Sport Management Students’ Perceptions of the Glass Ceiling

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In 2009, it was estimated that nearly 30,000 students were enrolled in over 300 sport management undergraduate and graduate programs across the United States (King, 2009). Today, over 640 sport management programs exist (NASSM, 2016) representing a 100% increase from just seven years ago. As sport management undergraduate and graduate programs increase in number, size, and popularity throughout the U.S. and around the world, new sport management graduates seek sport-focused jobs in organizations including but not limited to college athletic departments, professional sport front offices, national governing bodies, and sport-oriented event management companies.

This influx of newly trained sport managers has led to an increase in the number of women and racial/ethnic minorities in professional sport leadership positions (Lapchick, 2014). For example, according to the Racial and Gender Report Card (Lapchick, 2013), the National Basketball Association (NBA) ranks as the top men’s professional sport organization for hiring racial minorities and women (Lapchick, 2016a) when compared to the National Football League (NFL), the National Hockey League (NHL), Major League Baseball (MLB), and Major League Soccer (MLS). However, both women and people of color are still relatively absent from senior and executive levels of leadership. Specifically, women hold 23.6% of the senior administrative positions (e.g., director, assistant general manager, chief operating officer, chief financial officer, chief legal counsel) within teams, while people of color have similar representation at 23.5%. Although these numbers far exceed the norms in professional sports they do not align with the 36.1% of women and 32.1% of racial minorities represented at the NBA’s professional administration positions (e.g., titles of manager, coordinator, supervisor, and administrator) (Lapchick, 2016). So there seems to be equitable representation of women and racial minorities at the lower level administrative positions in professional sports, but less equitable representation as they move up the organizational ranks.

Intercollegiate athletic administration has experienced similar trends, and women continue to be found in more subordinate roles of sport organizations (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). For example, previous research has indicated that while women represent the majority of assistant coaches for women’s teams in the NCAA, men still hold the majority of head coaching positions for those same teams (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Darvin & Sagas, 2016). The management literature has characterized this seemingly direct barrier to leadership and upward mobility as a glass ceiling. The term “glass ceiling” characterizes women and racial minorities’ stifled career progress in organizations (Hymonitz & Schellhardt, 1986). Recent management literature suggest that this glass ceiling metaphor is erroneous in its assumptions and misleading in its perception (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Previous research on the glass ceiling suggests it is not inclusive of all the ways women are excluded in the workplace and that the exclusion of women is not as obvious as glass ceiling literature may lead many to conclude. Eagly and Carli (2007) suggest instead using the term labyrinth to describe and ground the factors influencing the lack of women in leadership positions.

Nonetheless, Fink (2016) suggest that “overt sexism in sport is still quite common and often uncontested” (p. 2). She then goes on to suggests that although those in management may suggest that sexism is taking more subtle forms, in sport sexism remains: “commonly overt yet simultaneously unnoticed. It hides in plain sight. It is so entwined in the fabric of sport that most do not even discern it.” (p.2). For these reasons, we agree with Eagly and Carli (2007) in that the lack of women in leadership roles is more fully explained through the lens of a labyrinth more so than a glass ceiling. However, we also recognize, in many ways gender issues in sport, trails general management and society as a whole. Therefore, in our quest to explore the labyrinth, we will begin by examining the glass ceiling.

Previous scholars have provided informative reviews on women in leadership and women in sport (Burton, 2015; Cunningham, 2008). Although much of the research on women in leadership positions fit firmly into Eagly and Carli (2007) description of the labyrinth, no sport management research to date, explicitly addresses the glass ceiling phenomenon as factor influencing sport management students and their perceptions of working in sport. While
previous research has provided ample evidence of gendered practices within sport organizations, these investigations have been limited to a sample of current or former sport employees. More specifically, as sport management academic programs have grown, it is clear that students perceive a future in the sport industry. However, it is still unclear why so few women are represented in sport leadership positions. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate sport management students’ perceptions of the glass ceiling, as a barrier to their success and upward mobility in the sport industry. This inquiry will be guided by two research questions: Do sport management students’ perceptions of the glass ceiling in the sport industry differ based on gender? How might perceptions of anticipated salary differ for men and women pursuing careers in the sport industry?

Data was collected from current students enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate sport management program at one of three schools in the Northeast, Midwest, and South regions of the United States. Students were recruited via email. The email contained a link to the survey. Participants were asked to complete the 34-item Career Pathways Survey (CPS) (Smith, Crittenden, & Caputi, 2012) and demographic information. The CPS allowed quantitative comparisons of men’s and women’s beliefs about the glass ceiling across four factors: resignation, acceptance, resilience, and denial. Data analysis included multivariate (e.g., MANOVA) and univariate (e.g., ANOVA, factorial ANOVA) analyses. The recruitment sample included approximately 700 students, with 241 total respondents for a 34.4% response rate. Once the data was cleaned, a total of 195 participants were included in the analysis. We explored differences related to various demographic characteristics and perceptions of the glass ceiling. In an effort to address our first research question a MANOVA was administered to the data. Results of the MANOVA indicated a significant multivariate effect for the CPS, Wilks’ $\Lambda = .94$, $F (4, 186) = 2.94$, $p = .02$. Univariate analyses revealed a significant main effect for Denial $F (1, 189) = 6.89$, $p = .009$. Specifically, male participants had stronger beliefs that the glass ceiling was non-existent or a myth ($M = 3.84$, $SD = .52$) than did female participants ($M = 3.64$, $SD = .52$).

In an effort to address our second research question, an ANOVA was administered to the data. Results of the ANOVA indicated a significant univariate effect for starting salary, $F (1, 189) = 4.79$, $p = .03$. Specifically, male participants anticipated a higher starting salary ($M = 5.36$, $SD = 2.89$), than did the female participants ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 2.55$).

Theoretical implications of this research extend glass ceiling literature to sport and student perceptions of their future industry. Practitioners should gain insight into how they may be able to address gender differences in the way sport management students perceive the sport industry.