Double Punch to the Glass Ceiling: Career Path Experiences of Minority Women Athletic Directors

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Carla Williams was named the University of Virginia’s athletic director in October 2017, making her the first black female athletic director at a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I, Power Five conference school ever. Williams faced career mobility issues faced by women in the male-dominated collegiate sports profession as well as the challenges faced by people of color. The New York Daily News deemed her the “most important leader in college athletics,” noting the significance of the hire in the wake of the violent white nationalist rally just months earlier in Charlottesville, Va. Williams told ABC News, “I’m living proof that you can do anything” (Miller & Thorbecke, 2017, para. 1).

Women hold fewer than 25% of athletic director (AD) positions across the NCAA and less than 12% at the Division I level (Acosta & Carpenter 2014; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). There has been a slight increase of women in athletic department administration in the past decade (36.2%), but 11.3% of athletic departments do not have a woman in the administration in any capacity (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). The career opportunities for ethnic minority women in college sport are even more bleak. Ethnic minority women hold only 6.4% of all positions in collegiate athletics. Ethnic minority women hold 28 positions as athletic directors across all three divisions of the NCAA, and that number stands at 10 at the Division I level (NCAA, 2018). However, several of these women hold positions at historically black colleges, somewhat minimizing their status as ethnic minorities in predominately African-American environments.

Taylor and Hardin (2016) examined the experiences and career mobility of 10 female NCAA Division I athletic directors. These ADs did not purposefully pursue a career as an athletic director but were more of “accidental tourists” who ascended to the position of athletic director (Taylor & Hardin, 2016, p. 18). McDowell and Carter-Francique (2017) investigated organizational experiences of 10 African American women athletic directors and found that participants faced racial and gender stereotypes, career mobility obstacles, increased scrutiny as well as their own identify conflict (McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017).

This research set out to investigate the career paths, experiences, and challenges of ethnic minority women in the athletic director position at NCAA institutions. We specifically expanded the sample to all women of color to paint a fuller picture of the diversity of ethnic minority women in collegiate athletic leadership. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were utilized to embed into the participants’ perspective (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Trends indicate female minority ADs experience sexism significantly more than racism and are challenged on the management of football. All the women stressed the importance of mentorships and relationships in their success. The results of this study provide ethnic minority women a greater understanding of career progression in college sport and can assist administrators in developing strategies for creating more inclusive departments. These women face many challenges regarding career mobility as they first have to negotiate the obstacles faced by being a woman followed by the impediments of being a person of color.