

12-2023

Ongoing Challenges and Success Stories of Title IX Compliance in the Northern Sun Intercollegiate Conference: A Qualitative Study

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Ongoing challenges and success stories of Title IX compliance in the Northern Sun
Intercollegiate Conference: a qualitative study.

A thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

Of the Department of Leadership Education

College of Education

Of Winona State University

By

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In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Science

Date: December 6, 2023

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In June of 1972, the Title IX Education Amendments were signed into law by President Richard Nixon, prohibiting sex discrimination in any educational program or activity receiving any type of federal financial aid (Education Amendments Act of 1972, 2018). Since then, more women have received an equal opportunity to participate in interscholastic and collegiate athletics. Since its inception, the percentage of women athletes competing on college teams has risen from 15% to 44% in the 2020-21 academic year (Staurowsky, et al., 2020). While successes over these 50 years of inclusivity should be celebrated, there have also been inequities cited in athletic departments over that same period, creating a double standard when it comes to playing and as is the focus of this research study, to coaching.

Female coaches, no matter the collegiate level, have faced a variety of inequities over this 50-year period. In 2016, 60% of head coaches for women's sports were males, compared to 40% of females coaching women's sports (Wilson, 2016). A recent study showed that 59% of women coaches at the NCAA Division III level considered leaving their positions within the last three years, citing burnout and lack of organizational support (Laney, 2021). The above studies point to an overarching problem regarding Title IX compliance at college institutions. The aim of this research study is to produce a qualitative research study of NCAA Division II athletic administrators, Title IX coordinators or some similar title, and female sport coaches from a specific conference to understanding the challenges and/or successes within athletic administrations regarding Title IX compliance.

Problem Statement

Equity issues surrounding women's athletics have been ongoing, even since the implementation of Title IX legislation in 1972 (Staurowsky, et al., 2022). Fink (2016) acknowledges that there is an embedded nature of sexism in sport that bleeds into coaching and athletic administrations. Fletcher (2022) claims gender pay gap issues exist, particularly at the Division I level, but not enough information exists at the Division II level. A recent report done by the Women's Sports Foundation argues that there is a shortfall regarding Title IX compliance as it pertains to equal allocation of dollars for men's and women's athletics programs (Staurowsky, et al., 2022). According to Fletcher (2022), research on Division II athletics regarding gender equity and sexism in coaching is lacking compared to research studies done at the Division I level.

For 50 years, studies have been done regarding Title IX compliance, yet little is known about Title IX compliance amongst NCAA Division II institutions. Tegtmeier (2021) puts a focus on a comprehensive analysis regarding compliance at two midwestern Division one institutions and the impact football has on compliance from a lens of finances and proportionality. Challenges to compliance and strategies to fix those challenges have been outlined by Causby (2010) regarding two-year institutions and their unique operating budgets and athletic department makeup. Veite's (2021) focus on perceptions of compliance from an entire athletic administration and coaching staff at one NCAA institution provide insight into how an institution fights a lack of women coaches and athletic directors. This study seeks to add to that research, with a particular focus on challenges and strategies for success when it comes to Title

IX compliance for athletic administrations and their programs in the Northern Sun Intercollegiate Conference, a Division II athletic conference.

Background

Title IX states that “no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (US Dept. of Ed. OCR, 2021). Compliance of Title IX, according to Feder’s legal review of Title IX (2012), is outlined by the US Department of Education’s clarification policy of 1979, as well as a subsequent policy in 1996, that created a three-pronged test that athletic administrations must adhere to stay compliant. The three-prong test is the official measurement of the 1979 policy, and is defined as “the proportionality test, the expansion test, and the accommodating interests test” (Feder, 2012, p. 6). The proportionality test, as defined by Jenkins (2019) states that “the difference in participation opportunities must not be sufficient to sustain a viable team” (par. 22).

Universities cannot have differences in proportion that equate to a whole other team, especially if that team is male. The second prong, the expansion test, is defined as “as long as universities are working toward compliance, they meet the spirit of the law” (par. 24). The accommodating interests test is a politically charged prong, which asks for universities to “fully accommodate the interests and abilities of your female athletes”, without defining what interests and abilities mean (par. 25). Jenkins goes on to add that many compliance tests within universities come from surveys, but that surveys do not do compliance justice. They are a point of contention as they do not evaluate a multitude of factors, yet the compliance officers for most university simply need a preponderance of evidence to admit compliance, creating a

loophole (par. 28). Another challenge to ensuring compliance comes from some institution's inability to train their administrators and compliance officers annually due to financial constraints, as Schrieber (2018) points out. Veite's (2021) study, although not explicitly focused on compliance, concludes that the inability to balance family and work, as well as negative perceptions of gender roles has also had a negative impact on women in athletic leadership positions, thus creating an inequality in the coaching realm. Lastly, Mattoon's (2021) study reinforces the idea that university athletic administrators do not understand how Title IX compliance works, citing that by relying solely on proportionality, miss out all a plethora of opportunities for women in athletics. A theme of focus emerged regarding compliance, combating sexual harassment on campus, which in no way fits into the comprehensive three-prong test of Title IX compliance on campus.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the challenges athletic administrations face regarding Title IX compliance and strategies used to maintain compliance. This study will be narrowing the focus to the Northern Sun Intercollegiate Conference (NSIC), focusing on athletic administrators, Title IX coordinator/Senior woman administrators, and women's sport coaches. The results of this study will identify the challenges athletic administrations face with complying with Title IX in their respective schools, as well as how women's sport coaches perceive that compliance to be fulfilled.

The research questions this study is aiming to answer are:

Q1: What are the challenges that athletic administrations face regarding Title IX compliance at their respective NSIC institution?

Q2: What strategies have been utilized to maintain Title IX compliance at their respective NSIC institution?

Limitations and Delimitations

The first limitation of this study is the personal relationship with participants on the part of the researcher. The researcher maintains personal relationships with a percentage of the participants within the study, potentially creating biased responses from participants. The second limitation of the study is the number of participants that agreed to be interviewed was smaller than what the researcher had hoped for. The delimitation of the study is bounded to the Northern Sun Intercollegiate Conference, as the researcher is looking solely at Title IX compliance from those institutions regarding women's athletics. While narrowing the focus of Title IX compliance to a geographic and institutional area bridges a gap in the research, this creates a smaller pool of participants from which the researcher will analyze the data.

Definition of Terms

Title IX: a Federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in education programs and activities. All public and private elementary and secondary schools, school districts, colleges, and universities receiving any Federal funds must comply with Title IX (Cornell Law, 2021).

Title IX Compliance: an assurance of appropriate education and training; coordination of a university's investigation, response, and resolution of all reports under Title IX policy; and an assurance that appropriate actions will be taken to eliminate prohibited conduct, prevent its recurrence, and remedy its effects (Cook, 2022).

Title IX Noncompliance: failure to comply with procedural requirements outlined as Title IX regulations (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Summary

There is little to no information available on past or current trends of Title IX noncompliance and OCR's conceptualization of the law. The limited information available on Title IX noncompliance has been largely reported by the media and OCR, rather than scholars (Schaffer, 2017.) This chapter provided an overview of the research surrounding the challenges athletic administrators face regarding Title IX compliance at universities and how that noncompliance affects women's basketball coaches. Chapter 2 will review the literature surrounding Title IX compliance and noncompliance at universities, assess the gap in the literature regarding the specific conference this researcher is focused on, and to inform the reader on the history of Title IX and associated methodologies that create or fix the challenges of compliance.

Chapter 2: Review of the literature

Introduction

Title IX compliance is something that all colleges and universities strive for on their campuses, as it is mandatory for the purposes of equal education and anti-discrimination on the basis of sex (Bendici, 2016). This chapter examines the review of the literature on the historical timeline of Title IX legislation, the historic and current celebrations, and shortcomings of Title IX as it pertains to female student-athletes and coaches, as well as the historic and current challenges that colleges and universities face regarding the ever-changing nature of compliance on their campuses.

The History of Title IX

Fifty years ago, the 1972 Educational Amendments Act was enacted into law, with a provision in the act now colloquially known as Title IX. This provisional piece of legislation was designed to remedy ongoing practices of discrimination in all federally funded educational programs, stating that “no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” (US DOJ, 1972. p. 1)

Title IX regulations encompass a wider variety of protections from discriminatory practices of federally funded organizations, including scholarships, admissions requirements, and access to courses, but it is perhaps best known for the prohibition of sex discrimination in intercollegiate athletics (Leder, 2012). Originally, the passage of Title IX was the result of finally calling attention to discrimination in education employment, which at the time had been

excluded from all prior civil rights legislation (Lieberwitz, et al., 2016). Dr. Bernice Sandler is credited with amassing evidence of widespread bias in higher education as it pertained to hiring practices regarding women (Hagerty, 2019). She found a loophole in Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, banning discrimination based on sex, color, national origin, etc., but failed to include public educational institutions in the legislation. Thus the 1972 Educational Amendments Act was born, with Sandler, along with House of Representative members Edith Green (OR) and Patsy Mink (HI) at the helm of advocating for and that legislation, without fully realizing that their efforts towards passage would have such a powerful effect in the realm of intercollegiate athletics (Hagerty, 2019). Additionally, Title IX was birthed from another failed piece of legislation, The Equal Rights Amendment. The ERA stated that “men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction.” (Congressional Digest, 2019. p. 5). While too controversial to get ratification from the required 38 states, Indiana senator and chief sponsor the ERA, Birch Bayh, took the portion regarding sex discrimination at colleges and universities to the Senate floor and presented it as Title IX, which ran into opposition but eventually passed and signed into law by Richard Nixon in 1972 (Education Journal, 2022). During his push for signage, Bayh orated on the Senate floor “One of the great failings of the American educational system is the continuation of corrosive and unjustified discrimination against women. It is clear to me that sex discrimination reaches into all facets of education — admissions, scholarship programs, faculty hiring and promotion, professional staffing and pay scales. Because education provides access to jobs and financial security, discrimination here is double destructive to women.” (Clymer, 2019. p. A28). And while much of the focus of Title IX legislation is attributed to athletics and equality, the history

of the legislation has had a crucial impact in how higher education sees gender relations. As Rose (2015) commends, the passage of the 1972 Title IX Amendments not only institutionalized gender equality as it pertained to being admitted into college and to have the equal benefits regarding athletics, but also demonstrated for the first time a gender-consciousness in higher education policy. Women accessing higher education through the regular admissions process and through athletic scholarship is now mainstream policy throughout the country.

Impact of Title IX on Intercollegiate Athletics

The impact that Title IX legislation has had on intercollegiate athletics is cause for both celebration and criticism (Schultz, 2022). From a celebratory standpoint, Title IX legislation has opened doors for women in intercollegiate athletics in terms of scope and participation, with colleges and universities now able to offer a variety of women's programs (Liu, 2022). The access that Title IX has created for women to pursue careers in a spectrum of fields cannot go uncelebrated. From an athletic standpoint, US women have ascended to the highest of platforms, competing and winning at national and international levels (Staurowsky, 2022). Although this paper is looking at Title IX from an intercollegiate lens, it is worth noting that since 1972, the percentages of high school females participating in athletics has risen from 7% to 44%, with the connection being that a percentage of those females move on to intercollegiate athletics (NFHS, 2019). NCAA statistics cite that the percentage of female athletes at the collegiate level has risen from 15% to 44% since Title IX passage (Cooky, 2023). Race considerations have also been mostly positive, as Cooper and Newton point to the expanded opportunities that have come from black female student-athletes, as well as other women of color (2021). And while newer to the field of being under the umbrella of Title IX

protections, O'Connor (2022) points out that policies protecting athletes against transgender discrimination showing positive results on campuses and in courtrooms around the country. She also argues the most important benefit that girls and women have under title ix protections are the sociocultural learning experiences that they receive while playing sports. O'Connor (2022) cites an article from the Women's Sports Foundation website that "girls who play sports are more likely to get better grades, have higher levels of confidence and self-esteem, have a more positive body image, and higher states of psychological well-being."

Challenges with Title IX Compliance

While Title IX has vastly improved the landscape when it comes to opportunities for girls and women at the collegiate level, Druckman (2018) questions whether the target population of girls and women fully believe that discrimination "on the basis of sex" has stopped. While girls and women fully back the policy, there is evidence that there still a long road to travel to create an equal situation among female student-athletes. Perhaps the largest problem with Title IX compliance lies in its wording, as Dinneen (2013) suggests. He acknowledges that Title IX was not written specifically for college campuses, and thus should be worded to fit the unique needs of each campus across the country, as they are all different in size and composition. One of the biggest pitfalls that Title IX has not fully addressed is the ongoing sexual assault and harassment on campuses (Department of Education, 2022). In a recent study on sexual violence amongst schools at the Division I, II, and III levels, Wiersma-Mosely and Jozkowski (2019) uncovered that 1000 of 1422 students responded with being the victim of some level of harassment or assault. While these students may not be athletes, Kelly (2017) provides research that many of these schools at an institutional level do not even report sexual assaults.

Kelly notes that in 2012, 45% of colleges did not report an assault, which Title IX is supposed to cover under equal opportunity and access. This reporting of sexual assaults, as well as the state and federal investigations at the university level that the reporting leads to a situation where female athletes will choose to not report and deal with the mental and emotional effects of harassment and assault because the publicity that follows is too much of a stigma to deal with (Beavers and Halibi, 2017).

Another issue that hinders true equity is the unfair role Title IX coordinators must play in the compliance process. Pappas (2021) notes this unfair role in his study, concluding that Title IX coordinators, whose job description has been in place since the 1975 Title IX implementing regulations, face multiple challenges that do not allow them to work toward gender equity in a meaningful way on campuses. Coordinators, who do not hold high positions within their department, face pressure from higher up administration and the media, and lack the resources to do their jobs. Pappas calls for a collaborative effort that must occur for Title IX coordinators to successfully do their jobs, but thus far has not seen those efforts nationwide. Additionally, Lake (2017) recommends that senior leadership at colleges and universities should “get out of the way” and let Title IX coordinators do their jobs and have respect for that process, while at the same time maintain communication and appropriate levels of response when non-compliance does happen.

Yanus and O’Connor (2016) did a nationwide evaluation of compliance and non-compliance amongst NCAA Division I schools and found proportionality and financing gaps largely amongst Historically Black Colleges & Universities in the southern United States. Cooper and Newton (2021) echo this sentiment by uncovering women athletes at HBCUs don’t

necessarily feel a sense of belonging on their campuses due to patriarchy and lack of athletic administration training, thus bolstering the non-compliance findings from Yanus and O'Connor.

Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this research study is to examine both the challenges and successes faced by NCIS athletic administrators and Title IX coordinators/senior women administrators regarding compliance, as well as how women's sport coaches perceive that compliance to be met. Theoretical frameworks to support this study is social cognitive theory, sometimes known as social learning theory and social constructionism.

Social Cognitive Theory

Developed by Albert Bandura, social cognitive theory is "based on the idea that people learn from interactions with other people in social settings. In addition, by observing the behavior of others, people can develop similar behaviors." (Ilmiani, et. al., 2021) Bandura explains that people are the producers of their environment, not just products of it. The environment, which includes social interactions, such as construction, modeling, and persuasion, can alter personal characteristics (Films Media Group, 2003). One tenet of social cognitive theory (SCT) asserts that while people are influenced by and react to their social and built environments, they also have the capacity for self-regulation, self-reflection, forethought, vicarious learning, and innovation through imagination and communication (Beauchamp, et. al., 2019). Another tenet of SCT is self-efficacy, the belief that humans have in their capacity to execute behavior decisions to achieve specific performance results (Bandura, 2012). For a person to have rich or poor self-efficacy, there are sources that are present or absent: past

mastery experience, social modeling, verbal persuasion, mental imagery, and perceptions of one's emotional and physiological states (Maddux, 1995). There is a recognition process that occurs in SCT that most tasks and decisions do not occur singularly and in isolation, but in social and interdependent settings, thus positing that one's self-efficacy is partially determined by those around him or her (Beauchamp, et. al., 2019). These proxy agents, as Bray (2014) defines them, when joined with the decision makers, create a sort of collective efficacy, which should allow for peak performance when it comes to the original person's behaviors and ability to make the best decision. The important learning from the tenets of SCT is that all decision makers do not make their own decisions singularly but are affected and manipulated by the social settings around them, and the people in those social settings can give that decision-maker a richer or poorer self-efficacy in a behavior they must employ or in a choice they need to make (Beauchamp, et. al., 2019). Applying SCT to this research study will allow the researcher to understand why people in athletic administrations define the challenges to Title IX compliance as they do, and why they model decisions that could put their athletic department in full compliance or lack thereof.

Social Constructionism

Kenneth Gergen's definition of social constructionism, as outlined by Segre (2016) is that the existence of all social and cultural reality, such as values and meaningful actions, is due to social actions and practices, as opposed to individual ones, which are collectively performed across time and space and generally taken for granted. Most everything that humans take for granted as real come from a continuous built upon set of beliefs and knowledge. Over time they become the objective reality. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, in their original book

The Sociology of Reality (2011), theorize that because all knowledge is socially constructed over time, thus becoming the reality of a culture or group, the inequities and problems that exist in that culture or group will need to be fixed with undoing the old socially constructed knowledge with newfound socially constructed knowledge. The problem exists in that if there has been constructionism that creates a reality towards discrimination of a particular group of people, the newfound knowledge to counteract the “truth of discrimination” must be overwhelming to create a new reality (Berger & Luckmann, 2011). Social constructionism is an interesting lens from which to understand Title IX inequality because the theory would posit that gender inequality stemmed from a reality that people simply accepted as truth over time, as well as learned and built upon from others. If Title IX non-compliance and the inequality that persists because of it continues to trend toward deeper inequality it could mean that the people who have the ability to fix the compliance situation will not because they are still stuck in the reality that inequality is simply the truth of the world, which could be considered a dangerous idea.

Summary

Chapter two discussed the history of Title IX, the impact Title IX legislation has had on intercollegiate athletics, and the challenges that persist regarding Title IX compliance amongst college campuses and athletic departments. Chapter two finished with frameworks of social cognitive theory and social constructionism as lenses for the research study. Chapter three will discuss the research design and methodology of the study.

Chapter 3: Research Design

Previous research supports the importance of understanding the continued challenges to Title IX compliance as it impacts student-athletes, athletic departments, college campuses nationwide from a cultural, environmental, and political level (Mattoon, 2021). This research will help institutions glean information that could be helpful in their collective decision making regarding how they approach compliance at their institutions. The purpose of this study was to examine the challenges athletic administrations face regarding Title IX compliance and strategies used to maintain compliance. A qualitative research design was used for this study to uncover whether the NSIC institutions are compliant and uncover the specific challenges that prevent them from being compliant. By using a qualitative design, the aim is to gain insight into the processes involved in the co-constructions of meaning, the lived experiences of the decision makers, the cultural phenomenon associated with choosing to comply or choosing to oppress student-athletes by not adhering to Title IX legislation (Atkinson, 2017). Qualitative research methods provide a means of capturing the complexity of a phenomenon (Vaughn & Turner, 2016). Lastly, qualitative research values people's lived experiences and is inherently subjective and sensitive to the biases of both researchers and participants. That subjectivity speaks to the core value of qualitative research and to deeply understand a research subject (Tomaszewski, et. al., 2020). The qualitative design was phenomenological, as it "focused on the essence of a lived experience that can be observed and felt by people who have different viewpoints and because a larger concept or idea was being explored." (Tomaszewski, et. al., 2020). Because the participants in this study are complex individuals, capturing descriptive data which will allow the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of Title IX compliance challenges and successes.

This information aims to address the state of the NSIC as it pertains to Title IX compliance and whether the challenges can be overcome from an institutional level. By using a qualitative research design the expertise, opinions, and experiences of athletic directors and compliance coordinators can be collected.

Sample and Setting

The population for this study was current athletic administrators, Title IX coordinators/senior woman administrators, and female sport coaches at all participating schools in the Northern Sun Intercollegiate Conference (NSIC). The NSIC governs 16 member schools in the Midwest, with schools located in Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Nebraska.

Purposeful selection was used for the semi-structured interview selection. Purposeful sampling is the selection of information-rich cases related to a researcher's topic of interest (Palinkas, 2015). The criteria for choosing athletic department leadership to be interviewed included administrators who are considered the head director of athletics, the senior woman administrator or similar title, and female sport coaches within each respective university. This ensures a standard of expertise and triangulation for the interviewees regarding Title IX compliance. In all, the sample size for this study was ten participants. Three athletic directors, three senior woman administrators, and four female sport coaches participated in the interview process.

The setting for this study was conducted online via Zoom between the researcher and the participants, either in the privacy of the participants' athletic offices or in the comfort of their own homes. This setting ensures privacy and the ability of the participants to respond in a

manner that is comfortable for them. The limitation of the setting is that there is no direct face-to-face conversation, which could create a change in response.

Instrument

The instrument for the semi-structured interview will be the primary researcher and the interview questions. According to Roberts (2020), the value of the data collected during the qualitative interview depends on the competence of the researcher and the strength of the interview questions. The value of the interviews provides a space for extended conversations that allow the researcher insights into how people think and what they believe. By utilizing the instrument of the in-depth semi-structured interview by the researcher, the data received will be comprehensive and worthy for analysis.

More than just a means of information retrieval, interviews are considered as conversational practices, through which the researcher seeks to understand the world of the interviewees and the meanings these interviewees associate with their experiences (Mahama, 2017). Semi-structured interview was developed to collect data from all participants and create a sense of order, as it provided the researcher with a set of predetermined questions (Bridges et. al., 2008). According to Kallio (2016), the reason why the semi-structured interview is a popular data collection method is that it has proved to be both versatile and flexible. The semi-structured interview for this study consisted of demographic questions of gender, job position/title at the institution, and years of service at the institution. It went on to address the interviewees' expertise of Title IX and their knowledge of the definition of compliance. The interview questions also addressed the information pertaining to the challenges and successes surrounding Title IX compliance, specifically at their respective institution. Lastly, the interview

questions were created from a lens of social cognitive theory and social constructionism.

Interview questions are located in Appendix A.

Data Collection

The interviews helped identify the decisions made and concerns of the decision makers (athletic directors and compliance coordinators) regarding compliance at their respective institutions and to triangulate whether there are common challenges within the Northern Sun Intercollegiate Conference. The semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom, after an agreement was made from the purposeful sampling to conduct the interview. “Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest.” (Palinkas et. al., 2015, p. 533). The time of the interview was determined by the respondent to fit their schedule, barring it met the timeline for the researcher. This timeline was communicated to the respondents during the initial contact. The interviews were recorded for future analysis, which was also made clear to the respondent. The interview questions were open-ended to maintain complexity, allowing for respondents to expand on the topics they felt comfortable and willing to discuss further. The respondents’ identities were kept confidential. To ensure confidentiality, in the analysis and results sections the respondents are distinguished as “athletic director 1”, “senior woman administrator 1”, “head coach 1”, etc., depending on the person’s job title. The interviews were recorded and saved on a fingerprint encrypted drive.

Data Analysis

In any qualitative research study, when it comes to data analysis the researcher must stay objective and empathetic to the participants involved in the study (Sutton, 2015). Thematic coding was used to analyze the data from the semi-structured interviews. According to Skjott Linneberg, (2019) “A code is a short representation that captures the salient features of a main idea put forth by subjects through their responses in a qualitative study.” (p. 259) After the researcher broke down the answers to interview questions, the responses were categorized with the creation of a coding framework based on challenges and success strategies. As part of another coding process, the researcher created a framework based on the job titles/descriptions of the participants, which ensured for triangulation of the qualitative study. As coding became iterative, the researcher used answers from the participants and coded from the lens of how answers potentially fit the holdings and suggestions of social cognitive theory and social constructionism, the theoretical frameworks for the qualitative study. From these frameworks of codes the researcher was able to cross-reference each to identify qualitative themes within the responses.

Summary

Chapter three encompasses descriptions and rationale behind the research method, including the demographics and criterion of respondents, the instruments utilized for research, the methods for data collection, and a description and methodology for analysis. Chapter four will discuss the data recorded and the answers that emerged from the data collection.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the challenges athletic administrations face regarding Title IX compliance and strategies used to maintain compliance within the institutions of the Northern Sun Intercollegiate Conference (NSIC). This chapter provides the results from analyzed data from a series of semi-structured interviews.

Demographics

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with three athletic directors, three senior woman administrators, and four head coaches of a women's sport, counting ten in all. All participants were currently employed by an NSIC affiliated institution. The three differing job titles and descriptions ensures for triangulation of data.

Interview Findings

The research question posed to help understand challenges to Title IX compliance at their institution was:

RQ1: What are the challenges that athletic administrations face regarding Title IX compliance at your respective NSIC institution?

In response to RQ1, one of three senior women administrators (33%), two of the three (66%) of the athletic directors (AD) and all four (100%) head coaches (HC) stated that financial constraints from university athletic departments make it difficult to comply with Title IX protections. This equates to 70% of the interviewees highlighting financials constraints creating disparities as a significant challenge to Title IX compliance. One athletic director highlighted financial aid disparities across men's and women's sports based on undergraduate enrollment

that can come into direct problems with compliance. Another athletic director articulated financial constraints regarding facility improvements for respective men's and women's sports, noting an example that a university athletic department may not be able to remodel or improve a women's facility without doing the same for a men's facility. Additionally, the head coaches reported the financial constraint that comes with fully funding the sport of football at universities, which can cause financial disparities when it comes to need to fully fund other sports, both male and female. The finding of financial constraints causing disparities coming from university athletic departments is highlighted below.

AD 1 stated,

The women all have a locker room, but they've got to go out into a hallway and use shared shower and toilet facilities. On the men's side, they have shared showered and toilet facilities, but there's a direct access to that from there. So from a Title IX perspective, they would look at that as unfair. And then our largest women's program [track & field] doesn't even have a facility, and trying to address that comes with building an indoor building, which constitutes a massive financial obstacle.

In response to RQ1, another finding emerged from all three senior woman administrators (SWA) interviewed (100%) in that historically there has been inadequate support for women based on misunderstanding and ignorance of Title IX doctrine, eventually leading to learned acceptance on not truly complying with Title IX protections, with women's sports taking the brunt of those ignorant decisions. Better education and awareness within athletic departments was noted to ensure fair treatment of all athletes as well as to ensure that significant changes don't need to be made to entire departments to be within the parameters of compliance.

SWA 2 stated on the inadequate support for women based on historic ignorance,

Because now we are trying to make things compliant and that becomes really more detailed and almost nit-picky, which is even more challenging. So now I feel like they're trying to keep it equal. But historically we were hurt for over 50 years and nobody really cared and now they're going to try to make everything equal.

SWA 1 commented on the inadequate support based on learned acceptance,

I think the other thing is sometimes women just say, that's good enough now, we got a little bit more, which doesn't fit the meaning of compliance. And I think (my mentor) taught me that a little bit more isn't good enough. No, we're not a secondhand sport. We're not second hand.

To summarize, the challenges that athletic administrations face regarding Title IX compliance at their respective NSIC institutions included financial constraints and historic inadequate support for women leading to active ignorance of Title IX issues.

The research question posed to help articulate successes regarding Title IX compliance at their institution was:

RQ2: What strategies have been utilized to maintain Title IX compliance at your respective NSIC institution?

In response to RQ2, the first finding surrounding successful strategies for maintaining compliance was the prioritization of open communication amongst and within athletic departments for the purpose of getting ahead of potential compliance issues. All of the participants interviewed highlighted prioritizing communication at the administrative level to make sure compliance was not becoming an issue that could not be dealt with if left unsaid. One head coach interviewed highlighted the frequency and nature of the compliance meetings of the athletic administration that they work for, with an underlying message of prioritizing communication,

We sit down and we have meetings about compliance through the year, and we go through, like we had to at one point, go through every single thing that we ordered for

our women's team one year to make sure that we were getting equal things as the men. And budget wise, we sit down with our athletic director, and he wants to make sure that we have equal things. We meet at the end of the year, for sure. Every year we sit down and we go through budget. We might have a meeting in the summer where we go through needs of each program, what we're looking for, and then the administrators compare and contrast some things. And then we'll meet again in the fall and when we're trying to fundraise to increase our scholarship dollars to be equitable.

In the same vein as the head coach, an athletic director noted a way to prioritize communication within the entire athletic community at their university with yearly Title IX audit surveys issued to every student-athlete and coach to find gaps in their compliance.

AD 1 states,

I think we've done a good job in paying attention to it (Title IX compliance) and getting people to understand and have conversations about it. The yearly survey we give our athletes on the three parts of participation, financial aid, and fair treatment has been very useful for that communication.

Also prioritizing communication, two head coaches applauded audits via having open lines of communication between athletics administrators and all the sports programs, not just theirs, to maintaining Title IX compliance.

Another finding amongst the three titles interviewed came from the senior women administrators. While all groups noted prioritization of communication as a worthy strategy, all three (100%) senior women administrators considered the hiring practices of their universities of personnel who value and advocate for Title IX and gender equity to be a worthy strategy of Title IX compliance success. One senior woman administrator commended their universities commitment to increasing women's representation in coaching and administrative positions. Another senior woman administrator noted that their university had practiced hiring people and was committed to hiring people in the future who fully grasp the interpretation of laws

surrounding Title IX so not to come into compliance issues in the future. The third senior woman administrator interviewed highlighted the importance having current and new advocates within the athletic department and within each sport for equal treatment and opportunities.

To summarize, the strategies utilized to maintain Title IX compliance at the NSIC institutions included prioritizing communication surrounding Title IX compliance and hiring personnel who value and advocate for Title IX gender equity.

Summary

Chapter four has provided a comprehensive examination of the data gathered through semi-structured interviews. The qualitative data analysis and interpretation of findings have illuminated findings surrounding the challenges and successes of Title IX compliance by NSIC university athletic departments. Chapter five will build upon the knowledge gleaned from the analysis, drawing more meaningful conclusions that can offer practical implications for relevant stakeholders of athletic leadership.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

Chapter five marks the culmination of an exploration and analysis of qualitative data by various stakeholders in the NSIC conference regarding the challenges and successful strategies of Title IX compliance through the lens of semi-structured interviews. This concluding chapter serves as the link where the threads of theory, methodology, and empirical findings converge to answer the research questions posed at the outset. In this final chapter, the researcher provided insights on the themes outlined in the previous chapter, drew cohesive conclusions that not only address the issues of Title IX compliance but also contribute to the broader body of knowledge on educational leadership. Chapter five provides a comprehensive overview of the significance of the study, address limitations, and provide avenues for future research.

Discussion and Conclusions

A qualitative research design was utilized to explore the challenges and successes in identifying how athletic administrations in the Northern Sun Intercollegiate Conference are handling Title IX compliance. The research design was phenomenological in nature, which provided the best approach to explore the lived experiences of various stakeholders withing athletic administrations at universities affiliated with the NSIC. The research questions guiding this study were the following:

Q1: What are the challenges that athletic administrations face regarding Title IX compliance at their respective NSIC institution?

Q2: What strategies have been utilized to maintain Title IX compliance at their respective NSIC institution?

The finding emerged from RQ1 was that financial constraints from university athletic departments create a large challenge when trying to comply with Title IX laws and legislation. Additionally, another finding from RQ1 outlined the historic nature of the conference in that there has been inadequate support for women based on misunderstanding and ignorance of Title IX doctrine, eventually leading to learned acceptance on truly complying with Title IX protections. A third finding came from RQ2 on the successful prioritization of open communication amongst and within athletic departments for the purpose of getting ahead of potential compliance issues. Additionally, a fourth finding came from RQ2 on the hiring practices of their universities of personnel who value and prioritize Title IX and gender equity to be a successful strategy of Title IX compliance.

Theoretical Connection

Title IX has played a critical role in the evolution of sport for girls and women in the United States. Title IX's enactment served as a catalyst for the growth of sport participation opportunities for girls and women at the high school and college levels (Stauroswwy, 2022). Therefore, everyone that has stakeholder power would be wise to consider the ongoing challenges, and recipes for success when it comes to Title IX compliance within their environment. As explained in the literature review, the impact that Title IX legislation has had on intercollegiate athletics is cause for both celebration and criticism (Schultz, 2022). Bandura's Social cognitive theory served as a theoretical framework for this qualitative study. Social cognitive theory asserts that while people are influenced by and react to their social and built environments, they also have the capacity for self-regulation, self-reflection, forethought, vicarious learning, and innovation through imagination and communication (Beauchamp, et. al.,

2019). In addition to social cognitive theory, this study also tried to understand Title IX compliance from the theoretical framework of social constructionism. According to Airo (2021), the basic principle of social constructionism “is that many of the things we perceive as objective truths are not but are constructed culturally or socially.” (p. 93) When uncovering challenges and successes to Title IX compliance, this qualitative study used both theoretical frameworks to inform and guide the data collection process to bring about qualitative themes. The connections are understood in the following paragraphs.

Various participants identified one of the main challenges as financial constraints. The interviewees discuss the need to increase scholarship and funding for women's sports to ensure equality of opportunities, all the while maintaining a level of financial equality with male sports, particularly football, as was explained by the Tegtmeier (2021) study outlined in chapter two. The financial constraints also align with what Causby (2010) articulated from a study on two-year colleges and their unique financial budgets and constraints contributing to Title IX compliance issues. The challenge of financial constraints aligns with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, as financial resources are a factor that can influence individuals' beliefs about their ability to succeed. If women's sports receive less funding, it may undermine their self-efficacy and limit their opportunities for success (Bandura, 2016.) While athletic administrations are not necessarily the direct cause of this, as they are constrained by a university budget, the trickle-down effect to women's programs can undermine self-efficacy in the long run.

Additionally, the semi-structured interviews reveal the impact of audits on compliance efforts. Audits are described as a process of evaluating facilities, finances, and opportunities for participation to ensure compliance with Title IX. Participants explained a variety of audits in the

interview process, whether it be survey communication or communication with the entire athletic department for the purposes of getting ahead of potential Title IX compliance issues. This proactive communication as a strategy for success aligns with social cognitive theory as audits in the medium of survey and department communication can provide feedback and information that can shape individuals' beliefs and behaviors (Bandura, 1972). The interviews suggest that audits in those various forms of communication have been beneficial in identifying areas for improvement and promoting compliance. Likewise, social cognitive theory emphasizes the importance of social modeling and reinforcement in shaping behavior to bring about a better collective efficacy in an organization, and the attention given by administrators to prioritizing communication via audit surveys and department compliance meetings can serve as a good form of social modeling to reinforce a feeling of compliance in the athletic department.

The research themes also lend to a connection to the framework of social constructionism. Defined by Zhao (2020) as “a sociological theory according to which knowledge and meaning are historically and culturally constructed through social processes and actions,” (p. 98) the perceived challenges and successful strategies that the NSIC universities are handling surrounding Title IX compliance highlights the role of institutions in shaping and maintaining social norms and practices.

A finding amongst the senior women administrators that was a concerning challenge maintained the idea that there had been historical inadequate support when it came to Title compliance, leading to a practice of active ignorance when it came to fixing compliance issues. This challenge fits in with social constructionism because it is the process by which individuals and groups create and maintain their understanding of reality through shared meanings and

interpretations (Pfadenhauer, et.al., 2019). In the context of this research on Title IX compliance, the historic inadequate support leading to ignorant practices reflects the social construction of gender norms and expectations within athletic administrations. It had been the expectation that women's Title IX issue were possibly not that important because nobody saw the gender roles that women student-athletes had at universities as meaningful or powerful as men's roles.

According to Berger and Luckmann (2011), institutions are social structures that shape and maintain social order. In the context of Title IX compliance, the institutional attention and administration reflect the social construction of institutional policies and practices, in this case Title IX compliance. For instance, various participants interviewed saw success in compliance through prioritized communication and survey audits throughout the athletic department and university. The interviewees emphasized the role of administration in addressing the inequalities identified in audits and making a conscious effort to find solutions and maintain compliance. Likewise, the hiring of personnel who advocate for Title IX compliance efforts can also be understood in the same vein with social constructionism, as the universities are shaping the social construction of their athletic departments through the hiring of people who will help facilitate policies toward effective Title IX compliance. Although social constructionism asserts that there is no objective reality but only a culturally created one, through the process of hiring advocates of compliance it can feel like the university is doing a good job of complying. The institution's culturally and socially created reality creates that truth that they are doing an effective job.

Discussions

RQ1, Theme 1: Financial Constraints

RQ1 brought up an array of answers on the challenges to Title IX compliance. The U.S. Department of Education, as outlined by Walker (2020), maintains that accountability for compliance with Title IX encompasses all programs or activities of the federally funded college or program, with a noted area including but not limited to financial assistance. A majority of interviewees noted the biggest challenge in maintaining compliance was not having the finances necessary to be compliant in all areas of an athletics department, ranging from financial assistance via scholarships, athletic facility improvements, and athletic equipment. There felt a need to increase scholarship funding for women's sports and add new female sports to ensure equal opportunities. The interviewees discussed the challenges of comparing different sports financially and the difficulty of achieving true equality across all programs because of finances. They also highlighted the frustration of having to manipulate numbers and track detailed expenses to ensure compliance. Seventy percent of interviewees identified some form of financial constraint as a challenge to Title IX compliance.

Select discussions relevant to this theme include:

AD 2: So I think the first thing that I would say in regard to compliance is it's kind of a moving target. As an athletic director trying to navigate that target, I have to be aware of the finances and budget. And then just balancing the finances of the financial aid piece, which are hard and fast. Your participation numbers are unique every year, and your finances have to reflect that, which can be challenging. I think balancing all of the moving parts related to participation, financial aid, and then just funding in know we know there's some things that we should be doing better or different.

RQ1, Theme 2: Historical Inadequate Support Creating Ignorance Practices

Research indicates that individuals and institutions help to create a reality based on shared meanings and interpretations throughout time and space (Pfadenhauer, et.al., 2019). The historic practice, or lack of practice, of Title IX compliance can be understood by Curtis' (2017) argument of active ignorance, referring to a conscious and intentional disregard or refusal to acknowledge information, facts, or knowledge. It involves a deliberate choice to ignore or reject information, often to maintain existing beliefs, biases, or perspectives. Unlike simple lack of knowledge, active ignorance implies an active effort to remain uninformed or dismissive of certain information, despite its availability. This can hinder intellectual growth, hinder informed decision-making, and contribute to the perpetuation of misconceptions or misinformation, in this case creating a misconception of Title IX compliance at NSIC institutions based on those historic inadequate supportive practices. If the active ignorance has been maintained throughout history, it can be argued that the institutional attention and administration reflect the social construction of an institutional policy and practice of ignoring Title IX compliance issues.

Select discussions relevant to this theme include:

SWA 1: It's so unique, just the ignorance and just the misunderstanding about what it really means to be compliant with Title IX. I think the other thing is sometimes women just say, that's good enough now, we got a little bit more, which doesn't fit the meaning of compliance. And I think (my mentor) taught me that a little bit more isn't good enough. No, we're not a secondhand sport. We're not second hand.

RQ 2, Theme 3: Prioritized Communication of Title IX Compliance

Communication is a process of mutual influence and reciprocity that leads to interdependent exchanges and contributes to feelings of satisfaction (Mehra & Nickerson,

2019). The prioritized communication on behalf of athletic administrations was highlighted by the interviewees as a successful strategy of Title IX compliance. This emergent theme was found by one hundred percent of the participants in the semi-structured interviews.

Select discussions relevant to this theme include:

HC 4: Communication creates a culture of inclusivity and respect, which is where we need to go if we are going to be about equity. And I think we are definitely there at our school when it comes to that communication piece.

AD 1: We added the Title IX piece to our survey six or seven years ago. Every year we ask them, you either strongly agree, neutral, disagree or strongly disagree on Title IX issues within the student-athlete landscape. And so when you look at where student athletes disagree or agree, that to me is a good balance.

RQ2, Theme 4: Hiring Personnel who Advocate for Title IX Equity and Compliance

In a recent study by Paul (2016, p. 33), Title IX coordinators reported that their “jobs were a challenging ‘beast’ when describing the amount of work and responsibility of their Title IX position.” Most wore ‘multiple hats’ in that they had dual roles/jobs on their campuses. For illumination, the job title of Title IX coordinator is synonymous with the title of Senior woman administrator used in this study. Regardless of the title, there is proven research of the challenge to the work of Title IX compliance. In this study, however, one hundred percent of senior women administrators interviewed praised the administration at their universities hiring current personnel and advocates who understand equity for the purposes of Title IX compliance. Once again, this proactive approach to hiring Title IX focused personnel connects to social constructionism as it highlights the role of institutions in shaping and maintaining social norms and practices (Berger & Luckmann, 2011).

Select discussions relevant to this theme include:

SWA 2: Our administration has been proactive in addressing the inequalities identified in our Title IX audits. They have made it a priority to provide equal opportunities and resources for both men's and women's sports. They make sure our entire department is up to date with Title IX protocol, and Title IX compliance is a part of our hiring process when it comes to interviewing people for the athletic department.

Conclusions and Leadership Implications

The results of this qualitative study prove that Title IX compliance is a healthy, necessary procedure that athletic departments around the country need to be proactive about. The results of this study are important because it suggests challenges and success strategies from a Midwest NCAA Division II conference (NSIC) that can provide other athletic administrations a recipe for greater attention and better decision making when it comes to complying with Title IX legislation in their own departments and conferences. Participants identified challenges of the three-pronged test of Title IX. Participants also highlighted successful strategies within their university athletic departments that brought about streamlined and proactive compliance efforts. After conducting semi-structured interviews triangulating three athletic directors, three senior woman administrators, and four head coaches of women's sports, reviewing of literature, and analyzing the findings from chapter four, the researcher generated several leadership implications for practice.

Conclusion 1

Title IX compliance is a fluid, moving target that must be continually addressed as things arise through the academic and athletic year. Challenges, if left unattended to, will have the potential to blister into a larger problem that may require difficult institutional decisions. Successful strategies are only as successful as the proactivity an athletic department displays. Proactive communication on compliance needs to have dedicated time throughout the year.

Implication for Leadership: Athletic department leaders have a responsibility to each other, as well as to the university culture to create an equitable experience for their student-athletes on campus. With the knowledge that Title IX compliance can change year by year from a variety of circumstance such as enrollment, facility improvements, roster sizes, etc., athletic administrations would be wise to have Title IX meetings throughout the year with necessary personnel for the purposes of informing and giving everyone in those meeting a sense that the institution is committed to the norm of being Title IX compliant 100%. Head coaches, assistants, and the student-athletes themselves will all benefit from having an athletic administration that is informing them and holding the department accountable to the highest standard of compliance. Holding routine staff compliance meetings, budgeting for personnel to attend compliance workshops, and handing out student-athlete surveys on perceived compliance are worthy ways to be proactive in communicating with stakeholders on the standard of maintaining Title IX compliance.

Conclusion 2

Financial constraints are a noteworthy challenge that prevents universities to be more compliant. Depending on a universities athletic budget that athletic administrations are given on a year-by-year basis, the finances could make a department more compliant are making them less compliant.

Implication for Leadership: A bigger budget would be the ideal situation for all these universities to ensure that everyone gets what they need and want, but the reality is that finances are simply not that ample, particularly for most schools in the NSIC as the research has found. Athletic administrators need to have fiscal responsibility when it comes to Title IX

compliance issues. If something is out of compliance that requires money to fix it, it would be against federal law to knowingly not do anything to correct it. A recommendation for leaders in athletic departments is to find unique ways to fundraise in their communities for their athletic department fund to bulk up any potential decrease in budget that has been mandated by the university, something that seems to continually happen to athletic departments. Another recommendation is to create a fund set aside solely for Title IX compliance issues that require financing to fix. The allocated dollars would only be tapped into when a compliance issue arises. For example, an issue may arise with uniform orders or a locker room amenity that does not satisfy both gender's teams. To fix that issue, money can be used to remedy that situation.

Conclusion 3

An ignorant history contributing to poor past practice is not an excuse to continue to just 'meet the bar' when it comes to Title IX compliance. Having advocates that are committed to the highest standards of compliance and not just being ok with 'just being ok' will move the needle when it comes to Title IX compliance around the country in collegiate athletic departments.

Implication for Leadership: Title IX legislation just celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2022. There is a lot to be proud of when it comes to gender equity in public education. For all the compliance successes within the last half century, there are just as many pitfalls, and there will continue to be pitfalls without a passionate group of advocates that exist in each educational institution in the country. Athletic directors, Title IX coordinators, senior woman administrations, head coaches, and whoever else that is involved in the compliance process- continue to hire and educate advocates who can become experts in Title IX legislation and what

it means for their institution. It would be considered educational malpractice to waste the last 50 years of success and equity to have a department that doesn't have advocates. Continue to survey student-athletes on their perceptions of Title IX compliance. Leaders should seek self-accountability from people in their departments, student-athletes included. Feedback from the stakeholders in the institution should be done on an annual basis. It would show athletic departments care, and it shows that Title IX compliance is the standard of excellence at the institution.

Recommendations for Future Research

More research is needed to identify challenges and successful strategies when it comes to Title IX compliance. Research could explore other intercollegiate athletic conferences around the country. Research could include other worthy stakeholders than just the ones the researcher identified and interviewed. A theme from the study was financial constraints. Future research is needed to understand best practices by universities when it comes to budgeting for athletic departments to ensure Title IX issues can be quickly resolved by finances if need be. Another theme from the study was the historically inadequate support creating ignorance. Future research is needed to understand which institutions around the country fit the definition of an ignorant university who is only doing the bare minimum when it comes to Title IX compliance. Lastly, future research is needed to understand what type of advocacy and strategies work best in historically highly compliant institutions. With that knowledge, institutions could have a winning formula when it comes to addressing challenges of Title IX compliance in their future.

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Appendix A

Challenges Regarding Title IX Compliance:

1. Can you describe the key challenges your athletic administration faces in ensuring Title IX compliance at your NSIC institution?
2. How do you perceive the influence of role models and leaders within your athletic administration on fostering a culture of gender equity in compliance with Title IX?
3. Are there specific areas within your athletic department where Title IX compliance is more challenging, and if so, how do you navigate those challenges?
4. Can you elaborate on any institutional or societal norms that may create challenges to achieving gender equity in athletics and complying with Title IX regulations?

Strategies for Maintaining Title IX Compliance:

1. What strategies or initiatives has your athletic administration implemented to proactively address Title IX compliance issues?
2. How do you leverage positive modeling and observational learning to promote behaviors and attitudes that align with Title IX compliance within your athletic department?
3. What specific policies or procedures your institution has put in place to foster a gender-equitable environment and uphold Title IX standards?
4. Can you discuss any initiatives or interventions that aim to reshape gender norms and foster an inclusive environment supportive of Title IX goals?

5. How do you assess the impact and effectiveness of the strategies implemented to ensure Title IX compliance, and what adjustments have been made based on these assessments?