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The Glass Door: Early-Career Women in Collegiate Athletics

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INTRODUCTION

Women face many challenges in the professional workplace, whether in regards to career mobility, either upwardly or laterally, or having to prove their competence for the positions they do hold. These are typically characterized by the glass wall, glass ceiling, glass escalator, or glass cliff.[1] This study introduces another challenge many women face in gaining entry into male-dominated professions, such as collegiate athletics, and that is the glass door. The glass door refers to women seeking a specific career but not being able to pursue it because they are women.

The challenges of women in athletics are reflective of similar challenges faced in many career fields, whether male dominated or not. Three challenges that are specifically relevant for women in collegiate athletics are the existence of the glass wall, the glass ceiling, the glass escalator, and the glass cliff. First, women face horizontal segregation in which women are concentrated in certain fields.[2] The career fields women are channeled into are often positions of lesser authority that are considered "gender appropriate."[3] This horizontal segregation, also termed the glass wall, is evident in collegiate athletics, in the funneling of women into the "soft" areas of sport administration.[4] Second, vertical segregation, or the glass ceiling, is a phenomenon within organizations where men have better chances of internal promotion.[5] The glass escalator refers to men advancing professionally at a quicker pace than women. Men are bypassing women who may have more experience and are being placed in positions of leadership based on their gender.[6] Women may only be offered higher authority positions within an organization after

times of difficulty, which creates a tenuous foundation for a woman in a leadership role.[7] The glass cliff phenomenon refers to women having their credentials questioned because of gender and then being placed in a tenuous position that will lead to failure. The combination of segregating women into fields with lesser authority, a reduced chance of promotion within their fields, and women achieving leadership positions only when the organization is in crisis and thus more likely to fail are barriers that contribute to decreases in career mobility and professional advancement.[8]

Women in College Athletics Administration

It has been the norm for men to hold leadership positions in athletic administration and coaching with the opinion that women did not possess the necessary leadership traits for these positions.[9] In order to continue to narrow the gender gap in athletic administration, current entry-level professional women in the field must have the ability to achieve more career mobility than their predecessors. The women in the present study have made strategic educational and career decisions, while navigating gender discrimination and work-life balance challenges, in order to gain entry and advance into leadership positions in a male-dominated field. A persistent topic among sport management scholars is the underrepresentation of women in administration and coaching in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Sport participation levels are at an all-time high for women, but this trend has not extended into collegiate athletics administration.[10] Vivian Acosta and Linda Carpenter found only 10.7 percent of Division I athletic directors are women, and that percentage (6.3 percent) is even lower among Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) athletic departments. Head coaching is also dominated by men as women only hold 25 percent of head coaching positions across NCAA Division I.[11]

A slight increase in the proportion of women occupying athletic administration positions in the NCAA has been observed from 2012 to 2014, with 36.2 percent of all athletic administration positions being held by women versus 35.8 percent in 2012.[12] Early-career professionals and managers are attempting to climb the athletics administration ladder through networking, professional development, higher education, and mentorship; however, barriers connected to sexism and gender stereotyping persist.[13] Research has suggested that women struggle to advance because of unequal assumption of competence, homologous reproduction, homophobia, and lack of female mentors.[14] Additionally, women may choose to leave the profession earlier than their male counterparts because of family commitments, lack of time and support, and burnout.[15]

Challenges to Women in Collegiate Athletics

Ninety percent of women's athletic departments were overseen by female athletic directors prior to the inception of Title IX in 1972, but the percentage of women athletic directors had decreased to 22.27 percent by 2014. Women athletic administrators in general are scarce, as only 36.2 percent of all athletics administration jobs are held by women.[16] The primary reason for the decrease in women in leadership positions in college athletics was the integration of women's athletics into the NCAA governance structure. Women's collegiate athletics operated autonomously until the late 1970s when the NCAA assumed their operation and management.[17]

College athletics is a growing profession, but most newly created administrative positions within athletic departments are overwhelmingly going to men. More than 1,150 positions have been added to college athletics in the past decade, but three out of every four are held by men.[18] Women are also represented in higher percentages in the "soft" side of athletic administration, such as academic advising, student-athlete life skills, and oversight of minor sports.[19] Women are not getting experience in decision-making positions because they are in support positions and because they are being channeled into areas that are less likely to exercise authority.[20] This hinders their ability to advance in their career into senior-level positions.

Career mobility is instrumental for early-career professionals in athletic departments in order to achieve their next higher position and eventually senior leadership roles. Career mobility theory is characterized by the multiplicity of employment opportunities that are accessible for individuals within an organization.[21] Homologous reproduction is the process where dominant groups or individuals reproduce themselves through hiring similar individuals based on social and physical characteristics; this is another factor in career mobility.[22] The dominant group will be successful at reproducing itself, irrespective of that group's gender or other demographic characteristics.[23] In the case of collegiate athletics, when there is a female athletic director versus a male, the percentage of female coaches within the athletic department is significantly higher.[24] This phenomenon has also been witnessed in the coaching hierarchy, where female head coaches are more likely to hire female assistant coaches.[25] Additionally, in sports information, which has the lowest representation of women, homologous activity was reported among athletic directors hiring sports information directors.[26]

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Research on early-career professionals working in collegiate athletic departments is scarce. A lack of women in leadership positions, gender

societal norms, and need for research on early-career professionals helped shape the research questions for this study. This lack of research can also be attributed to the limited access to collegiate administrators in general and the limited number of possible participants.[27] Thus, the purpose of this research was to examine the challenges and experiences of female early-career professionals working in collegiate athletics.

METHODS

The aim of this study was to gain insight into the participants' inner thoughts and experiences; therefore, a qualitative research design was used.[28] A qualitative approach allowed the meaning of experiences and perceptions to be drawn from the interviews and then placed into themes to construct the narrative. The themes are then presented in the research findings and discussion.[29] Qualitative research is often used to explore topics that are difficult to measure quantitatively, such as personal experiences and perceptions.[30] The nature of the study allowed themes to emerge from the interviews and allowed the participants to tell their stories.[31]

Grounded in discussion, interviews require the researcher to ask questions and listen and for participants to respond.[32] The participants' "work life" (i.e., experiences and challenges in the workplace) was the foremost focus of this study. It would be too difficult to observe all female early-career professionals working in NCAA Division I athletic departments in their professional setting, so interviews were used so the researcher could enter into the participant's perspective. Interviews allow for more personal interaction between the researcher and participant and permit further probing and clarification with follow-up questions. Further, interviews are often used when the research topic explores sensitive or controversial topics, such as gender issues in the workplace.

An e-mail inquiry was sent to 10 female early-career professionals working in NCAA Division I athletic departments asking for their participation, and all agreed to participate.[33] The respondents were selected purposely because it was believed they would be in the best position to provide information to address the purpose of the study based on their previous education as well as previous and current employment.[34] All participants had experience in several different areas within NCAA Division I athletic departments, making them ideal subjects.[35]

Interview questions covered topics such as education, career progression and aspirations, challenges of being a woman in a male-dominated industry, mentoring, interactions with colleagues, and career advice (see Table 12.1). An interview guide was used to ensure that several common areas of information were collected from each participant. The interview guide was comprised of experience and behavior, opinion and value, and demographic questions.[36]

Table 12.1 Interview Guide

Questions

1. Tell me about how you got to where you are; was working in a collegiate athletic department your career aspiration?
2. You have an advanced degree, when and why did you decide to pursue a Master's degree?
3. Were you a graduate assistant?
4. Did you have a job before you began working in collegiate athletics?
5. What is it like being a woman working in collegiate athletics? Are you purposeful in your dress and interactions with others?
6. Do you think your experiences are different than your male colleagues?
7. Do you think that women are more inclined to enter into the "soft" areas of collegiate athletics (e.g., academic advising, life skills, women's sports)? Or are they funneled in that direction?
8. How do you interact with coaches? Do you interact with male and female coaches differently?
9. Do you have a formal or informal mentor who you meet/talk with on a regular basis? How did you secure this mentor? How do they help you?
10. Do you serve as a formal or informal mentor? How did your mentee secure you? How do you help your mentee? How does this experience benefit you?
11. How do you interact with students-athletes? Do you feel as though you need to serve as a role model for female student-athletes?
12. Are you a member of NACWAA?
13. What advice would you give to a female wanting to pursue a career in collegiate athletics?

Interviews were conducted via telephone and were audio recorded for transcription purposes. The average length of the interviews was 23 minutes with the shortest being 16 minutes and the longest being 31 minutes. Length of interviews can vary based on numerous factors, including participants' daily work schedule and commitment, unexpected events on the day of the scheduled interview, or research material. In qualitative studies, researchers should strive to achieve data saturation, which occurs when new themes stop emerging from the data.[37]

Once the interviews were transcribed and formatted, they were sent to the participants for member-checking, which provides data validation during qualitative analysis.[38] Participants are given the transcriptions from their interviews and allowed to review them and to provide clarifying or additional comments to questions.[39] Data analysis began after member-checking was complete. A grounded theory analysis approach that emphasized constant comparative data analysis was used where segments of data are grouped together based on a similar dimension.[40] During constant comparative data analysis, one segment of data is compared to another in order

to find similarities and differences.[41] Data are grouped together based on a similar dimension, and these groups become the categories of the study. The researchers coded first for open and in vivo coding to find as many categories as possible.[42] Then the researchers consciously compared each code to the others to make collapsed or narrowed categories. These categories are compared for the same dimensions and conditions.

Then thematic memoing is used to connect categories further, make sense of ambiguous findings, and start to create interpretations/implications.[43] The categories continue to narrow until they reach theoretical saturation, or other data adds little to the category.[44] Once the categories were solidified, quotes were pulled to illustrate each category. Pseudonyms were used in the findings to maintain the participants' anonymity. The data analysis style used by the researchers in this study is a widely used method for analyzing qualitative research.[45]

FINDINGS

The participants were an average age of 30 years old and had been working in their current position for just more than 2.5 years. The range of experience was from one month to 4.5 years. Two of the participants were married, one was engaged, and seven were single. Relationship status was asked of all the participants, but discussion of relationships did not emerge during the interviews. All of the respondents were White. The representation of minority women in collegiate athletics is scarce, as only approximately 5 percent of collegiate athletic employees at the NCAA Division I level identify as women of color.[46] Two of the respondents were former student-athletes, and none had coaching experience. All 10 of the participants hold a master's degree in sport management or a closely related field. Additionally, all the respondents were student employees at one time during their educational experience within an NCAA Division I athletic department before they secured a full-time job. The participants worked in several subspecialties within the athletic department, such as marketing, academic support, development, football operations, and athletic training (see Table 12.2).

Three themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) gaining entry—the role of a student worker in gaining crucial job experience as well as the importance of a master's degree to advance in leadership, (2) professional development—mentorship, professional organizations, and networking, and (3) pretty young thing—gender discrimination, the combination of age and gender discrimination.

Gaining Entry

There has been a shift in the amount of education and experience required to work in the world of collegiate sport because of the desirability of the

Table 12.2 Participants

Participant	Age	Family Structure	Years in Current Position	College Athlete	Area of Athletics
Andrea	26	Single	1	No	Marketing
Bethany	33	Single	1	No	Academics
Chelsea	27	Single	1	No	Academics
Donna	30	Single	4.5	No	Development
Eleanor	34	Single	1 month	No	Academics
Freda	28	Single	4	No	Development
Gina	26	Single	1.5	No	Development
Harriet	30	Engaged	4	No	Football Operations
Irene	33	Married & Expecting	2	Yes	Athletic Training
Jessica	31	Married	4.5	Yes	Development

profession and the billion-dollar industry collegiate sport has become. This shift highlights further education in the form of advanced degrees and a diversity of experiences in the multiple types of departments that encompass an athletic department. Robin Hardin, Coyte Cooper, and Landon Huffman found that 80 percent of Division I athletic directors held a master's degree with previous areas of employment in development and marketing.[47] Eight of the 10 participants in Elizabeth Taylor and Hardin's study of female athletic directors also held an advanced degree.[48] The participants echoed this topic enough to create the theme of "gaining entry" as the participants discussed gaining entry into athletics by beginning their work in sports while in their undergraduate careers and then by seeking master's degrees; thus they were trying to break the glass door.

Seven out of the 10 participants discussed their experiences as student employees in athletics during their undergraduate years. They believed that their experiences in this role allowed them to move into graduate assistant positions or internships and in turn gain the requisite experience to qualify for their first job within collegiate athletics. Andrea credited working as a student worker in helping her obtain her current career in marketing. She stated, "I worked every basketball game and every sporting event that I could after that. I just loved it. I did it for the rest of my time there and have been doing athletic marketing since then." Gina also acknowledged that her experiences as a student worker modeled and founded her career in development. She said,

> I actually sat down after the women's basketball tournament with [a former athletic director], it was after dinner, and we sat down and talked a little bit and they told me that if I was interested in getting

into development in college athletics that I needed to start working as soon as possible. So they set me up with [a director of development and fundraising], and at this time it was still men and women's athletic departments at university. So I went in there on the women's side and helped out with a couple things and then once the departments merged I was able to do both men's and women's development.

Freda echoed Andrea and Gina's experiences of the role of a student worker being a bridge to her career in development and allowing her to see how all the departments in athletics worked together. She explained,

> My junior year of college I also started working as a student in the university fund office, the development office with university athletics, and really got to know how the departments work with each other. Kind of how marketing works, how development works. As you mentioned, student-athlete development, advising, so I really got to know the inner workings of collegiate athletics there.

All of the participants in this study obtained a master's degree and spoke about the significance of having a master's degree and working in collegiate athletics. Eleanor voiced the importance of a master's degree by stating, "I realized that you needed a master's to be successful in any field that I wanted or sit in at that point, so that is kind of what led me there because I knew I needed it." Bethany reiterated the significance of having a master's degree and working in athletics, saying, "I think in athletics you really need that extra additional education level, so that is why I decided to do that." For Chelsea, the knowledge obtained in the classroom was crucial to her move in collegiate athletics. She viewed an MBA as a way to gain the experience she needs to eventually switch fields. She said,

> I love what I am doing now, and I definitely want to stay in the realm of college athletics, but I see myself moving up at some point even if it is just an assistant athletic director or a director of student athlete academic support center. I think to be at that level I need more business skills that I don't feel I have. So things like how to run a budget, or how to [manage] people. I have experienced things like having student employees, but I don't really have any experience managing full-time employees so I would like to gain knowledge on that. I also eventually see myself going over to athletics administration in general, not necessarily with academics, so really just trying to plan my next move, I guess my five- to 10-year plan. I spoke with my supervisor about it and we kind of both felt the MBA was the way to go.

Whether the participants purposefully sought out their master's degree for experience and an added level of education or completed it in association with their graduate assistantship, all of the participants acknowledged that both their advanced degree and their experience as student employees in athletics helped them gain entry into the profession.

Professional Development

The importance and necessity of networking, professional organizations, and mentoring stressed by the participants led to the theme of "professional development." Women that feel supported, have an invested mentor or role model, and have opportunities to engage in professional development are able to advance in their career.[49] Women that are given these tools also display more job success and satisfaction.[50]

The early-career women in this study credited the use of mentoring and networking as reasons why they have been able to succeed in their profession. Eight of the 10 participants said they had a mentor with six having formalized relationships, and two of those formal mentorships were established through professional organizations. The two participants who did not have a current mentor recognized and expressed a need to establish a mentoring relationship. The participants acknowledged how their mentors not only provided career advice but also emotional support and friendship. Chelsea mentioned the ability to ask questions and vent to her mentors. She stated, "I would say I probably talk to them on a weekly basis and definitely reach out to them more often if I have questions or concerns or need to vent." Andrea reiterated the importance of having a mentor to guide her, listen to her, and even motivate her to continue in her work. She said,

> She is the one I can bounce ideas off of or vent to at times. It can be therapeutic but also she just gives me motivation. Every time I get off the phone with her a weight has been lifted and things I didn't see as possible come into light a little bit and helps me move forward. And I really appreciate having that person to make some of the things I am uncomfortable with more realistic, talk through in terms of how to get things off the ground, and feel a calm in situations I don't normally feel calm in. She has definitely been my go-to person this year.

Irene discussed how a former supervisor became her mentor and then eventually a trusted friend to her through her time at that institution. She explained, "By the time that I ended up finishing my tenure there, and leaving, his comment to me was, 'I don't feel like I'm losing an employee, I kind of feel like I'm losing a daughter.' He mentored me and still does at times." All eight

of the participants that had mentors spoke highly of the importance of the relationship to establish goals, seek out career advice, and have someone to confide in about work or personal issues.

Along with mentoring, the participants articulated that networking was essential to career development. Six of the participants were members of national professional organizations in their field with four being members of National Association of Collegiate Women Athletic Administrators (NAC-WAA). Chelsea vocalized the importance of networking and joining a professional organization, saying,

> I think networking is the most important thing that you can do. Even when I was in my first role, I found the money, I went to N4A [National Association of Athletic Academic Advisors] and I met so many people that I still talk to now and that was three years ago. So I think networking and joining . . . an organization . . . is the best thing that you can do. I mean, you can also talk to people and see how they got where they are and different things like that.

Although the other four participants were not in established professional organizations, they still stressed the importance of networking to establish oneself in the field. Andrea discussed networking, saying, "I think the best advice that I can give you is to understand from the beginning is that everyone around you is connected in some way. So the people that you work with on a daily basis are really going to be your advocates moving forward."

Bethany discussed how her purposeful network allowed her to change jobs or try new experiences. She said, "I used that experience [networking] to springboard me to the next experience, but all along I have kept in touch with great people. I just did a really good job, like really intentional to stay in touch with people. So I am constantly writing cards, reaching out to people."

All of the participants noted that networking, establishing and maintaining mentors, and joining professional organizations enhanced their careers.

Pretty Young Thing

The theme of "pretty young thing" was selected to encompass the differences the participants experienced particularly in gender, dress, and age. Society emphasizes the importance of femininity, even with women that play or work in sport, and Sandra Bartky found in order for a woman to obtain the ideal form of femininity, she must be beautiful, small, thin, and weaker in comparison to the men around her.[51] Women are expected to partake in daily grooming of their face, hair, and clothing, choices that reflect the ideal of femininity.[52]

This deeply embedded view of femininity in society also blends into the world of collegiate sport. Masculinity reigns supreme with fans, coaches, and administrators, but femininity and athleticism are mutually exclusive concepts in American culture.[53] Paul Willis honed this concept of masculinity further, stating, "it is assumed that sports success is success at being masculine. Physical achievements and masculine activity are taken to be the same."[54] Women must act hyperfeminine to avoid masculine or lesbian labels and also to protect the ideal that society outlines and desires.[55] This viewpoint could potentially impact coaches and administrators, and this way of thinking could affect the experiences of women working in collegiate athletics.

The findings of this study indicate the presence of gender and age discrimination. Eight of the 10 women expressed issues with gender discrimination as they obtained and maintained their current positions within collegiate athletics. The participants particularly focused on the constraints associated with being a woman, being young, and their physical appearance. Four respondents specifically discussed how their age was a factor in discrimination. These women were either purposeful in their dress to avoid discrimination or were targeted by other employees for their dress. Bethany said, "My appearance and my overall demeanor around student-athletes; I am pretty much uptight and conservative." Jessica explained that professional dress was necessary to be taken seriously as a young woman in sport. She said,

> It's definitely harder I think in this industry; probably more so than being a female in any other industry. I definitely, especially when I first started my career, made a point to dress very professional. I'd wear suit jackets all the time or just try to always dress top notch so I would be taken a little more seriously, plus I was young, so I think you try to do that when you're younger anyway.

Eleanor spoke about being in a male-dominated environment. She was almost not hired due to her appearance: "So when I first started, as a graduate assistant, as well as an intern and a graduate assistant there was some hesitation in hiring me because I was female. It was, I was working with football and they had never had a female. Visually, if you look at me I am a petite, small girl."

She was also directed to dress appropriately due to being a young, attractive woman in an environment where she was surrounded by men. She said,

> I know coming in, you had talked about dress, I know I had a couple of comments about the way I was dressing and I thought I was dressing appropriately. But other people, how do I say this delicately, other people were not dressing as I would consider professionally and nothing was said to them and I couldn't understand why I was being talked to. I

never wore shorts, or short skirts, or anything that I deemed inappropri-
ate, but I was talked to about that.

Not only were differences apparent for the participants based on dress and
age but also due to simply being the minority gender in collegiate athlet-
ics. Participants revealed discrimination based on the "good ol' boys club,"
access, pay, and ability to express opinions and lead. Harriet expressed the
presence of the good ol' boys club and her outsider perspective, stating,
"You work 16-hour days like the male coaches do, but you don't get a locker
room, you don't get your workout time, so it's not the same." She went on
to say,

> I'm in football, and I think there are for sure major, major differences.
> It's a boys' club. It is a man's world, and I understand that and I think
> that's why I'm kind of able to get along and be okay with all these
> guys around. I think there's times I get really, really frustrated because
> I watch someone who started here . . . at the same time as me, he's the
> same age as me, same education, same, actually less experience and I've
> watched him progress and he gets titles and he can move up the chain,
> but I know that I can't because I'm a female in this sport, here.

Chelsea also explained that being a minority as a female in her job caused her
to change her demeanor and actions. She said,

> Working with football a lot of times I am the only female in the room.
> I travel with the football team, and a lot of times I am the only female
> on the plane, at the hotel, et cetera. I definitely try to carry myself as
> professional as possible and I don't want to say you can't show weakness,
> but when you are at a table with your supervisor who is a male, your
> two male coworkers who also work with football, and a ton of football
> coaches, you definitely want to be as confident as you can.

Not only did the participants note the ever present good ol' boys club, they
also noted the pay discrepancy that still exists for women working in colle-
giate athletics. Eleanor vocalized this issue:

> Also, at least within the last several years, there has been a perceived
> a preference to promoting males; or males that may have been starting
> families or giving them raises and then telling women there is no money
> or you should just appreciate coming to work type thing. So I felt like
> I was trying to be assertive as a female but then I was being told that I
> should know my place if you will.

Jessica also expounded on the lack of pay equality. She stated,

> I will say that especially in the South I think people don't like to say it but the good ol' boys' network is definitely still around. Very much so. I think that the guys automatically have a little bit of a leg up as far as moving up and being promoted and getting raises. I know for a fact that there are men in our department that make more money than the women counterparts who are doing the exact same job. How is that fair?

Finally, participants felt gender discrimination based on the ability to lead and contribute to meetings and the overall organization. Harriet explained that she was not even invited to the conversation due to her gender. She said, "I don't understand why the guys get to do all this, why they get all these opportunities, they get to be involved, they get called into meetings, they get all these opportunities." Eleanor criticized her department revealing,

> Another thing I will say, at least in my last several years, it wasn't, how do I put this, it didn't seem as if the women's opinion was valued and it was a different opinion it was like why aren't you on board? Why are you not full steam ahead like the rest of us? It is like I just have a different opinion. So it was almost like don't speak up either because then you felt like if I was just going to be ridiculed so I am not going to say anything.

The participants expressed that gender differences, barriers, and discrimination are still very present in the industry of collegiate athletics.

DISCUSSION

Women face many challenges as they pursue their chosen profession. These challenges can be described by the glass wall, glass ceiling, glass escalator, or glass cliff.[56] Women have issues with career mobility, both vertically and laterally, as well as with not being seen as capable leaders. This study introduces the issue of simply gaining entry into a profession, especially professions that are male dominated, such as collegiate athletics. Women are often looking through the glass door as they develop a strategy to successfully pursue a career in collegiate athletics.

The findings of this study show that women who want to enter the profession of collegiate athletics (i.e., break the glass door) need to be purposeful in their decision making to gain access to the field. The strategy of gaining athletics experience as soon as possible, pursuing graduate assistantships, and earning a master's degree were all key factors in the participants' ability to

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gain entry into the profession. Sport management has become a profession, and former coaches transitioning into administrative roles are a thing of the past. Education and professional preparation is now essential to gaining entry into the field.[57]

Another factor that is important for women who do choose to enter the profession is the need for mentoring and networking. The vast majority of respondents indicated they had a mentor and that they recognized the value of their mentors. Women wanting to enter the profession should become involved in professional organizations and take advantage of the networking and mentoring opportunities. Professional organizations should also take note of this and continue to develop mentoring programs, make membership affordable to students, and try to increase student attendance at conferences. Mentoring and networking programs can also be established in athletic departments and across college campuses. Major college athletic departments can often employ more than 200 staff, and it would be challenging for a new employee or student to meet everyone. Events should be held to assist with integrating new employees and student employees into the culture of the athletic department and to provide opportunities to network.

Networking is an essential part of organizational culture, and individuals who excel at networking are more likely to advance their careers than those who do not.[58] However, women tend to join and become members of less influential networks. A possible explanation is that if women occupy lower-level positions, they do not have access to attract the more powerful individuals into their network. While there has been discussion on the ineffectiveness of the "good ol' girls club" versus the "good ol' boys club," the apparent lack of effectiveness is actually a result of the scarcity of female personnel in senior positions.[59]

Female athletic directors have discussed the lack of female mentors they encountered throughout their professional career.[60] This scarcity may contribute to women seeking out formal mentorship more than men because they encounter more barriers to developing informal mentoring relationships.[61] Women who seek female mentorship regularly find limited options due to the absence of women in prominent positions.[62]

One issue that emerged but is not directly related to gaining entry into the profession was work-life balance. All of the participants discussed a lack of work-life balance and the lifestyle of working in collegiate athletics. Many of the participants discussed the long hours at work; lack of time for friends, family, and hobbies; and the possibility of a career change in the future in order to start and maintain a family. The participants encouraged women seeking to gain entry into the profession to establish priorities and consider the sacrifices required to pursue a career in college athletics. Working in sports, in particular college athletics, can be described as more of a lifestyle than a job.[63] The

responsibilities of the position must be accomplished during the traditional workday, in addition to the athletic events that often occur in the evenings and afternoons. It is not unusual for athletic department staffers to put in 14-hour days for a home football game at a Division I—FBS institution. This is on top of the regular 40-hour work week plus any other basketball, volleyball, or soccer games that may occur during the week. The challenge is particularly relevant to women because of traditional gender norms that cast women as the primary caretakers of the family who need to be home tending to household and family responsibilities. This leads to tension in early-career professionals as they are faced with the decision of pursuing a career or a family.[64] Women can have both, but that is where the support network is so valuable in regards to mentors and a network from whom to seek advice on how to balance work-life issues.

The other balancing act facing women is knowing when they should be forceful in voicing their opinion and when not to be. Strong, aggressive women are often characterized as bitchy, whereas strong, aggressive men are seen as assertive leaders. It is definitely a difficult balancing act and one that has to be managed by women in the business world. The respondents in this study mentioned that their voices were not always present at meetings, and at times they were not even invited to attend meetings. Women were excluded from out-of-office activities as well. This can lead to a low sense of value and self-worth and again can cause women to leave the profession rather than pursuing a career.

The balancing act also extends to dress. The respondents indicated that they have to be much more conscious of their decisions in regards to appropriate dress. Employers assume significant prerogatives with respect to the dress of their employees and may impose more stringent regulations on their female employees that are different than those imposed on their male employees.[65] This manifests itself in collegiate athletics departments when male employees are often allowed to dress casual (e.g., workout clothes, golf shirts, and athletic shoes) while female employees are required to dress business casual. Female employees may be encouraged to wear a skirt or high heels in order to appear more feminine, whereas it is acceptable for a male employee to look as though he just completed a workout, because men are supposed to be masculine and engage in high levels of physical activity.

Implications

Early-career professionals in NCAA Division I athletic departments are the operational backbone of an athletic department. They perform the day-to-day tasks of keeping the athletic department functional and are not as concerned with long-term strategic planning as senior-level administrators.[66] The

findings of this study provide a road map of sorts for women aspiring to work in collegiate athletics and break the glass door. Taylor and Hardin found that women who had become collegiate athletic directors really had no aspirations early in their career to pursue college athletics as a profession.[67] The women interviewed in the current study were purposeful in selecting their major, participating in internships within athletic departments and continuing their education in order to secure a graduate assistant position within a Division I athletic department. Women who are interested in pursuing a career within collegiate athletics need to be purposeful in selecting opportunities that will assist in positioning them for leadership positions. In addition to choosing a major that directly relates to their future career goals (e.g., sport management, business), women should also seek opportunities such as working directly with football in a management aspect, becoming involved in the budgeting and development aspects of the athletic department, and seeking out a mentor.

Respondents stressed the importance of securing a mentor and getting involved in national organizations in order to foster relationships with others in their specific subdivision of the athletic departments. It may be beneficial for athletic departments and sport management programs to provide information on national organizations (e.g., NACWAA, N4A) to their student employees and majors.

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of women in early-career positions within NCAA Division I athletic departments. Although the participants were positive, enthusiastic, and expressed enjoyment in their current positions, they did communicate a number of challenges and negative experiences throughout their journey. The themes that emerged from the interviews were similar to challenges reported by females working at different levels within collegiate athletics as well as females working in other male-dominated industries.

It may be beneficial for future research to examine the experiences of early-career professionals across all specific classifications of Division I (i.e., Football Bowl Subdivision, Football Championship Subdivision, and no football) as well as Division II and Division III and compare the experiences of each. Examining women at different levels within the athletic department (e.g., graduate assistants, senior women administrators, and athletic directors) about their experiences and challenges while working in collegiate athletics would be beneficial as well. By investigating different populations, comparisons can be made to track progress as women move up the ladder.

Limitations

The current study only interviewed 10 female early-career professionals. This may have yielded different themes, but the current interviews were

conducted until saturation was reached. The interview transcripts could have been interpreted differently by other researchers as well. The interviews were conducted via telephone, so the interviewer could not see the reactions or body language of the respondents to determine if the initial question should receive a follow-up based on the nonverbal physical response of the respondent. Future research may employ different modes of data collection (e.g., in-person interview) or quantitative research methods in order to gain a more representative sample and generalizable results. Additionally, the sample for this study was limited to participants working in NCAA Division I athletics.

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