Upper echelons theory posits that organizational outcomes such as strategic choices and performance levels are partially predicted by managerial background characteristics (Hambrick, 1994). That is, strategy and effectiveness of a given organization are rooted in the “values and cognitive bases of powerful actors in the organization” (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). In the context of intercollegiate athletics, it seems apparent that such influential actors are the ADs and the Associate ADs. Lapchick (2008) views the Associate AD position as “training grounds for the athletic director’s position.” Meanwhile, Chelladurai (1985) characterizes ADs and their associates as the strategic apex that links “the athletic core to the larger institutional system” (p.139). Therefore, prior experience in the same athletic context should result in greater knowledge and human/social capital. Thus, the purpose of this study is to compare the performance of Division I ADs based on their experiences prior to assuming their current positions. Performance will be measured using each institution’s average Academic Progress Rate (APR) and Director’s Cup Points (DCP). APR is used by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) to measure university graduation rates, while DCPs measure the on-the-field performance of Division I institutions used by National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics (NACDA).

The upper echelons theory (Hambrick, 1994) suggests that strategy emanates from the top of the organization and flows to subordinates via mid to high level executives (Andrews, 1971; Tilles, 1970). Furthermore, Hambrick (2007) states that “leaders in the upper echelons behave on the foundation of their personal views and understanding of strategic situations” (p.193). Research has, for the most part, supported the tenets of the upper echelons theory. Various scholars believe that leaders in the upper echelons impact organizational outcomes by influencing vision and mission (Nahavandi, 2006), shaping and reshaping climate culture (Miller & Droge, 1993) and by allocating resources and directing reward systems (Schein, 2004). It is, therefore, arguable that success will be compromised if executives lack a good understanding of their organizational context and/or existing constituencies.

Relative to intercollegiate athletics, managers are often characterized by frequent and closer interactions with passionate constituencies (i.e. players, coaches, campus community, boosters and fans). There is often an emphasis on relationship building or relationship maintenance in the managers’ attempts to generate resources that are requisites for competitiveness in the intercollegiate athletics industry (i.e. championships, graduation rates). The upper echelons view would suggest that accomplishments of lofty academic and athletic endeavors in the contexts of athletics and higher education will require a reliance on the values, beliefs and experiences of athletic executives. Research has indeed found that when executives are presented with a problem, they define the problem in terms of their functional area (Dearborn & Simon, 1958). Hambrick’s reasoning about the upper echelons perspective further applies to the context of athletics given the uniqueness of institutions. Thus, athletic executives with greater knowledge of internal competing forces and outside environmental realities are more likely to understand how to deal with various constituencies and thereby more ready to meet organizational challenges whereas, athletic executives lacking such understanding are more likely to have a steep learning curve in terms of the nuances of a particular college or university culture. In fact, Chuck Neinas, the renowned founder of Neinas Sports Services, the consulting company that helped placed two of the top five most highly paid athletic directors (Lew Perkins at Kansas and Joe Castiglione at Oklahoma) confided to Bloomberg News about the difficulty of succeeding at the intercollegiate level as an executive outsider (Bloomberg News, 2009). Yet, evidence from the data we collected shows that about 27 percent of current ADs are hired from within the same organization, approximately 60 percent with previous experience are hired from outside the organization and roughly 12 percent are hired with no previous experience in athletics.

On the basis of the aforementioned considerations, we would expect that ADs hired from within the same athletic organization would have a good understanding of existing stakeholders and/or other competing forces regarding the inner functioning of their departments. Moreover, the level of immersion within athletics’ various processes should
give an inside Associate ADs a competitive edge over those without such backgrounds. Hence, after controlling for institutional size, athletic department budget, and tenure of the AD, we hypothesize that the previous experiences of the AD will impact the performance of the athletic department relative to APR and DCP. Specifically, athletic departments led by individuals who have been promoted from within will have higher APR and DCP scores compared to those departments led by individuals who have been hired from other athletic departments or those with no previous experience in athletics. Further, athletic departments led by individuals hired from other athletic departments will have higher APR and DCP scores than those led by individuals with no previous managerial experience in athletics.

To test these hypotheses, two analyses of covariances (ANCOVA) will be conducted. The independent variable will be AD’s previous experience and will have three levels: previous experience within the department, previous experience from another athletic department, and no previous administrative experience within athletic departments. The dependent variables for the two ANCOVAs will be the department’s APR and the DCP. Size of the institution, tenure of the AD, and budget of the athletic department will serve as control variables in each ANCOVA. These variables have previously been noted to be influential on organizational outcomes (Amis & Slack, 1996; Hannan & Freeman, 1984; Youndt et al. 2004). The 116 Division A Football Bowl Subdivision institutions will be utilized as the sample. Athletic Directors’ biographical data has been collected via NCAA and universities websites as well as Wikipedia and Google. Three year DCP averages have been obtained via the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics (NACDA). Similarly, 4-year APR averages have been collected via the NCAA website.

Results will be discussed relative to theoretical considerations and practical implications from the findings will be forwarded. Further, suggestions for future research will be provided.