Women in Intercollegiate Athletics: An Exploration of the Career Development of Female Assistant and Associate Athletic Directors

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The number of women working in intercollegiate athletic administration has increased over the last decade (Acosta & Carpenter, 2010). For example, women accounted for 42.5% (NCAA Division I), 43.5% (NCAA Division II), and 46.2% (NCAA Division III) professional administration positions in intercollegiate athletics—an average divisional increase of 8.6% between 2008 and 2009 (Lapchick, 2010). While the increase of women in professional staff positions in intercollegiate athletic programs is impressive, research suggests (Grappendorf & Lough, 2006; Grappendorf, Lough, & Griffin, 2004; Whisenant, Pederson, & Obenour, 2002) these positions are not in the managerial "pipeline." The pipeline refers to senior-level title positions of assistant athletic director and associate athletic director (Grappendorf et al., 2004; Lapchick, 2010). Individuals holding senior-level positions are perceived to be more likely to achieve an athletic director position than those in professional administration because the skill sets associated with senior-level administration, such as budgeting, fundraising, and supervisory responsibility, are perceived to be more transferable to the position of athletic director (Grappendorf & Lough, 2006; Grappendorf et al., 2004; Lapchick, 2010). Senior-level positions are perceived as "training grounds" for the athletic director position (Lapchick).

Though more women work in intercollegiate athletics than ever before, the proportion of women as senior- and executive-level managers in general is declining (Acosta & Carpenter, 2010; Lapchick, 2010). In the last five years, the percentage of female senior-level administrators in Division I has increased by 2.7%, while Divisions II and III have experienced declines of 8.5% and 7.1% (Lapchick, 2010). Between 2008 and 2010, the overall percentage of female athletic directors at NCAA institutions declined from 21.3% to 19.3% (Acosta & Carpenter, 2010). Moreover, 13.2% of NCAA intercollegiate athletic departments do not have any female representation at the executive or senior levels of administration (Acosta & Carpenter, 2010). As such, sport scholars and practitioners have grown increasingly concerned about the underrepresentation of women in administrative decision-making roles in intercollegiate athletics (Burton, Grappendorf, & Henderson, 2011; Cunningham, 2008; Grappendorf & Lough, 2006; Grappendorf et al., 2004). Given the underrepresentation of women as athletic directors in intercollegiate athletics and the concern that women may experience difficulty accessing such positions (Bruening et al., 2008; Burton et al., 2011; Grappendorf et al., 2004; Inglis et al., 1996; Moore, Parkhouse, & Konrad, 2001; Sagas & Cunningham, 2004; Walker & Bopp, 2011; Whisenant et al., 2002), there is a growing need to understand the career experiences and expectations of women in assistant and associate athletic director positions in intercollegiate athletics.

Further, personal factors and contextual factors such as organizational structures and social relationships may act as barriers or supports in the career development of women (Lent et al., 2000). This current study seeks to identify barriers and supports women perceive and experience in their roles as senior-level administrators in intercollegiate athletic departments. Considering studies on women in intercollegiate athletic administration have focused almost entirely on female athletic directors, the barriers and supports identified in these studies may not be applicable to women in senior-level administration. In other words, barriers and supports may be a function of managerial rank (Russell, 2006).

Career theorists (Astin, 1984; Gottfredson, 1996; Lent et al., 2000; Savickas, 2005) suggest women negotiate barriers and supports by either (a) compromising career aspirations and goals or (b) developing coping efficacy. Few studies on women in intercollegiate athletics have attempted to collect information on how and why women negotiate barriers and supports. Moreover, little research exists on how the negotiation of barriers influences career expectations and goals of women in intercollegiate athletics. Therefore, the purposes of this presentation are to (a) discuss the career experiences and expectations of female assistant and associate athletic director positions and (b) gain a better understanding of how the negotiation of barriers and supports influences career development, expectations, and goals.
Therefore, this qualitative study explores the career experiences and expectations of women in senior level management positions in intercollegiate athletics. The sampling frame includes senior-level female administrators working at NCAA member institutions in Kentucky, Ohio, or Indiana. This study will use a combination of criterion and stratified sampling. The suggested criteria for selection of participants in this study are (a) female; (b) currently employed as an assistant or associate athletic at an NCAA Division I, II, or III member institution; and (c) at least 30 years of age. Formal, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with up to 35 participants between November 2011 and December 2011. The researcher will also collect documents including participant resumes and job descriptions.

In this presentation, we will discuss important findings regarding to the career experiences and expectations of female senior level administrators. Practically speaking, perhaps these findings will offer a better understanding of barriers and supports in intercollegiate athletics as they pertain to managerial rank. Identifying barriers and supports can help sport management academics and practitioners prepare women pursuing careers in intercollegiate athletics for issues they might face, as well as offer suggestions for coping and/or adjustment strategies while keeping professional expectations and goals in mind. Moreover, the coping and adjustment strategies discussed by women in this study may offer guidance to women with established careers in intercollegiate athletics be more proactive about their career-related decisions. Insights from this study may be used to provide recommendations – to sport management faculty and athletic directors – for the recruitment, retention, and advancement of women in intercollegiate athletics.