Gendered Leadership Networks in the NCAA: A 2-Mode Analysis of Senior Woman Administrator and Athletic Director Networks

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Although opportunities for women to participate in intercollegiate athletics has increased, the representation of women in administration has not followed suit (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). Specifically, according to Acosta and Carpenter (2004, 2014) reports, in 2004, women held 41% of all administrative positions in intercollegiate athletics, compared to 36.2% in 2014. Previous research suggests that the presence of “old boys’ networks” or “boys’ clubs” act as barriers to women in intercollegiate sport (Kamphoff, Armentrout, & Driska, 2010; Walker & Bopp, 2011; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). Shaw (2006) supports the presence of old boys’ and old girls’ networks, which hold power and influence the decision making process. Shaw (2006) results suggest that “networks’ gendered, exclusionary nature ensured that women had little opportunity to access knowledge held within them and, consequently, struggled to achieve influence within their organizations” (p.521). This leads us to believe that membership in work-related social networks may be an important part of gaining the power and influence necessary for leadership. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to examine the gendered differences in intercollegiate administrator social networks, using 2-mode social network analysis.

The present study is guided by the notion of leadership in networks. While traditional leadership literature explicitly examines individual-level characteristics or attributes (i.e., personality traits), there has been a strong trend in recent leadership research to more appropriately consider the relational elements of leadership (Mehra, Dixon, Brass, & Robertson, 2006). The general idea behind leadership in networks is that the embedding social structures, within which individuals operate, implicitly and explicitly facilitate (or constrain) their emergence and effectiveness as leaders (Carter, DeChurch, Braun, & Contractor, 2015). As Balkundi and Kilduff (2006) wrote, leadership lies not in the attributes of individuals but in the relationships connecting individuals. Individuals are inherently embedded in larger social networks (Uzzi, 1996), and people’s perceptions of other as leaders are reflected through the sets of ties and interpersonal relations within which all individuals are located (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2006). So while some may perceive leadership as the result of individual characteristics or hard work, leadership is more appropriately conceptualized as the consequence of network structure (Parker & Welch, 2013). As Carter et al. (2015) wrote, an individual’s occupation of central positions within a network relates to how others perceive their leadership potential, ability, and effectiveness. Individuals with high measures of degree centrality tend to be perceived as powerful (Brass, 1992) and betweenness centrality has been noted as a strong predictor of leadership emergence (Brass, 1984) and leadership perceptions (Mullen & Salas, 1991).

While the relationship between networks and leadership is widespread, it is particularly impactful for the leadership constraints faced by women. McDonald, Lin, and Ao (2009) found that gender inequality is reproduced through social network segregation, whereby women are trapped in segregated networks isolated from the flow of information and influence necessary for professional advancement. Particularly in organizations or industries marked by a male-dominated workforce, women tend to be isolated and segregated based on gender (Brass, 1985). As Ibarra (1995) concluded, the inability of women leaders to advance in careers and organizations, particularly those in male-dominated arenas, is often the result of exclusion from informal social networks.

Based on the relationship between networks and leadership, the goal of this study was to examine the networks of two distinct leadership positions within the NCAA: Senior Woman Administrator (SWA) and Athletic Director (AD). SWA is the highest ranking female in each NCAA athletic department. AD, including associate and assistant, is the highest ranking individual in each specific sub department, as well as the overall athletic department. Building a network of highly public or successful individuals is limited by issues of access and response; network analysis
typically requires response rates above 75% and access to all members of the specific population. In consideration of these challenges, network methodologists developed a distinct method for creating networks when access and adequate response rates seem unlikely: affiliation networks. Affiliation networks are grounded in the assumption that co-membership in some group, or co-attendance at some event, serves as an indicator of an underlying social tie (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). Affiliation networks are a particular type of 2-mode study, in which two different sets of entities are included in the same matrix; in the present study individuals in the rows and organizations in the columns. For the present study, we built two different co-affiliation networks: the first for SWAs and the second for ADs, both bounded by the NCAA Division 1 population from the year 2011-12 for a total of 344 data points. In terms of co-affiliation, we included all organizations through which the individuals had an official affiliation through either educational affiliation or previous employment. The underlying assumption, as in all 2-mode networks, is that affiliation with the same networks represents a proxy for some kind of tie among members of the same organizational node. As a result, we were left with four distinct co-affiliation matrices: 1) SWA-by-SWA; 2) Organization-by-Organization based on SWA co-affiliations; 3) Athletic Directors-by-Athletic Directors; and 4) Organization-by-Organization based on Athletic Director co-affiliation.

A full presentation of the data is impossible in an abstract, but a few relevant statistics should illustrate the findings produced from our analysis. In the first matrix, SWA-by-SWA, average degree is 4.251, density is .009, there are 86 components, and the connectedness is .543, and 77 isolates. Individuals with the highest eigenvector scores included Karen Peters (Portland) and Karina Herold (Pepperdine), the most connected in the SWA network. In the second matrix, Organization-by-Organization based on SWA co-affiliations, the average degree is 3.988, density is .012, there are also 86 components, connectedness is .492, and there are 62 isolates. Organizations with the highest eigenvector scores include the NCAA and UMASS Amherst, the most connected in the SWA network. In the third matrix, AD-by-AD, average degree is 9.133, density is .036, there are 29 components, and the connectedness is .772, with 26 isolates. Individuals with the highest eigenvector scores include Kirby Hocutt (Texas Tech) and Brian Wickstron (Cal Riverside), the most connected in the AD network. In the fourth matrix, Organization-by-Organization based on Athletic Director co-affiliation, average degree is 6.355, density is .012, there are 104 components, and the connectedness is .611 with 76 isolates. Organizations with the highest eigenvector scores include Ohio University and Michigan, the most connected in the AD network.

Our results suggest there are gender differences in intercollegiate administrator social networks. The SWA network is not as connected and has many more isolates (i.e. individuals with no connection to others in their network) than the AD network, which happens to be predominately male, and is much more connected and had nearly no isolates.

The theoretical implications of this research includes extending the literature on the lack of women in leadership positions to include quantitative evidence of gendered social networking differences. Also, this is the first sport management study to date that uses social network analysis to demonstrate the gendered nature of leadership in sport. Practitioners may use this research to create gender inclusive social networking opportunities in their organizations.