Descriptive statistics contrasting the stark differences between the low percentage of Black head coaches and high percentage of Black players in the National Football League (NFL) is well documented (Lapchick, 2012, 2013). The lack of Black head coaches may be a result of discrimination occurring in lower rungs of the promotion ladder (Solow, Solow, & Walker, 2011). However, Becker's (1971) seminal research on discrimination stated employer discrimination is highly unlikely in competitive labor markets, but the market for football coaches operates with many potential barriers to entry including the benefits of having connections in the industry (Fast & Jensen, 2006) as well as racial (Madden, 2004), gender (Lapchick, 2013), and institutional discrimination (Finch, McDowell, & Sagas, 2011). One form of institutional discrimination which may prevent fair competition in the promotion of NFL coaches is based on centrality.

Leavitt (1951) stated people who held centrally located positions within a group were more likely to be selected as leaders due to the inherent structure of the group. Grusky (1963) used centrality to explain why infielders are more likely to become managers in Major League Baseball (MLB). Grusky further generalized his findings by stating people in central positions must communicate with those around them more, providing more opportunities to develop better social skills. These refined social skills allow individuals to receive better performance evaluations, interview skills, recommendations, and ultimately, chances for promotions (Grusky, 1963). Anderson (1993) assessed the degree of racial discrimination, which results from centrality, using media guides from 88 intercollegiate football programs from the 1990-1991 season. Using descriptive statistics and chi-square tests, Anderson found career opportunities for Blacks to be restricted due to institutional discrimination which limits Blacks’ access to central positions.

More recently, Finch, McDowell, and Sagas (2011) provided a 15-year update of Anderson’s 1990 study by analyzing the same descriptive statistics using chi-square tests with media guides from 116 intercollegiate football programs from the 2005-2006 season. In both the Anderson and Finch et al. studies, discrimination was analyzed on the basis of who was in the coaching positions and what was their racial and playing/coaching position background. The updated results by Finch et al. and comparison against Anderson’s findings provided by Finch et al. suggest institutional racism may still potentially limit African Americans’ access to central positions, and ultimately, the visible and prestigious positions of head coach and coordinator. Though Finch et al. stated “[t]he hiring mechanisms often seen in Division I football may also contribute to a lack of access and interviews for Black coaches” (p. 48), neither Anderson nor Finch et al. examined the hiring practices which may be facilitating the discrimination. Furthermore, neither study examined the years of experience or levels of success each coach had achieved to earn their positions.

While centrality has been investigated in the college sport context (e.g., Anderson, 1993; Finch et al., 2011), there is little research examining centrality in professional sport. Examining race and centrality among NFL coaches from the 2000 season through the 2006 season, Braddock, Smith, and Dawkins (2012) found significant differences in the races of coaches assigned to central positions and offensive/defensive coordinators, but not for head coaches. Similar to the Anderson and Finch et al. studies, Braddock et al. did not examine determinants of movements into positions, but rather correlations between coach attributes and the coaching positions they occupy. Rider, Wade, Swaminathan, and Schwab (2016) analyzed determinants of promotion among NFL coaches with respect to race and found evidence of racial discrimination in promotion practices. However, Rider et al. did not account for centrality as a factor in promotions. Foreman (2017) found evidence of race and centrality being determinants of promotions and demotions within the NFL coaching ranks. More specifically, central position coaches are more likely to be promoted (Foreman, 2017). However, based on previous research (e.g., Anderson, 1993; Finch et al., 2011; Braddock et al., 2012), Black coaches may experience more difficulty securing central coaching positions.
Thus, the purpose of the proposed research is to examine the factors that allow coaches to make lateral moves into central coaching positions. The empirical setting is the NFL from the 1984-1985 season through the 2016-2017 season, thus spanning 32 seasons. Consistent with Deephouse and Suchman’s (2008) recommendation to use media publications for understanding organizational phenomena, NFL Record and Fact Books are utilized. These NFL Record and Fact Books are official NFL publications and provide detailed information regarding coaches, such as position titles, birth dates and places, and previous teams coached by year. The unit of analysis is a coach-season, whereby each coach is observed for the duration of a season and characteristics of the team for the season are attributed to the coach who began the season with the team, according to the NFL Record and Fact Books. To examine possible determinants of lateral moves to central coaching positions, regression analysis will be used with a dichotomous dependent variable indicative of a lateral move to a central position. Independent variables will include demographic variables (e.g., race and age), individual and team performance variables, and prior central position experience.

The findings in this study will have implications for both scholars and practitioners. Many scholars attempt to identify whether discrimination exists within the hiring practices of sport organizations and why few minority head coaches exist in the league compared to the number of minority players (Solow et al., 2010). Furthermore, diversity initiatives for NFL coaches have already been implemented (e.g., the Rooney Rule), suggesting potential opportunities for an expansion/ revision of current policies or the implementation of new policies to increase career mobility opportunities for minority coaches. Moreover, non-sport organizations (e.g., Uber and Facebook) adopted diversity initiatives that originated in sport, suggesting this research may prove useful for non-sport organizations when attempting to expand opportunities for minority candidates (Foreman, 2017).