Men and Women in College Athletic Administration: Career Callings or Career Compromise

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Much of the research on the careers and administrative roles of men and women in sport have focused on gender and the effect of socially prescribed gender roles (Burton, Grappendorf & Henderson, 2011; Burton, Barr, Fink, & Bruening, 2009; Henderson, Grappendorf, & Burton, 2011; Lough & Grappendorf, 2007; Peachy & Burton, 2011). The majority of these studies have utilized social role theory and/or role congruity theory as frameworks to understand the sex segregation of positions within an athletic department (see Hoffman, 2011), as well as the perpetuation of a male-dominated organizational structure. Career theorists, however, suggest gender is only one of a myriad of variables influencing career expectations, goals, and experiences (Astin, 1984; Gottfredson, 1996; Lent et al., 2000; Savickas, 2005). The diversity of career experiences of intercollegiate athletic administrators are also critical to understanding organizational social contexts, which have the potential to affect career development.

Sociologists and social psychologists studying career development argued that social contexts and the identities associated with such contexts are likely to significantly impact career decisions and trajectories (Astin, 1984; August & Quintero, 2001; Brown, 2002; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). Individual identities (e.g., gender, race), social roles (e.g., employee, mother, spouse), relationships (e.g., collegial, familial, peer), and organizational structures (e.g., opportunity for advancement, hiring practices, formal and informal networks) influence career expectations, goals, and decisions. Social contexts and variables contributing to the construction of personal and professional identities are important to consider when examining individual career development. Furthermore, theories on career choice and development provide helpful frameworks for understanding how entrenched perceptions, social roles, and organizational structures affect career expectations, goals, and mobility in the workforce. One way to examine this is through the lens of selected career development theories. Career development theories provide an interpretive framework for understanding the career experiences of women in intercollegiate athletics.

Although intercollegiate athletics is a male-dominated sport industry segment, little research has been conducted on the careers of male college athletic administrators. Knoppers and Anthonissen (2007) and Sartore and Cunningham (2007) suggested power is gendered and favors men in sport organizations. To the contrary, previous research in other male-dominated industries suggests perceptions of gender may be changing (Duehr & Bono, 2006; Smith et al., 2012). Thus, examining career development from a male perspective might also offer insight into how perceptions of gender in intercollegiate athletics administration have evolved. There is also little research that compares the career experiences of men and women in intercollegiate athletic administration. Until we explore the career experiences and perceptions of men – and examine areas such as values incongruence or work-family balance, for example – it is difficult to adequately assess the role of gender and other variables influencing the career development of individuals pursuing careers in intercollegiate athletics. Thus, the purposes of this study were to (a) discuss the career experiences, expectations, and goals of men and women in intercollegiate athletic administration; and (b) compare their experiences to gain a better understanding of the similarities and differences in career barriers and supports men and women experience in athletic administration.

This qualitative study explored the career experiences and expectations of 36 senior level managers (20 women, 16 men) in intercollegiate athletics. Participants for this study were selected using purposeful criterion sampling. Participants were male or female, currently employed as an assistant or associate athletic director at an NCAA Division I institution, listed as “athletic administration” on their respective athletic department websites, and at least 30 years of age. Men and women who met the study criteria were then randomly selected for participation. Participants engaged in semi-structured interviews. Each interview addressed four main areas, including the participants’ (a) career path, (b) perceptions of supports and barriers in career development, (c) adjustment strategies in career development, and (d) career expectations and goals. Interviews, conducted in-person or over the phone, lasted approximately 40 to 85 minutes and were transcribed verbatim.
In this presentation, we will discuss important findings regarding the diverse career experiences and expectations of male and female senior level administrators. The findings of this study suggest men and women share similar supports that were influential in helping them achieve their career goals. Career supports included positive relationships with supervisors and mentors, networking, and opportunities for advancement. Women identified gender and work-life balance as barriers to their career development, yet men were less likely to identify any barriers at all. When men did identify challenges, the challenges had more to do with a lack of institutional resources or negative interactions with colleagues and supervisors. Interestingly, men and women identified personal and professional values as integral to career decision-making. They sought positions that were more closely aligned with their expectations and values, which often resulted in a reevaluation of career goals (e.g., pursuing or not pursuing the title of Athletic Director). The findings of this study also lay the groundwork for exploring the work experiences and career paths of diverse populations from the perspective of career development theory. Additional 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, minorities (e.g., racial/ethnic, sexual orientation), and men in intercollegiate athletics. Finally, this presentation will address areas for future research in career development and with diverse populations working in intercollegiate athletics.