

Taking A Broader View: A Life Course Perspective on Women's Athletic Career Trajectories

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Women in intercollegiate athletics administration remain highly underrepresented, especially in higher-level positions and most notably athletic director positions (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012). In the most recent update to their 35-year longitudinal study of women in intercollegiate sport, Acosta and Carpenter (2012) report that women currently occupy 35.8% of administrative positions overall and 20.3% of athletic director positions. The percentages are lower in Division I institutions, however, where only 29.8% of administrators and 10.6% of athletic directors are female. They also report that though the percentage of university athletics programs without any female administrators is at an all-time low, 9.2% of athletic programs still lack female representation completely.

Previous research examining this issue generally has been based in two primary frameworks: (1) structural and/or organizational factors, including supports and barriers (Danylchuk, Inglis, & Pastore, 2000; Grappendorf & Lough, 2006; Hancock & Hums, 2012) and (2) sociological phenomena, such as traditional gender roles and stereotypes that lead to discrimination against women (Burton, Barr, Fink, & Bruening, 2009; Burton, Grappendorf, & Henderson, 2011; Burton & Hagan, 2009). These perspectives have been useful in identifying access and transition barriers, particularly to more "agentic" positions, such as Chief Financial Officer or Athletic Director. For example, even though representation of women has increased (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012), positions within athletic departments still tend to be segregated by sex, with women occupying supportive roles, such as administrative assistant, academic advisor/counselor, and life skills coordinator, and men occupying more leadership roles, such as associate director, assistant director, and director of athletics (Burton et al., 2011; Zgonc, 2010). These perspectives, however, lack consideration of the whole person beyond their current organizational and socially defined work contexts.

In order to understand women's experiences in intercollegiate athletics careers, it is imperative to examine not only the gender and power relations within their work context, but also how factors outside of work may affect their personal choices, work experiences, and career and life decisions (Danylchuk et al., 2000). Bruening and Dixon (2008) used the life course perspective to examine the ways in which mothers who were also Division I head coaches were able to navigate the work-family interface. They found that women's choices regarding their careers were influenced by support (or lack thereof) from their organizations (particularly, their supervisors), as well as support (or lack thereof) from influential others, such as spouses or partners. Building on this work, sport management researchers need to explore the ways in which personal life factors may influence career progression within athletics administration and need to acknowledge the concepts of linked lives – that people have relationships with others that impact their lives – and human agency, by which individuals, within the contexts and constraints that surround them, make decisions among available options that shape their career and overall life paths (Elder, 1994).

The purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which women's personal and professional life experiences influence the choices they make regarding their careers over time. The present study, which is currently in progress, uses a narrative approach from a life course perspective. The sample comprises women who currently hold administrative roles within NCAA Division I athletics programs. Sample selection was initiated by contacting suitable participants within the authors' personal networks. Those participants then identified other women who also had careers in intercollegiate athletic administration. Participants include a cross-section of women at various points in their careers: early, middle, and late. Each participant is completing a career trajectory/life map, indicating any turning points, both in the course of her career as well as in her personal life, that have been relevant in her career path. Follow-up semi-structured interviews are then being conducted with an audio recording device. Transcripts are being coded using the process of open-coding (Altheide & Johnson, 1994) and analyzed with the aid of NVIVO 9 software.

Preliminary findings reveal that in addition to organizational and sociological factors that act as barriers to their career progression, women also make decisions regarding their careers based on elements from their personal lives,

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such as wanting to dedicate more time to a hobby, pursuing their partner's career, or desiring to spend more quality time with their loved ones. These decisions act as turning points that influence their career trajectories, regardless of initial career aspirations. The women report that the process of navigating a dual-career family is particularly challenging and seems to require at least one partner to make significant alterations to their career. These results, combined with the previous literature, suggest the need for an even broader perspective on women's careers in sport. This perspective needs to include the broader social and familial context, and how choices regarding linked lives shape and constrain career progressions as one component of "weaving a life" (Garey, 1999).