect" can become a powerful barrier" (Manfredi et al., 2019, p. 2). This section of this chapter aims to provide theoretical context that will deconstruct professionalism as a Black woman in higher education.

Dr. Player served as a college president when women in leadership were widely discredited, overlooked, and disrespected. Dr. Player persisted in spite of her duality of being a woman and being Black. Her journey is inspiring because she persevered through the world's fight for equity and social justice with no template or model to follow. Dr. Player created her own rules without the need to assimilate or act out of character. She came prepared and always presented the facts. She strategically presented herself as one of the masterminds of higher education, not just as a woman but as a leader overall. She earned her rightful place as a pioneer in the field of education.

Mason and Goulden (2002) introduced the glass ceiling theory as both "an alleged inherent pattern of discrimination" (p. 23) "as well as a socialization process related to gender in our society and throughout the world" (Fedrizzi-Williams, 2016, p. 12). Together, the

socialization and the entrenched discrimination “bar women from top positions in academic and other institutions” (Mason & Goulden, 2002, p. 23). In other words, the present structures of higher education and the privileged people that work within the system are partly responsible for discouraging and hindering Black women from ascending to leadership roles.

Dr. Player understood that the best way to change the academy's oppressive nature was to amend the policies and traditions that worked to immobilize Black women. She did not approach her assignments with the plan to survive them. She knew she needed to research, build consensus, and work until colleges and universities provided an aggregate education for their students. Dr. Player proved herself to be prepared, culturally aware and intuitive about reaching people where they were. Her critical ability to think about and analyze situations for the long run made it almost impossible for her to be denied in spaces within the academe. Dr. Player understood she would have to make difficult sacrifices for her students to be afforded more significant opportunities to do their best.

This study essentially demonstrated that Dr. Player broke through the glass ceiling. She did not focus on the barriers in front of her but instead challenged her colleagues and subordinates to redirect their attention to the issues concerning education for Black Americans. She convinced them that the miseducation of Black Americans was everybody’s problem, and it should not be left up to Black Americans to resolve this issue alone.

Whiteness as Property

Within the Black community, we have adopted a particular set of survival skills that we hoped would later ensure “higher economic returns in the short term, as well as greater economic, political, and social security in the long run” (Harris, 1993, p. 1713). Things such as passing, code-switching, and assimilating are just a few ways Black Americans have bargained

or denounced their identities for the sake of surviving racist America. These strategies are adopted under the assumption that anything closely related to the White race will ensure a sense of security and gain exclusive access to a world not previously known to Black Americans.

Harris (1993) argued the acts of passing, code-switching, and assimilating constituted "whiteness as treasured property." This concept is explained as a social structure or racial caste

> So embedded that it is rarely apparent, the set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits that accompany the status of being white have become a valuable asset that whites sought to protect and that those who passed sought to attain—by fraud if necessary. (Harris, 1993, p. 1713)

Unfortunately, these choices in many ways perpetuate the oppressive nature of America. What stance should Black Americans take? Self-denial is one logical choice for Black Americans to advance. The security and stability of their families rely on self-denial. Unfortunately, many Black Americans felt they were forced with no other option. Harris (1993) continued to explain:

> Whites have come to expect and rely on these benefits, and over time these expectations have been affirmed, legitimated, and protected by the law. Even though the law is neither uniform nor explicit in all instances, in protecting settled expectations based on white privilege, American law has recognized a property interest in whiteness that, although unacknowledged, now forms the background against which legal disputes are framed, argued, and adjudicated. (p. 1714)

During the local Civil Rights Movement in Greensboro, Dr. Player supported her students and spoke out against the concept of whiteness as property. She willfully challenged the system. Dr. Player understood that universities and their surrounding communities are stubborn to

change, and she knew firsthand how dangerous it was for them to cling to what was familiar. She worked diligently and patiently to resolve race and gender bias issues by approaching change through incremental steps. She also shared her platform with students to do the same. Dr. Player earned the respect of her students, subordinates, and colleagues because she ignited a fire in them to work toward a better world.

Concept of Global Leadership

There is a plethora of research surrounding leadership in the workplace and higher education. Unfortunately, many of those texts miss the opportunity to prepare their audience for cross-cultural leadership through examples and experiences. As mentioned before, Black women suffer from the intersectionality of their race and gender simultaneously. Black women also struggle with being underrepresented in leadership literature as well as in senior leadership roles in higher education. The direct results of this are the fewer opportunities for Black women to be a part of the conversation and the lack of understanding for others on how to mentor, critique, and prepare Black women for leadership.

Anne Perkins (2009), a Professor of Leadership Studies at Christopher Newport University, conducted a study regarding global leadership as a theoretical framework. The study focused on how a global idea of leadership intrudes into our lives and expands our expectations of the skills and talents needed in a culturally complex world. The author explained that historical context, such as the long-term political, intellectual, economic, and social forces, significantly impact "the standards followers use to measure leader success" (p. 76). In addition, culture often influences and defines the societal requirements needed for a current leadership role. Unfortunately, many leadership roles are based on western civilization and often disregard how vital it is for leaders to evolve with the ever-changing world. Perkins stated:

> Successful leadership approaches correspond to the demands of the immediate context and the expectations of the contemporary context while recognizing these demands and expectations have their roots deep in a society's past. History and culture surround the current leadership environment, molding and limiting leadership choices and potential solutions. (p. 76)

Dr. Player worked to meet the needs of the students and prepare them for the world that was constantly changing. She knew that you had to think long-term as a Black woman prepared to go out in the world. Perkins (2009) argued that global leadership is embedded into actual success, but not talked about openly. Black women like Willa Player sensed the importance of keeping democratic ideals and a grounded sense of history and place as part of her frame for everything she did while aspiring to and embodying leadership roles. She lived her life by principle. Black women were not afforded the luxury of waiting for life to happen to them but had to be proactive in gaining all the knowledge they could to live in a world that had not figured out just how to support them. Dr. Player modeled this behavior and had a clear set of guiding principles that she could share with the people she mentored, supervised, and befriended.

Being a Black woman in America forces you to live in a constant place of strategizing. You have to be meticulous in your actions because you cannot afford to make many mistakes. After all, you may not be forgiven. You are often left to consider others when you are forgotten or overlooked, and you learn how to work quickly without much guidance or advice. Black women in leadership must navigate it in ways no other gender or race has to. Therefore, I can conclude the global leadership model is not sufficient enough for Black women. Quite frankly, I believe leadership should be based on the Black woman's experience. Through her leadership, her influence touches every person, and she must consider all the possibilities. She is not perfect,

but she works because she cannot afford to lead as if she shares the same privileges as White men and women or Black men.

Navigating Professionalism as Black Women in Higher Education: Recommendations

Dr. Player's extraordinary journey should not be one that we idealize but one that we absorb in order to become proactive agents of change in higher education. When you try to make sense of Dr. Player's ability to accomplish as much as she did in a man's world, you must consider what challenges she faced being both Black and female. Dr. Player once said:

> You don't have to act like a man to get ahead. You just have to be secure, knowing what you're talking about . . . You don't have to wear Madison Avenue pinstriped suits to get ahead . . . for true authority is through words, ideas and implementation of those ideas (Brown, 1998, p. 90).

Dr. Player mastered working as a Black woman in a White man's world. She knew her strengths and felt comfortable challenging policies that further perpetuated the oppressive nature of politics in America.

> I had this reputation of being this little woman with a soft voice, but I had a tough stance. I always did my homework. If I didn't know what I was talking about, I didn't open my mouth like some of these men. (Player as cited in *A Black woman's march to the top*, 1985, p. 27)

At the time of Dr. Player's appointment to the college presidency, professionalism was defined based on the standards set by men. She redefined what leadership for Black women looked like during that time. She believed, "Women realize more than ever that her contribution cannot be made as a woman disguised as a man. She must be herself to gain self-fulfillment" (Brown, 1998, p. 88). She lived by those words. She was courageous in everything she did. An example

of this was in May of 1963 when, the mass arrests of students and citizens of Greensboro, marches, and demonstrations escalated from hundreds to thousands.

Dr. Player can be remembered for bringing homework down to her students to keep them updated with their schoolwork. Due to the increase as a result of arrests, the jail was filled. To detain the students, they were held in the Old Polio hospital. Dr. Player recalled:

> Well, I found out that when you use an old building, it has to be inspected, but I didn't know where the codes were, see. So we had this attorney, Stern[?], and I went down, and I asked him where I would find the codes. He told me where to find them in the library. I went and read them myself. Then I went on to Captain Jackson and said, "You know, what I have found out is that you are illegal in putting the students in the polio hospital when the hospital hasn't been inspected." And I said, "So if you don't let those girls go, I intend to do something about this." [laughter] So I guess about a couple of days after that, you know they did let them go. (Chafe, 1977, p. 5)

She found the codes at the library and interpreted them herself. She found that it was illegal to place students in the old polio hospital because it had not been inspected. Dr. Player met with the local police department and the governor to explain what she had found. She ensured them that she had no intentions to stop trying to get her students released safely. And after a couple of days of her consistently visiting the Governor, the women were released. Dr. Player was fearless. When asked how she was able to accomplish all she did during such a tumultuous time in America, she recalled, "As opportunity unfolded, I was never afraid of the hard work and the challenge . . . I often wonder how I ever did it without being afraid, but it never occurred to me to be afraid" (*Bennett College will celebrate Sunday*,1997). Dr. Player modeled bravery and can be used as the foundation of leadership development for emerging Black women.

To Survive or Challenge the System

Black women face the duality of hating a system that has not yet changed but they must endure the same system in order to survive it. The system consists of the oppressive and discriminatory nature of the academy, and Black women are challenged to thrive at the intersection of racism and sexism. However, by challenging the system, Black women risk being ostracized, reprimanded, or even fired. Not every person has the luxury of leaving their job or speaking out in fear of how it could negatively impact their employment status.

Derrick Bell's (2002) "Ethical Ambition" discussed how he turned down promotions and walked away from jobs because the institutions failed to promote diversity ethically. Black women are faced with this same decision daily. Bell (2002) described courage as:

> Courage is not a quality you have or don't have; nobody is born courageous, nobody has courage all the time, and nobody who has not yet been courageous lacks the possibility of choosing it in the future. Courage is a decision you make to act in a way that works through your own fear for the greater good as opposed to pursue self-interest. Courage means putting at risk your immediate self-interest for what you believe is right (p. 43).

Because Black women assume the role of the workplace nurturer, advocate, and confidante, they are often expected to take on these responsibilities while also recognizing the system is working against them. Black women also realize the system has not changed but are left with few options to challenge it. Therefore, they are tasked with constructing strategic ways to get what they need while also obliging the nature of the academy.

Deconstructing White Professionalism as Black Women in Higher Education and Stopping the Silencing of Black Women in Leadership in Higher Education

Professionalism is a socially constructed norm that has been used to discriminate against marginalized groups. The following strategies serve only as temporary strategies to further the deconstruction process of professionalism in higher education. This study charges us all to employ these interim strategies until employment is no longer an option:

Do Not Conform to Professional Standards as a Means of Surviving the System

Though conformity is the most effective way to gain compliance, it does not make you appear more credible. Conformity stunts your personal growth and may decrease your ability to work independently. As challenging as it may be, you must walk in your path. You have to be courageous enough to go against social and cultural norms and naturally do what comes to you. If this is an area where you might struggle, practice in small ways with a mentor and trusted advisor.

When Interviewing for New Positions, Be Your Most Radical Self

Before the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, many of us spent most of our time at work. It is essential to work in an environment conducive to your mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. During job interviews, many people of color assume they need to portray the candidate they think employers want. However, they are often failing to realize their resume attracted the employer. The interview is the time for both the employer and candidate to decide if it is a good fit. Therefore, this recommendation charges you to be yourself. Employers want the person they hired, and if you choose to be somebody else, you will find yourself unhappy. Find the place of employment that appreciates who you are and that will foster your personal and professional growth.

Stop the Urge to Code Switch

"Code-switching is an identity-shifting mechanism used to mask, alter, or soften one's authentic racial and/or ethnic identity to accommodate the culture of a particular environment" (Apugo, 2019, p. 54). Code-switching hinders meaningful social engagement in the workplace. It is problematic because it enforces the idea that one must speak a sure way to appear credible and qualified. Resist and speak out against professionalism practices that perpetuate White supremacist culture. The objective is to have a healthy, equitable work environment. Work to develop one's potential to reduce problematic behavior.

Resist the Need to Show Up Twice as Good

Many Blacks are told they have to "work twice as hard" when entering the professional development stages of their life. This speech has become a rite of passage for Black women in the workplace. This type of messaging is also in television shows such as Scandal, as Olivia Pope's father reminds her that "You have to be twice as good as them to get half of what they have" (Scandal, 2013). Black women are taught to over-exert themselves while also expecting to be underpaid and unappreciated. What makes this advice so damaging is that there is no guarantee that you will benefit from it after showing up twice as good. Therefore, this recommendation challenges you to resist the need to show up twice as good. Resist the need to do others' work when they do not show up. Learn to delegate effectively and ask for help so you can maintain your boundaries.

Encourage Your Place of Employment to Leverage Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace

In 2020, the United States experienced a surge in political and social justice movements. We also saw many organizations and universities step in to support the fight for justice and inclusiveness. Every day, people in marginalized groups fight for their voices to be heard and receive equal rights. It is time for us to require the same for our places of business. Workplaces

that leverage diversity and inclusiveness strive to maximize the talents of their constituents and address critical incidents that may alter the organization's culture. Black women should not be the only group pushing for this type of environment. If Black women are the only ones creating the safety net, how can there be real change? If you experience resistance, call on your work allies to assist you when communicating new ideas or initiatives to the group.

Limitations

The facts of the case, namely, the reorganization of Bennett College, the participation in the local Civil Rights Movement in Greensboro, North Carolina, and the push to provide Black Americans with an equitable education experience were all facilitated by Dr. Willa Beatrice Player, and they were the primary focus of this historical research study. Her aspirations to provide better access higher education programs and degrees for Black Americans were articulated clearly through all of her actions as both an aspiring and embodied leader.

However, this study experienced a variety of limitations. “A limitation of a study design or instrument is the systematic bias that the researcher did not or could not control and which could inappropriately affect the results” (Price & Murnan, 2004, p. 1). The initial limitation in the study was the component of time. Dr. Player’s presidency at Bennett College during the 1950s limited the first-hand accounts for this study because she is no longer alive. Thus, I used primary and secondary sources to put together this account. My study relied heavily on the archival documents held at Bennett College and archival newspaper articles.

Future Research

Recommendations for future research allow for the opportunity to expand upon the underrepresentation of Black American leaders in higher education.

The Jones Brothers

Brothers David Dallas Jones and Robert Jones took the world by storm as they transformed education for Black Americans and exposed the discriminatory nature of the Methodist Church. Further research should be done on their work, as Black men, who could easily pass as White, pushed to integrate spaces that traditionally operated exclusively for White Americans.

Black Woman Presidential Trio

During the data collection process of this study, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, Mary Elizabeth Branch, and Dr. Willa Beatrice Player served as presidents at postsecondary institutions in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1950s. Although there was not much overlap in their appointments, it would be interesting to find similarities between their leadership style, presidential impact, and institutional transformation.

Dissertation on the Pioneering 10

The climb to the college presidency is exceptionally challenging for Black women. During the data collection process, I found more information regarding other Black women who served in the college president role between 1930 and 1987. Future research should be done on the career trajectories of Mary Elizabeth Branch, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, Dr.Willa Beatrice Player, Dr. Mable McLean, Mary Frances Berry, Dr. Yvonne Taylor, Marguerite Ross Barnett, Dr. Niara Sudarkasa, Dr. Johnetta B. Cole, and Dr. Gloria Scott, the pioneering ten women in higher education leadership.

Dissertation on Men Who Succeed a Woman President

In 2016, men made up 70% of the college presidency (ACE, 2016). Following each of the "Pioneering 10' college presidencies, a male preceded them in the role. This study briefly

addressed Black women being the cleanup administrators in higher education. Once the "Pioneering 10" fixed the issues of the institution, men succeeded for years to come.

Dissertation on Dr. Gloria Scott Randle

Dr. Gloria Scott Randle served as the next woman President of Bennett College of Women. Future research should be done regarding her experience succeeding Dr. Willa Beatrice Player and preceding Dr. Isaac H. Miller, Jr.

Conclusion

Dr. Player once said, "Every little contact where you express deep regard for the dignity and worth of the person is contributing to the unfinished business of democracy" (Player, 1960). Dr. Willa Beatrice Player should be remembered as a trailblazer far beyond her time. "Her deeds marked the black college campus as an incubator for protest beyond the ivory tower and gave rise to a cadre of young black women who pursued the "unfinished business of democracy" (Sanders, 2019, p.31). She survived the college presidency during one of America's most tumultuous times, the 1950s and 1960s. Unfortunately, like the many other Black women's contributions, there is very little known about Dr. Player's work in education. Very little is also being done in scholarship and research to correct this problem. This historical research study depicted Dr. Willa Beatrice Player's role as an educator, college administrator, civil rights activist, federal appointee, and Bennett College's first woman president. This study's significance sought to uncover the hidden life and leadership legacy of Dr. Willa Player as a pioneer in higher education and local civil rights activism.

Chapter One reviewed relevant literature on the history, legacy, and prominence of Black women exploring the college presidency. Chapter Two reviewed relevant literature on the history of college access and leadership for women with an explicit focus on Black women. Finally, the

chapter then discussed the combinational use of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Black Feminist Theory (BFT), and the Nexus of Black Leadership Efficacy (NOBLE) as its theoretical framework to gain an in-depth understanding regarding Dr. Player's leadership style and vision for Bennett College and how it influenced the institution and community. Chapter Three highlighted the biographical aspects of Dr. Willa Beatrice Player's personal life and the significance of her leadership during her career. Chapter Three also examined Dr. Player's prepubescence and emerging leadership development during her formative years. Chapter Four focused on the factors that influenced Dr. Player's personal development and professional career as an educator, college administrator, civil rights activist, federal appointee, and first woman president of Bennett College. Chapter Five discussed the erasure of Black women in leadership and Higher Education, Black women's role as college presidents and the presidential gap between 1955 & 1974; the Black Superwoman complex; and significance in Dr. Player being a "rare" representation of an educated Black woman. Chapter Five also engaged in dialogue regarding her leadership philosophy and strategies that have aided her as a Black woman in her career, and it concluded with a discussion regarding the study's theoretical frames, recommendations for Black women in leadership, and future research.

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