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What is the Role of an Athletic Director at the High School and College Levels?

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High School v. College Athletic Directors

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY, ST. PAUL

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

COLLEGE OF KINESIOLOGY

What is the Role of an Athletic Director at the High School and College Levels?

A GRADUATE PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

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for the degree of

Masters in Coaching and Athletic Administration

by

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Abstract

What is the role of an athletic director? Athletic directors work in both high school and college level settings. Not all athletic directors run their programs the same way. This proposed study involves a survey of high school athletic directors and college athletic directors. The survey would gather data on leadership style, delegation tactics, daily tasks, annual planning, and fundraising. If conducted, this study will provide information on how high school and college athletic directors are similar, as well as how they are different. This study would benefit those already in the profession and those who are aspiring to become an athletic director at the high school or college level.

Keywords: Athletic Director, Tasks, Leadership, High School, College

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction to the Capstone Project

The role of an athletic director (AD) is multifaceted. From an outside perspective, many athletic directors appear to monitor student eligibility, push papers, and organize sporting events. Internally, the job requires much more administrative performance. Elam (2022) stated,

High school athletic directors (ADs) fulfill many responsibilities within a school, including managing the logistics of hosting athletic events, ensuring the health and safety of student athletes, making accurate and ethical decisions regarding the academic eligibility of student athletes, hiring and evaluating coaches, growing and managing the athletic budget, communicating and resolving issues regularly with parents, among many other areas (p. 2).

The position has many roles. Wood et.al (2019) claimed that athletic department positions are frequently categorized as either external or internal based on how the position interacts with organizational stakeholders. External positions include duties such as marketing, development, ticket sales, and media relations. These positions emphasize skills related to glad-handing, fundraising, negotiating, strategic communication, sponsorships, and administrative tasks. Internal positions include job duties such as compliance, business operations, academics, life skills, and facility management. Internal positions were considered peripheral and can be completed by an assistant or associate athletic director. Advancement to the AD position is noted as being difficult. Furthermore, athletic directors hold a range of positions across age levels. While the job title remains the same, the role of each athletic director varies based on the grade level or school setting which employs them. This chapter is the first step in investigating the multifaceted role of athletic directors.

At the high school level, the school system requires specific tasks of athletic directors. Sturges et.al. (2020) described athletic directors as:

Gatekeepers for the high school athletic experience through influence over game scheduling, budgeting, fund-raising, marketing, and staffing. In addition, ADs are responsible for hiring and managing coaches, and dealing with parents, who can be highly involved with the daily sporting experience of high school athletes (p. 62).

For college athletic directors working at a higher level, there is a heavier emphasis on staff vetting. Wilson et.al. (2009) explained, “Few studies have examined the role that sport administrators play in the availability of sport psychology consulting positions” (p. 407). Various hiring processes were just one example of how roles of ADs differ.

Being an AD takes specific leadership skills. LeCrom and Pratt (2016) described leadership like this: “leadership and its principles remain the same across disciplines; what varies is how they are applied. From the corporate world, to the classroom setting, to college athletics, leadership remains a key concept in defining organizational success” (p. 202). Understanding the leadership style of ADs is an important component of analyzing the job’s role.

Significance of the Study/Rationale

The purpose of this research project is to provide insight on the specific differences in the occupational duties of high school and college athletic directors. The information collected will add insight into the similarities and differences of the position. This is important for professionals looking to work in the athletic director role in a college or high school setting.

Research Question

The specific aim of this study will be to determine the roles of high school and college athletic directors. Through this study performs analysis of the various tasks/duties of current high

school and college ADs to determine the similarities and differences in the profession. Data gathered would help support prospective or future athletic administrators. This study may help them clarify and understand the profession and determine how to create a successful athletic program.

Biases and Assumptions

As with any project, this one is not without its biases and assumptions. The first assumption is that the majority of the study participants will be male, as males dominate the population in this profession. This is especially true for the Division I level. Phillips (2021) stated,

In the last four months, 17 NCAA Division I college athletic directors have been hired and only two have been women. Among the Power 5 Conferences, the five wealthiest and most powerful conferences in NCAA Division I sports, that number is zero.

Currently, only five out of the 65 athletic director positions at schools in the Power 5 are held by women. From Sandy Barbour in the Big Ten, to Jennifer Cohen in the Pac-12, to Heather Lyke and Carla Williams in the ACC, and Candice Storey Lee in the SEC, these exceptional women are, well, the exception (para. 1-2).

Additionally, it is assumed that there will be little racial diversity within the participants in this study, because there are not many people of color in the athletic director profession at the college level. Renae Myles Payne, an aspiring athletic director, studied the lack of diversity among college athletic directors. Data gathered inspired the Global Sport Institute at Arizona State University in 2019 to look at the ongoing lack of diversity. The study looked at data from the years of 2010 through 2019. Hruby (2021) stated,

Taken together, the study's findings indicate that women and people of color in college sports administration continue to face career obstacles when compared to their White male counterparts – something that holds particularly true for women of color, with just 11 Black women, three Latinas, and two Asian American women hired as athletic directors” (para. 7).

Based on this information, the study will seek participation from female athletic directors and athletic directors of color.

Limitations

The first limitation relates to the use of a survey. As with all surveys, there is no control of which ones complete the survey (Starr, 2021). Starr (2021) stated, “Unfortunately, a major problem in all survey research is that respondents are almost always self-selected. Not everyone who receives a survey is likely to answer it, no matter how many times they are reminded or what incentives are offered” (p. 1). In addition, the length of the survey could be a barrier to participation.

Additionally, response participation will come from athletic directors all over the country, or maybe just from Pennsylvania or Minnesota. Some universities deny athletic directors permission to participate in surveys outside of the university. Porter (2005) found, “Many campuses are struggling with the issue of who can survey on their campus, which groups can be surveyed, and which survey methodologies and topics are permitted” (p. 5). This study shows multiple universities with such policies: Duke, Northwestern, Bucknell, and Maryland University, Baltimore County. Porter (2005) also stated,

Looking at the groups listed here, it is clear that policies vary. As discussed, students are often viewed as a group requiring special treatment. Other groups may also fit that

description. At schools with strong faculty governance, the faculty senate may believe that its permission is needed before any survey of faculty can be conducted (p. 13).

Participant's years of experience is also considered. This uncontrollable factor may cause answers to vary. A first-year athletic director will likely have different views on the profession compared to one who has been in the profession for many years.

Conclusion

This study will investigate the role of high school athletic directors and college athletic directors. This is an important topic for professionals looking for AD careers in this setting. Research has noted that these roles vary within and across levels; therefore, Chapter 2 will share the methods necessary for this proposed project.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Introduction

The position of an athletic director has changed over time. DeCesare (2017) discussed “the shift from past expectations that has occurred incorporates more responsibilities evolving from the increased interest and enthusiasm for high school athletics. The data showed the responsibilities of the athletic director position have grown in complexity with the expectation to blend communication skills, ethical leadership, and business management” (p. 4). Therefore, this chapter will share the methods necessary to investigate the roles of high school and college ADs.

Instrumentation

For investigating the roles of ADs in the United States, a Google form survey was created (see Appendix A). This instrument begins with an informed consent statement explaining the purpose for the project. Participants state what level they work in: High School or College. The remaining questions pertain to leadership style, daily and annual tasks, and a few open-ended questions on programming and fundraising.

Participants

To gather insights on the topic of roles of ADs, the electronic survey will be shared with athletic directors all over the country at the high school and college levels. Since high school and college are the two settings of interest in this project, only these two will be included. By opening the survey across the country, participants will vary across geographic locations, urban and rural, and private and public settings. Participants were randomly selected by a third party, however, when the list of participants was reviewed by the writer the pool showed an overrepresentation of white males. The study sought specific participants to offset this. Women

and people of color were contacted intentionally to offset the homogenous population of the study, as the real working world includes women and people of color as well. The final selection of participants aims to represent a miniscule model of the United States population.

Ethical Considerations

As with any study, there are ethical considerations for this project. The first concern is this: athletic directors will be surveyed throughout the United States. Although this may add value to the data collected, anytime human subjects are surveyed, their responses will be influenced by personal experiences and opinions. Therefore, the results may be difficult to compare and contrast across participants. Additionally, answers may vary based on years of experience.

To alleviate these risks, this project will go through Concordia's IRB for approval prior to beginning. All responses and data collected will be confidential with all identifiers removed. In addition, there will be no risks for participants as noted in the informed consent statement at the beginning of the survey (see Appendix A).

Data Collection and Analysis

The design of this study is a structured survey. The data collected from this survey will provide both quantitative and qualitative results. Closed-ended questions like "level of athletic director" and closed-ended prompts like "the three most important characteristics of an athletic director" will require quantitative analysis. For these questions, percentages and averages will determine the most frequently chosen answers.

In addition, athletic directors will answer open-ended questions such as "List three strategies you use to ensure academic success for students" and "List five daily tasks of your

job”. Data collected in each of these questions will be reviewed and coded. These codes will be organized into cohorts. The data will be split into two cohorts. One cohort will be the results provided from the high school athletic directors. The other cohort will be the results provided from college athletic directors. They will be broken down into these two cohorts because they share common characteristics and experiences. Those characteristics and experiences include administration level, education level, daily tasks, fundraising methods, recruitment, and leadership styles. This way data collected will be analyzed to determine the difference in roles of high school and college athletic directors.

Conclusion

This chapter covered the methods necessary to investigate the role of ADs at both the high school and college level. This process would involve a survey sent to ADs across the country. Both quantitative and qualitative data would be gathered. Chapter 3 will share how, if this study were to be conducted, the findings would benefit sport professionals.

Chapter 3: Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

The proposed study would investigate the difference in roles of athletic directors at high school and college levels. This study serves to provide professionals interested in being an AD with information about future career choices. Data would be collected using an anonymous survey, with participants selected across the country.

Practical Applications

The job title remains the same for high school and college athletic directors, however, this study would investigate the difference in the roles. Curran and Pottas (2017) indicate role ambiguity as a leading cause of stress in the workplace for employees. Therefore, this study aims to provide information regarding the essential functions of an athletic director at both high school and college level. This clarification aims to support athletic directors in understanding the function of their role. The study also aims to support sport professionals in making decisions that align best with their values, leadership methods, and interests.

Limitations

There will be a few limitations to this study if conducted. The first limitation is the use of a survey to conduct research. For this survey, one limitation was the lack of open-ended questions. Another limitation of this study may be getting the participation of the athletic directors. It may take several email communications to secure participants. In addition, some schools may have rules which would prohibit athletic directors be a part of a survey.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study provides support for future research opportunities such as: What impact does the AD have on team success? How does the leadership style of the athletic director affect the

program? In addition, is there a common weakness that ADs often have? There is also a concern with athletic director positions going to others who do not have athletic or coaching backgrounds. LeCrom and Pratt (2016) demonstrated, “some schools have turned from hiring former college athletes or coaches to serve as athletic directors to targeting business executives to fill these roles” (p. 203). This presents another topic opportunity where the researchers could look into why the athletic director role is going to those with business backgrounds.

Conclusion to Project

The study proposes an investigation into the roles of high school and college athletic directors. The project involves an electronic survey distributed to ADs in the United States. If conducted, graduate students and other sport professionals could benefit from the results of the survey. They can learn the typical duties of high school and college ADs, as well as the differences that might exist between them.

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Appendix A

Richard O'Donnell, a graduate student at Concordia University, St. Paul, is conducting research on high school and collegiate athletic directors. All information taken from the study will be coded to protect each subject's name. All answers will be anonymous and used for research purposes only. Any questions can be sent to O'Donnell at RickyOD23@gmail.com. If you agree to this statement, please proceed to the first question.

Athletic Directors: High School vs. College

Form description



⋮

What level are you as an Athletic Director?

High School ✕

College ✕

Add option or [add "Other"](#)

  | Required ⋮

Which of the following best describes your leadership style? *

- Directing
- Coaching
- Supporting
- Delegating
- Other...

List 3 strategies you use to ensure academic success for students. *

Long answer text

What do you feel the 3 most important characteristics of an Athletic Director are? (Please select only 3) *

- Confident
- Flexible
- Leadership
- Cooperative
- Humor
- Dependable
- Ethical
- Innovative

List 5 daily tasks of your job below *

Long answer text

List up to 10 steps you take prior to the start of a season *

Long answer text

List 3-5 tasks you perform annually for your job *

Long answer text

Do you recruit athletes? *

Yes

No

Do you attend sporting events? *

Yes

No

Who are some people an athletic director at your level consult with regarding athlete programming? *

Long answer text

What methods of fundraising do you use? *

Long answer text

What is your level of education? *

Short answer text
