The underrepresentation of women in sport leadership roles has persisted since the passing of Title IX in 1972 and the subsequent disbandment of the Association of Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) in 1982 (Bell, 2008). During the height of the AIAW’s governance of nearly 1000 women’s intercollegiate sport programs, female administrators and coaches accounted for the highest proportion (n = 90%) of female leaders in women’s sport history (Belanger, 2016). Once the AIAW was absorbed into the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the proportion of female leadership was nearly cut in half and has remained low over the last decade (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). Understandably, a great deal of research has been dedicated to examining the lack of women in sport leadership positions, with much of this previous inquiry focusing on the distinct barriers to advancement (Burton & Leberman, 2017; Burton, 2015; Cunningham & Sagas, 2008; LaVoi, 2012).

At the initial stages of this inquiry, research detailing the decline of women in leadership was often associated with the proverbial glass ceiling. Said differently, it appeared that once women’s programs were under the jurisdiction of the NCAA, there were many distinct and clear-cut barriers to female leadership achievement. Most notably, women were often absent from the role of athletic director within the highest levels of NCAA competition, Division I (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). Recently however, women have made gains within the realm of administrative leadership, across all three levels of NCAA competition (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). As such, the discussion concerning the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions throughout the NCAA has shifted from a focus on absolute barriers (i.e., a glass ceiling), to one of a complex journey similar to a labyrinth (Belanger, 2016; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Coined by Eagly and Carli, the leadership labyrinth suggests that, while routes do exist for women who aspire to top leadership roles, these routes contain both unexpected and expected twists and turns (Eagly & Carli, 2007b). Eagly and Carli (2007b) acknowledge, “Because all labyrinths have a viable route to the center [leadership position], it is understood that goals are attainable. The metaphor acknowledges obstacles but is not ultimately discouraging.” This is the premise on which the current study is built.

The presence of a sport leadership labyrinth suggests that women, in comparison to their male counterparts, will experience additional obstacles throughout their leadership quests (Burton & Leberman, 2017; Eagly & Carli, 2007a). While an ample amount of research has supported the factors that makeup the sport leadership labyrinth, the perception of these barriers have not been investigated as one overarching system of oppression. Oppression in the sport has industry been attributed to the male-dominated culture of sport organizations in which men and men’s activities are valued and rewarded (Knoppers, 1992). Whereas women in various sport settings often face hostile, antagonistic, and discriminatory work environments (Cunningham, 2008). Research to date has not measured the perceptions of both men and women of the leadership labyrinth for female sport administrators. Thus, inquiry was guided by the following research question: To what extent do sport administrator’s perceptions of the leadership labyrinth in the sport industry differ based on gender?

Participant perceptions were measured using the Career Pathways Survey (CPS) (Smith, Crittenden, & Caputi, 2012). The CPS provides a quantitative assessment of the perception of barriers impeding advancement across industry segments. The CPS was specifically designed to measure the attitudes toward gender inequality in organizational leadership (Smith et al., 2012). The current investigation compares male and female NCAA administrator’s perceptions of the leadership labyrinth and details the implications of such beliefs across four factors: resignation, acceptance, resilience, and denial.

Data was collected for male (n = 79) and female (n = 92) athletic administrators employed within one of three National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) levels, (Division I, II, or III). Athletic administrators (n = 186)
were recruited via email. The email contained a link to the survey. Participants were asked to complete the 38-item (α = .73) Career Pathways Survey (CPS) (Smith, Crittenden, & Caputi, 2012) and demographic information. Data analysis included multivariate (e.g., MANOVA) and univariate (e.g., ANOVA) analyses. We explored differences related to demographic characteristics and perceptions of the leadership labyrinth. In an effort to address our research question a MANOVA was administered to the data.

Results of the MANOVA indicated a significant multivariate effect for the CPS, Wilks’ A = .77, F (4, 172) = 5.92, p = .000. Univariate analyses revealed a significant main effect for Denial, F (2, 169) = 5.87, p = .003. Specifically, male participants had stronger beliefs that the leadership labyrinth was non-existent or a myth (M = 4.00, SD = .54) than did female participants (M = 3.75, SD = .45). Univariate analyses also revealed a significant main effect for Resignation, F (2, 169) = 14.77, p = .000. Specifically, male participants had stronger beliefs that women will be likely to give up or fail to pursue leadership positions due to an inability to handle or cope with experiences of social and organizational obstacles (M = 4.75, SD = .74), than did female participants (M = 4.16, SD = .80). Additionally, univariate analyses revealed a significant main effect for Acceptance, F (2, 169) = 3.69, p = .03. Specifically, female participants had stronger beliefs that women may not want to pursue positions of power, based on the assumption that leadership is a masculine pursuit (M = 4.17, SD = .62), than did male participants (M = 3.93, SD = .56).

Theoretical implications of this research extend the leadership labyrinth literature to sport employee perceptions of their organizations as it applies to inclusion, as well as their experiences with the obstacles posed by the sport industry. Sport industry members may be able to utilize these results as evidence of a need to shift the application of civil rights law within their organizations away from processes of ‘symbolic equality’ (e.g. King, 2017). More specifically, scholars have suggested that the managerialization of civil rights law, such as Title VII and Title IX, has reframed workplace equality from a legal mandate or a societal ideal, into an organizational objective whereby workforce diversity ought to improve organizational performance (King, 2017). This overused application of civil rights law tends to fall short of cultural changes and often results in a lack of inclusion and opportunity (King, 2017). A discussion of the practical application of this research will also include the implications towards generating higher levels of inclusion and opportunity for women within sport industry organizations.