A Comparison of the Career Experiences of Men and Women Working in Intercollegiate Athletic Administration

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Men and women experience their workplaces very differently (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016; Ferro, 2015; Wahl, 2014). These experiences affect the way men and women are able to move into jobs with higher levels of responsibility and ultimately into leadership positions. For women working in male-dominated industries, including the sport industry, the landscape can prove quite challenging. Researchers have examined the status of women’s careers in the sport industry, whether looking at barriers and challenges or strategies that help women attain leadership positions in intercollegiate athletics (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Burton, Grappendorf, & Henderson, 2011; Hancock, 2010; Hancock & Hums, 2015; Hums & Bower, 2013; Mazerolle & Burton, 2015), professional sport (Hums & Sutton, 1999; Itoh, 2014; Lapchick, 2014; O’Connor-McDonogh, 2010), campus recreation (Bower, Hums, & Keedy, 2005; NIRSA, 2015), health and fitness (Bower, 2008), Olympic sport (IOC, 2010, Women’s Sports Foundation, 2013), and Paralympic sport (IPC, 2010; Nordic Sports Science Forum, 2013). Researchers have yet to specifically examine the career experiences and challenges of men working in the sport industry and then compare those results to the women’s experience.

The purpose of this study was to gather and compare information on the career experiences of men and women working in intercollegiate athletic administration. This qualitative study addressed the following among men and women working in intercollegiate athletic administration: (a) demographics, (b) most/least enjoyable aspects of their jobs, (c) greatest challenges, (d) career advice, and (e) short-term and long-term career goals. The responses allowed for deeper exploration of the positions and mindsets of both men and women working in administrative positions in intercollegiate athletics.

The study respondents were 518 women and 778 men working in intercollegiate athletic administration at NCAA Division I, II, III, NAIA schools, NCCAA schools, and junior colleges. The National Directory of College Athletics provided the email addresses for the participants. The researchers sent the Female Sport Manager Career Survey [FSMCS] (Bower & Hums, 2010) to the female participants. The FSMCS, containing modified language, was sent to the men. For example, the women were asked, “What are the most challenging aspects of your job as a woman working in intercollegiate athletic administration?” while the men were asked “What are the most challenging aspects of your job as a man working in intercollegiate athletic administration?” The demographic data indicated the majority of the men in the study held the title of Athletic Director while the majority of women held the title Associate Athletic Director. The males earned an average salary between $60,000-$79,999 per year while the females earned $40,000-$59,999. The majority of both men and women worked at the Division I level, were White, and held master’s degrees.

The qualitative data were organized and condensed by uploading into HyperResearcher 2.7 and were also independently read and reread by the researchers. Constant comparative analysis was used to review the comments to identify similarities and differences among the data in coding and sorting into appropriate themes (Rossman, 2016). The trustworthiness of the study was strengthened by using multiple strategies of analysis introduced by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The credibility (internal validity) was strengthened by the use of the constant comparative analysis (Neuman, 2010). The transferability (external validity) of the study was strengthened by examining and tallying comments to establish themes (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). The dependability (reliability) of the study was strengthened by each researcher independently examining the data and debriefing to discuss the themes and categories. Finally, the confirmability (objectivity) of the study was strengthened by limiting bias of making any premature conclusions about the themes and/or categories, by reading and rereading the data, using the
constant comparative analysis, and research debriefing.

The participants’ responses offered some interesting contrasts. A number of the questions elicited gender neutral responses. For example, for the most enjoyable aspects of the job, both men and women indicated they enjoyed working with others in the athletic department (specifically student-athletes), followed by enjoying the job responsibilities of working in an athletic department. Regarding career advice, the most frequent responses from both men and women involved working hard, followed by gaining experience, and balancing work and life. This is understandable as dealing with long hours, gaining experience, and work-life balance are the realities of working in intercollegiate athletics. For short term career goals, the dominant themes for both men and women were to advance to a higher level job in intercollegiate athletics with the primary goal of becoming an athletic director while the next most frequent response was to stay in their current position. These same themes emerged to the question on long-term career goals.

Other questions, however, produced quite different responses between the two groups. Women indicated being a role model and mentoring were among the most enjoyable aspects of their job as women working in intercollegiate athletics. This theme did not emerge for the men. When it came to the least enjoyable aspects of the job, women frequently mentioned lack of females in intercollegiate athletics and dealing with negative stereotypes about women. The male respondents never mentioned dealing with negative stereotypes about men working in intercollegiate athletics or that there were too few men in these positions. A few male respondents did not even see the need for asking questions about being a male, as they did not see that being a male had anything to do with enjoying or accomplishing their jobs. This seems to suggest a sense of male privilege, as seen in other workplaces (Robinson, Frost, Buccigrossi, & Pfeffer, 2003); Zevallos, 2013). No women answered in that manner. The greatest challenges the male participants reported were dealing with budget limitations when distributing resources, limited opportunities to advance, gender issues in the workplace (such as when an SWA takes away an opportunity), and work-life balance. The budget limitations answer likely springs from the fact that male athletic administrators are more likely to be in positions responsible for financial decisions than females (Hancock, 2012). The challenges the women reported were lack of respect and time commitment while male respondents discussed dealing with gender based issues such as too much emphasis on Title IX and preferential hiring for women.

As mentioned earlier, numerous researchers have examined the gender-based issues that women working in intercollegiate athletics encounter but not the potentially gender-based issues men face or how the two groups compare. The study sets the groundwork for future investigation into this line of research, the results of which could help athletic administrators create a more inclusive work environment.