Women hold only 9% of athletic director positions at Division I universities (Acosta & Carpenter, 2010). This percentage has not changed significantly over the past ten years. Research within sport management continues to explore the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in sport, including intercollegiate athletics. Role congruity theory has been used as one potential framework to help understand why there are so few women in leadership positions in intercollegiate athletic administration. Role congruity theory predicts women will be less likely than men to emerge as leaders because expectations for leadership roles are incongruent with stereotypes regarding women (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Within leadership research in management, there is an evolving line of inquiry that has examined how women fare when working in positions considered incongruent with female gender role stereotypes. One line of inquiry proposes a ‘glass cliff’ phenomenon, which describes how women are more likely to be in precarious leadership positions as they are appointed to leadership positions in organizations that are experiencing decline (Haslam & Ryan, 2008). Through both empirical research (Haslam & Ryan, 2006, 2007, 2008) and analysis of archival data regarding the appointment of directors of British FTSE 100 companies (Ryan & Haslam, 2005), there is evidence to support the ‘glass cliff’ phenomenon. Extending the ‘glass cliff’ phenomenon, if organizational performance continues to decline, women are more likely than men to ‘fall’ from these precarious positions as a result of stereotypes indicating that women lack the traits necessary to be successful leaders (Ryan & Haslam, 2005).

Making mistakes when working in a gender incongruent position may provide one mechanism to explain the ‘glass cliff’ phenomenon (Brescoll, Dawson, & Uhlmann, 2010). That is, when women are working in a position stereotyped as male (e.g., chief of police), a mistake may lead people to believe that women should not be in that position much more so than if the mistake is made by a man. Indeed, women in gender-incongruent positions were perceived as less competent and accorded less status after making a mistake when compared to women making a mistake in gender-congruent positions (Brescoll et al., 2010). This can be explained by the influence of stereotypes on judgments of competence. When there is unambiguous information regarding the qualifications of those in a minority group (e.g., women, racial minorities), stereotypes do not influence evaluations of competence. However, if qualifications of individuals in a minority group are ambiguous, stereotypes strongly influence judgments of competence (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Hodson, Dovidio & Gaertner, 2002). Therefore, when an individual reaches a high status position in a gender-incongruent occupation, making a mistake results in ambiguity regarding competence and stereotypes influence perceptions of competence (Brescoll et al., 2010).

Research in sport management has indicated the position of athletic director has been stereotyped as requiring masculine managerial roles (Burton, Barr, Fink, & Bruening, 2009). However, women with unambiguously strong qualifications are perceived as being equally likely to be successful in the athletic director position when compared to similarly qualified men (Burton, Grappendorf, & Henderson, 2010). Yet, when qualifications are questionable, women in athletic director positions may face a ‘glass cliff’ as a result of gender stereotypes and ‘fall’ from the athletic director position faster than men. Therefore, the purpose of the current research is to explore whether a woman in the position of Division I athletic director, a position considered gender-incongruent for women, would be perceived as less competent after making a mistake when compared to a man in the athletic director position who makes the same mistake. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1 A female athletic director working for a Division I FBS university will be evaluated as less competent and will receive lower status evaluations after making a mistake in that position, compared to a similarly qualified male making the same mistake in that position.

Within the context of intercollegiate athletics, individual contributions accounted for 31% of the revenue generated by FBS universities (Fulk, 2008). As a result of the importance of individual contributions, we propose the following hypothesis:
H2 Participants will provide less support (i.e., decreased alumni giving to the university) for the female athletic director after a mistake in that position, compared to a similarly qualified male making the same mistake in that position.

To test these hypotheses a 2 (athletic director’s gender) x 2 (job performance: mistake vs. no mistake) x 2 (participant’s gender) between-subjects experiment will be conducted. Based on the design used in a previous study conducted by Brescoll et al. (2010), participants will be randomly assigned to one of four athletic director scenarios. In the mistake condition, participants will read about an athletic director that failed to respond to an academic crisis (cheating facilitated by athletic academic counselors) leading to NCAA sanctions detrimental to the university. In the no-mistake condition, participants will read about an athletic director that reported an academic crisis (cheating facilitated by athletic academic counselors) that resulted in the removal of the counselors and players implicated in the scandal with no NCAA sanctions detrimental to the university.

Participants (approximately 200) will be upper division undergraduate students in kinesiology courses at a large university in the northeast. Participants will be provided one of the four athletic director scenarios and will be asked to rate the status of the athletic director on four dimensions, status, power, independence, and respect the athletic director deserved following this mistake (1 = none, 11 = a great deal; Brescoll et al., 2010). Competence will be measured based on participants’ ratings of the athletic director on two 11-point semantic differential scales: competent-incompetent and knowledgeable-ignorant (Brescoll et al., 2010). Ratings of anticipated alumni giving will be measured on one 11-point scale (1 = never contribute, 11 = definite will contribute). Analysis of variance will be used to evaluate the hypothesis.

Results will be discussed relative to role congruity theory and the ‘glass cliff’ phenomenon. In addition, practical implications relative to increasing the number of women in athletic director positions will be discussed. Finally, directions for future research will be presented.