Career Motivation within NCAA: A Study on Division II Administrators' Motivation to Advance to Division I Athletics

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A diverse work force provides an inimitable competitive advantage (Frink et al., 2003), is positively related to firm performance (e.g., Dwyer, Richard, & Chadwick, 2003), and is thus a human resource objective that managers and CEOs strive to maximize. Yet, in college athletics there is no question that women are under-represented in management positions (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). Considerable research has focused on macro-level, structural factors that create and support systems that perpetuate this imbalance in the collegiate setting (for a thorough review, see Burton, 2015). For example, in 2002, Whisenant, Pedersen, and Obenour found, “Women who are able to gain entry into the athletic director ranks are segregated into the lower, less esteemed, and less powerful athletic director positions at Division II and Division III institutions” (p. 489). While they took this as confirmation of institutionalized hegemonic masculinity, they also suggested that, “The seeding of women at the lower levels may enable more female administrators to fill the pipeline of qualified candidates for future consideration of positions at Division I institutions” (p. 489). Yet, since 2002, little has changed in the growth of women in senior administrator roles. This opens the door for specific inquiry into both internal and external career path factors that might explain the lack of change in athletic administration.

First, as noted by Burton (2015), there is an “absence of research on women’s aspirations for leadership positions within sport organizations” (p. 163). To fill this gap we utilize career motivation theory to investigate whether men and women have different internal motivations to pursue these senior administrator roles. Second, Inkson (2004) advocates for joint analysis of both internal and external factors when investigating career paths as moves within and between organizations are driven by a subjective sense of growth. To this end, we utilize the concept of career path to investigate whether Division II administrators view Division I and Division II as a hierarchy of the same system or as separate entities. If they are not perceived as fungible, this could create a self-imposed barrier between the two divisions leading to the seeding of the pipeline as an ineffective tool to increase female administrator roles at the Division I level.

Thus, the two objectives of this study are to investigate a) the role gender and current position play in a Division II athletic administrators' motivation to advance to a similar or elevated position within Division I athletics, and b) whether a career in Division I athletics can be seen as reaching the pinnacle in intercollegiate sports. In this way, we are able to tackle not only two gaps in the literature, but also the interaction between them.

We took a cross-sectional approach with both quantitative and qualitative data to address these questions. All 1,140 Division II Assistant Athletic Directors, Associate Athletic Directors, and Athletic Directors were surveyed with a 31.2% response rate. In alignment with the gender balance in Division II administrative positions, 66% of respondents were male and 34% were female. Using the five factor Career Motivation Scale (Grzeda & Prince, 1997), an AVONA found no statistical difference in career motivation between male and females (p=0.422). Athletic Directors scored significantly higher (p=0.012) than Assistant and Associate Athletic Directors on only the Career Advancement factor. The largest differences were noted in preference to move to Division I. Males (58%) were significantly more likely (p=0.042) than females (44%), and Assistant/Associate Athletic Directors (57%) were significantly more likely (p=0.007) than Athletic Directors (43%) to move to Division I if offered a similar or elevated position. Qualitative analysis of open-ended explanations further elucidates the reasoning for these different preferences.
In conclusion, this study provides evidence that the lack of females in senior athletic administrator roles is not related to a lack of female career motivation. Instead, systemic and external factors are more probable causes. Furthermore, females and Athletic Directors are more likely to view the NCAA divisions as separate entities due to differences in philosophy, funding, and the balance of academics and athletics, thus reducing their preference to move up to Division I. From a managerial standpoint, these results explain why seeding female athletic administrators in Division II is not a successful strategy to fill the pipeline and increase representation at the Division I level. University presidents seeking to enhance managerial excellence through a gender diverse work force are encouraged to look for alternate solutions.