At a Crossroads: The Senior Woman Administrator Designation

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The Senior Woman Administrator (SWA) designation was established in 1989 by the NCAA to increase involvement of women in the management of collegiate athletics. However, research has found SWAs may not be afforded the decision-making tasks or opportunities needed for further career advancement. Despite the increase in overall participation in collegiate sport for women, women in leadership positions are still limited, with less than 12% of women in athletic director positions at the Division I level. There has been an increase in the actual number of women employed by collegiate athletic departments, but this is often seen within entry level positions.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of the Senior Woman Administrator designation by the women who occupy the position within NCAA Division I athletic departments through Role Congruity Theory. The designation was created as an avenue to empower and provide opportunity for women, however, previous research has found the designation may not be affording those opportunities. Furthermore, the 2018 NCAA SWA report found confusion is present on the purpose and role of the SWA. This study looked to expand the literature by exploring where and why the confusion still exists surrounding the SWA designation and sought to understand the permanency of the designation.

Particularly, to add to the body of literature in this topic, a qualitative study was used to explore this topic from the voices of those in the role and their construction of meaning and value around the designation, in contrast to previous research that has utilized a quantitative design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via telephone and audio recorded with 14 Division I SWAs. The interview protocol consisted of three parts: history of career experience, understanding and perception of the SWA designation, and career path navigation. After data collection and transcription, members of the research team coded data using the initial coding methods of in-vivo and descriptive coding took place. The researchers jointly grouped the codes into categories that were most applicable to the research questions in order to generate themes.

Two major themes were revealed: Designation has Consequences and Removal of the Designation. Themes highlighted the designation itself is problematic as the community within and outside of athletics views the designation as the “women’s AD” or as only overseeing women’s sports and gender equity issues. This finding demonstrates the omission of significant contributions of work in a wide array of areas within athletics by SWAs. Additionally, this view of the designation further aligns women with traditional gender norms and exemplifies Role Congruity Theory where women are not thought to possess the abilities or the titles for decision-making power within collegiate athletic departments. Furthermore, participants detailed the designation should be removed due to perceived inferiority based on gender, tokenism, and marginalization experienced from peers and the community. Findings have organizational culture implications both for the NCAA as a whole and athletic departments, as women in the study discussed how the title of SWA may limit ascension into leadership roles within collegiate athletics.