



Advancing Women in Leadership

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Full Length Research Paper

Women in Sport Leadership, Fifty Years Since Title IX

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Women in athletic administration in secondary public schools in Texas remain a significant minority to their male counterparts despite nearly fifty years since the passage of Title IX. This qualitative research study used narrative inquiry with eight research participants to investigate the factors leading to success among female athletic administrators in secondary education according to Creswell's (2013) method for coding information and identifying themes. The study results are organized by the four research questions. The findings include the importance and value of professional organizations for the personal development and networking opportunities for women. Work-life balance was noted among all the participants and the executive directors of the professional organizations as the largest factor for women leaving the industry as extreme hours are a constant expectation in sports administration. Desirable feminine traits, experience and connections, and influential male mentors and advocates were cited by the research participants as key factors to their personal advancement. Recommendations for practical application include partnerships between professional organizations and school districts to review key concerns as they relate to the recruitment and advancement of women in athletic administration. This study provides suggestions for advancing women in athletic administration in Texas school districts including: removal of barriers, opportunity for training, district environment of readiness, professional organization support, and prioritization of work-life balance and family needs.

Keywords: Gender, leadership, leadership development, institutional change

Males continue to greatly outnumber females in athletic administration as well as coaching positions throughout the state of Texas, which has perpetuated a cycle of recruitment, hiring, and burnout among women in the industry who have failed to gain the appropriate support in their position (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). Furthermore, limited opportunities for advancement in athletic administration are available to women (Bradford & Keshock, 2009). Although there has been a pronounced increase in girls' participation in high school and collegiate athletics, the substantial disparity between the number of male and female coaches as well as the even greater gender difference in the positions of athletic administration remains (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Staurowsky, 2009; Whisenant, 2008; Whisenant, Vincent, et al., 2005).

Since 1972 and the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments, girls and their coaches have, quite literally, made huge strides on high school campuses across the United States in regard to gender equity and fairness (Acosta & Carpenter, 2002). According to the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFSHSA) report, girls made up less than 300,000 of the participants in high school athletics in 1971, the year prior to Title IX, but there were over 3.4 million female athletics participants in the 2016-2017 school year. Girls throughout the country have changed stereotypes, created a landscape of physical activity, and fostered a new love of sport among

American youth; however, girls continue to battle for equality and basic rights to which boys have been privileged (Kennedy, 2010; Whisenant, 2006).

Even more staggering is the significant gender discrepancy among high school coaches and athletic directors (Whisenant, 2006). Despite nearly 50 years since the Education Amendments of 1972 including Title IX, female coaches and athletic administrators remain widely undervalued and underrepresented throughout every level of sports (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Cunningham, 2007; International Working Group on Women and Sport, 2012; Lapchick, 2012; Smith & Wrynn, 2013) as the field remains dominated by male coaches and administrators.

Although female athletes have enjoyed significant positive impact in the half century since the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the large discrepancy between the number of male and female coaches and athletic administrators has continued to increase (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Cunningham, 2007; Lapchick, 2012; Smith & Wrynn, 2013; Taylor et al., 2018) as the coaching of female athletes has become more prestigious (Bradford & Keshock, 2009). As the fiftieth year since the passage of Title IX approaches, it is an important time in women's sport to observe the impact of this legislation (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014).

Given the scope, scale, and longevity of gender inequities in higher education leadership, it is no surprise that scholars have

developed abundant literature on the topic over the past 20 years. Motivated by the need for new, creative solutions to a persistent problem and in light of our own subjectivity as emerging women leaders who seek guidance from such writing, we critically analyze three predominant themes in the literature: (a) professional development; (b) identity work; and (c) institutional change. Within the theme of identity work, we pay particular attention to WOC and marginalization. We assert that much literature reinforces the idea that women must take on additional labor in order to be successful (an idea that places responsibility for success on individual women), is targeted primarily at an insular, gender exclusive audience, and promotes working within existing structures even while acknowledging the need for structural change. Our goal, ultimately, is to develop new ideas and questions for future research and not to discount the rich body of existing research and advice. As such, we frame this review around the guiding question, "What are the available discourses surrounding women and higher education leadership in the U.S.?"

Review of Related Literature

History of Title IX

The passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 served as a significant step forward for female athletes (Overview of the Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, 2005); however, the amendment did not provide the same advancement for females in athletic administration (Bradford & Keshock, 2009; Whisenant, 2008). The early focus of the Title IX education amendments included equal pay and tenure track opportunities among women in higher education (Edwards, 2010). Echoing back to the original intention of Title IX, women in leadership and coaching positions in sports continue to be overwhelmingly outnumbered by males; in fact, today, there are proportionately fewer female coaches than there were in the years prior to the passage of Title IX (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). This lack of representation of women in athletic administration and in coaching positions limits female athletes' perception of the potential careers in sports which further perpetuates an already dire inequality (Bandura, 1997; Whisenant, 2008).

According to Edwards (2010), in Billie Jean King's testimony to the Senate Subcommittee on Education of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare in 1973, King addressed the need for change in school culture, athletic administration, and the media. Not only due to her incredible star quality and the recent defeat of Riggs but also her ability to garner top payment of \$100,000 for an athletic performance, King (1973) helped the American public and the Senate committee understand that money was a measuring stick for success (1973), and she struck at the heart of cultural change during her address:

So many women [have] the potential to be athletically inclined, and they are just afraid, but if through these educational programs, if you do fund athletic programs and girls find out it is

fun, they find out that they are accepted in fact they are looked up to, this will change everything. (King, 1973, p. 7)

King (1973) illuminated a vital part of the struggle for equity – girls will love athletics as much as the boys. When King was able to create a conversation about kids, not marathoners, not elite athletes, but just kids needing equal accessibility, the hearts and minds of Americans began to change toward the issue. As society began to see the need for girls to participate on the same level as the boys, change began to occur (Edwards, 2010).

Edwards (2010) noted that in addition to the changing role of women as athletes in the public's perception, special interest groups also quickly arose in discussion around the passage of Title IX including restriction of athletics from the regulation. Thus, Edwards suggested groups such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and the American Football Coaches Association lobbied for the specific exclusion of athletics from Title IX.

Universities largely feared the impact Title IX may have on their athletics budgets (Michener, 1976; see also Simon, 1993). In Michener's 1976 book *Sports in America*, Michener described the status of athletics budgets in the early years after the passage of the legislation:

One day, I saw the budget of a state institution supported by tax funds, with a student body divided fifty-fifty between men and women. The athletic department had \$3,900,000 to spend, and of this, women received exactly \$31,000, a little less than eight-tenths of one percent. On the face of it, this was outrageous. (p. 120)

Unfortunately, Title IX and the amendments that followed have never been adequately enforced (Nader, 2003; Pastore & Meacci, 1992). "The Office of Civil Rights has never initiated a single proceeding to remove federal funds from... any college that fails to comply" according to Nader (2003, p.1). Instead, Kennedy (2010) noted gender discrimination in both high school and college sports has largely been contested in litigation. Kennedy also found that while the court frequently sides with the plaintiff in Title IX cases, the financial punishments to the universities are not significant enough or widespread enough to demand major change.

Current Status of Women in Sports Leadership

While the significant increase in girls' participation in high school athletics continues, the large gap between the number of male and female coaches and the even greater gender difference in the positions of athletic administration remain (Staurowsky, 2009; Whisenant, 2003; Whisenant et al., 2005). In fact, as suggested by Bradford and Keshock (2009), the gap is actually rising.

While there are perhaps numerous reasons for this significant disparity in coaches and athletic administrators, Whisenant (2008) suggested that "the three structural barriers that have limited access for women in sport were opportunity, power, and

proportion” (p. 770). Whisenant also suggested the difficulty for women to gain head coaching appointments is one way in which opportunity is a factor. Whisenant found that when women are in the role of leadership at a particular institution, other women are much more likely to become head coaches as opposed to when the athletic director is male. Power is an essential factor in the continued disparity.

In their 2005 research, Whisenant et al., also pointed out that the dominant male leadership will be challenging to overcome due to homologous reproduction ubiquitous in the field of athletics. Whisenant et al. noted, “when the dominant group is men, the shared backgrounds and experiences often produce a network closed to women. This exclusion even from consideration is the result of social characteristics, not the lack of competencies for the position” (p. 912). For example, the Texas High School Coaches Association (THSCA, 2018) has never, in its history since 1930, had a female president of the organization. THSCA has over 21,500 members representing 1,100 school districts and is the largest organization of its kind in the world; however, in 2018, the organizations had thirty board members, none of which were women, nor has the organization ever had a female member of the board.

Additionally, according to the Texas High School Athletic Directors Association (THSADA, 2018) has had only two female presidents out of 46 since 1972. However, in 2018, half of the board of directors was comprised of women. The Executive Director Rusty Dowling also stated that there is a concerted effort on the part of the organization to increase leadership and participation of women in their organization. Unfortunately, University Interscholastic League (UIL), the governing body for public school sports in Texas (2018), THSCA (2018), and THSADA (2018), all do not keep records of their members, whether coaches or athletic directors, by gender.

According to Bradford and Keshock in 2009, since the passage of Title IX, the incredible gains by girls in sports participation has simply not been replicated for their coaches. They argued, “common sense would indicate that this increase in female athletic participation would also have shown a concomitant increase in the number of female coaches. However, the research reveals that this is not the case” (p. 196). For example, True (1986) reported that in Wisconsin, the number of female coaches decreased by 59% in the first ten years after the passage of Title IX. Yet, from 1971-1972, women coached 85% of the girls’ teams in Washington, but over the next ten years it severely declined to 32%. This decrease is also seen at the university level with nine of 10 female sports coached by women in 1972, but in 2014, only four out of 10 female sports were coached by women (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014).

At the high school level, Smucker and Whisenant (2005) found men held a majority of the coaching positions over girls’ sports and virtually all positions over boys’ sports. In Texas in 2005, males even held the dominant number of coaching positions of female sports according to Smucker and Whisenant. According to Whisenant et al., (2005), the disparity in the representation of

female athletic directors grows at both the high school and college levels in comparison to female coaches. They found “the lack of representation of women in the first level of sports leadership in interscholastic athletics is magnified at the athletic director level” (p. 911). Men control athletic administrative positions of importance with a sweeping majority of the roles in high schools according to Whisenant et al., (2005). In fact, Whisenant et al. found in Texas public schools, men hold 98% of the athletic director positions. Throughout the country, the odds are slightly better as males hold approximately 87% of the athletic director positions (Whisenant, 2008).

According to Whisenant (2008), it is a common practice for job listings for athletic director positions to require that the position double as the head football coach. Whisenant found that 77% of job announcements had this link in the job description. In 2008, Whisenant also found “by coupling the athletic director position with the head football coach position, schools appeared to be engaging in both disparate impact and disparate treatment discrimination, since few if any women are head football coaches” (p. 769). Hancock and Hum (2016) also pointed to a leaky pipeline when it comes to the career development of women in sport management.

Impact on Recruitment

Succinctly summarized, Whisenant et al. (2005) suggested “the jobs in coaching and athletic administration in interscholastic athletics that have been created by the growth of girls’ sports have typically gone to men” (p. 911). This lack of proportionality likely negatively impacts the perceptions of female athletes and their career options as a coach (Whisenant, 2008, p. 769; see also True, 1986) leading to a continued disparity. If young female athletes do not have female role models in leadership at their respective educational institutions, then they are unlikely to seek careers in the field which only continues to perpetuate the disproportion (Suggs, 2000).

Suggs’ (2000) quoted Shillingford who pointed out that “the lack of women perpetuates itself through a vicious cycle: Because women are so rarely able to crack the ‘old-boys network’ to land top coaching and administrative jobs few female athletes aspire to careers in athletics” (p. 54). In a national, longitudinal study, Acosta and Carpenter (2014) found the availability of better alternative career choices also reiterates the lack of female athletes considering positions in coaching or athletic administration. Beers (1997) noted “although athletic directors believed that female athletes were being given opportunities commensurate with their interests and abilities, the majority expressed a belief that there were ‘serious problems’ with gender equity” (p. 44). Beers argued this incongruence only further reiterates the intense separation between athletic directors’ understanding of the needs of female athletes and the actual application of Title IX policies.

Sports, both participation in and leadership of, remains a gendered space (Burton, 2014). According to Cunningham (2007), when a woman is hired in a position of influence, she

will “oftentimes face difficult and antagonistic workplaces” (p.136) in addition to the significant under-representation. Women are also significantly more likely to be placed in marginalized positions (Whisenant et al., 2002). The social institution of sport positions women as “other” in the hierarchical structure throughout participation, support roles, management, and leadership which leaves women under constant scrutiny (Kane, 1995). Behaviors of men are seen as superior to stereotypical behaviors of women (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Shaw (2006) found that sport organizations are inundated with the notion that men and their participation and leadership are privileged. Thus, Sartore and Cunningham (2007) suggested that jobs are linked with traditional gender and sex-role stereotypes in organizational settings where male privilege dominates the landscape.

Burton (2014) suggested, “any discussion of women’s leadership experiences in sport must include positioning gender as a fundamental aspect of organizational and social processes” (p. 156). Shaw and Frisby (2006) found that gender not only shaped identity but also serves as a power center influencing numerous aspects of an institution including but not limited to networking, structures, and policy and procedure. Young women need to see more women in decision making roles and positions of power within sports organizations in order to redefine the male dominance barrier as a strong perception among potential applicants in the workforce (Coakley, 2001). Hancock and Hums (2016) found that a leaky pipeline of women in sports leadership exists from limitations such as a lack of mentorship and access to personal development.

Furthermore, Krane et al. (2004) posited female athletes are likely to exhibit more feminine gender stereotypes when they are outside their respective sports arena. While gender and sexuality, particularly in the arena of sports, may be fluid, assumptions and normalization of gender remain stable in society (Butler, 2006). Once women do reach those positions in sports, whether as coaches or administrators, they often face difficult workplace environments, enjoy fewer opportunities to improve their options, which leads to burnout (Felder & Wishnietsky, 1990). This pattern is a problematic cycle especially considering the decrease in the number of women in sports organizations (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014).

The informal networks, often called “good ole boys,” can hold significant power within an organization or even an entire industry (Davidson & Cooper, 1992; Liff & Cameron, 1997). According to Davidson and Cooper (1992), for women to truly achieve success in the workplace, they may have to lean in to these networks to gain access to information and power at the right level. There are many limitations to such a prospect. Some women may perceive these networks to be impenetrable (Liff & Cameron, 1997), or they may be directly discouraged from participation in these informal networks or social activities (Knights & Richards, 2003). Additionally, it may simply not be in the nature or personality of an individual to insert themselves

into a male dominated informal network (Knights & Richards, 2003; Liff & Cameron, 1997).

While more and more organizations value diversity in the workplace especially among management, this is not commonly the case in sports organizations (Cunningham & Fink, 2006). Cunningham (2007) argued, “cultures of similarity that marginalize women are institutionalized within sport organizations – that is, there are informal processes and taken-for-granted norms, values, and assumptions that are perpetuated over time” (p. 157). This state of sidelining women’s advancement and participation in addition to the gendered nature of sport organizations becomes perpetual, cyclical, and continually reinforced (Ely & Meyerson 2000; Shaw & Frisby, 2006) which only further devalues the position of women in the field and weakens the industry as a whole. Cunningham and Sagas (2008) argued many traditionally feminine characteristics, such as listening, collaborating, and peacemaking, inherently add value to the workplace. Instead of valuing these qualities, women are expected to conform to the standard operating practices of the milieu and take on traits prized in traditional male leaders (Cunningham & Sagas, 2008; Shaw & Frisby, 2006).

Dual income households and single-parent households have continued to increase over the last several decades. As a result, organizations have begun to utilize more flexible practices that address the needs of these types of households (Greenhaus & Powell, 2003). Ely and Meyerson (2000) examined the often inherent tendency in the world of sports administration to accept the extreme expectations of work hours beginning early in the morning and continuing into the late hours of the evening, and its impact on gender equity. Darwin (2020) further examined the role that these expectations have on the retention inequity among coaches and sport leaders. Each of the three largest professional organizations for coaching and athletic administration in Texas, TGCA (2018), THSADA (2018), and THSCA (2018), shared deep concerns over the loss of women in the industry due to long work hours and work-family balance. Executive Director of TGCA, Tipton (2018) stated “work-life balance is the number one reason women don’t become head coaches and then athletic directors.”

In 1972, shortly after the passage of Title IX, women actually administered over 90% of women’s athletic programs (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). While Title IX was instrumental in the accessibility and promotion of female participants in organized sport, the unintended consequence of legitimize female athletes became the increased desirability of coaching girls’ sports; therefore, more men began coaching girls (Zimbalist, 1999). Within 30 years of the passage of Title IX, only 18% of women administered female sports programs and held only 17% of athletic director positions (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014).

Methods

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of female athletic directors regarding the recruitment and advancement of females in secondary school sports administration in public school districts across Texas. This research sought to address the central question of how female athletic directors, in the public school setting, perceive recruitment efforts to staff athletic administration opportunities within the school district. A qualitative approach allowed the researcher to seek out those few women who are in leadership positions in athletic administration and accumulate data to create meaning regarding their shared experiences. The complexity of the topic of women in athletic administration (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007) also suggested a qualitative methodological approach would be useful for analysis allowing the various shared perspectives. Common meaning was created by identifying the phenomenon of women in athletic administration, collecting data from females in these leadership roles, and conducting a horizontalization of the data to construct themes. The women's varied and diverse experiences are also shared by each other experiencing the phenomenon as a group of individuals, making their experiences both subjective and objective (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Setting and Participants

The setting was public school districts in Texas. Participant selection required identifying and contacting individuals who represent the focus of this research: current, female athletic administrators. Due to the small number of women in athletic administration in Texas, approximately 25, two types of sampling were used, criterion and snowball sampling, which resulted in eight study participants. Participants were all employed in large school districts between 5A-6A. Five of the eight were the first to hold the position of district Athletic Director for their respective districts. All participants played collegiate level sports. Five of the eight were married. Five identified as White, one as Black, one as Latino, and one as Black and White.

Data collection took place via face-to-face and virtual interviews. Furthermore, interviews were conducted using open-ended questions in order to gain the deepest understanding of the experiences of the participants. Upon completion of the study, the results of the study were emailed to all participants in order to ensure accuracy of the process, findings, and reporting. According to Patton's (2015) descriptions of ethics in confidentiality, the confidentiality of participants was protected through the use of pseudonyms, and the confidentiality of districts was protected through the use of pseudonyms for the locations.

Research Questions

After conducting a pilot test with an initial interview protocol, the final guided protocol was agreed upon by a panel of experts. Eight participants were interviewed using face-to-face questions in their natural setting. Open-ended questions were used to interact with participants through an inductive process to construct meaning. What are the female coaches' perceptions regarding the recruitment efforts of the school district related to staffing athletic programs? What are the female coaches' perceptions regarding the advancement efforts of the school districts related to staffing athletic programs? What are the challenges regarding the advancement opportunities to administrate athletic programs available within the school district? What are suggestions practicing female athletic directors offer to increase the opportunity for other female coaches regarding athletic administration?

Triangulation of the Data

Involving the use of more than one data source, the researcher used data triangulation for the study. The unique experiences of each study participant were recorded and transcribed verbatim, adding to the consideration of data through their diverse thoughts and experiences regarding the same phenomenon (Patton, 2015). This data triangulation added a provision of trustworthiness to the findings. Furthermore, participants had the opportunity to review their transcription and the study results in order to supply corrections, understandings, or information regarding the accuracy of the information and data analysis, which provided increased validity (Patton, 2015). A panel of experts was used to review the interview questions. Although the researcher included an epoche in which the personal experiences related to the phenomenon are bracketed, the researcher remained a key instrument in the process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Analysis

In order to analyze the phenomenological data, the following procedures, in accordance with Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2013), were used. From each interview, field notes and recordings were transcribed exactly (Patton, 2015). The researcher identified statements from participants of particular significance and their experience of the topic which were relevant to the purpose of the study and research questions. Independent, non-repetitive statements were also listed, clustered, and coded into patterns and response, which, according to Creswell (2013) provided horizontalization of the data, treating each statement with equal worth.

According to Creswell (2013), the raw, horizontalized data were grouped into larger units of themed information. Verbatim examples from the themes accompanied a textural description of the experiences of the participants in the study. The researcher created a structural description focusing on the setting and context in which the phenomenon is experienced. Including both

the textural and structural descriptions, a composite description of the phenomenon was developed.

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Results

Perceptions Regarding Recruitment

All of the research participants stated that their leadership experience was a necessary and foundational aspect of their success in coaching and then in athletic administration. Kimberly and Denise cited specifically that their colleagues would let them know of job openings for which they were qualified. All relied on a network of professional connections to promote their personal development and career progression. All women also stated that personal connections they developed through their professional organizations to be a key factor in their leadership development and job placement. This was often stated as both a way to develop skills and knowledge of sports administration, but it is also a way to connect to other industry experts. Every participant was a member of the Texas High School Athletic Directors Association (THSADA) and discussed the value of this organization. Daniela, Selena, and Heather also stressed the importance of the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NIAAA).

When asked about common factors in their districts regarding the advancement of athletic administrators, the participants all included either personal connections or experience or both in their answers. For example, Kimberly, Denise, and Heather specifically noted the connection to football as an important and valuable piece of experience, whether it was through supporting football in an administrative role or learning the game in order to support coaches' development. This was noted as a particular area of importance in Texas because it is the largest sport and consumes significant budgeting. Denise was a football operations coordinator for a previous school district, which she felt gave her a distinct advantage over other applicants. Kimberly planned to "intern" with her district in a football support capacity as she feels that this is a particular need for athletic director positions in Texas. Heather worked closely with the athletic director on football related support in her district when she was the assistant in order to prepare for a future role at the district level.

Conversely, Kendra noted that her lack of football experience was a point of concern before she was hired as the athletic director despite being in the assistant position for 11 years. She stated:

"I was very concerned about how the football coaches would perceive me. Which is respect, it's football and you better have a clue about football. You won't garner any respect if you don't know football. I was very apprehensive about how-- I mean I knew most of the football coaches, mind you. We've been in the district for so long, I knew who they were and I've been the assistant for 11 years. I just wasn't sure how they would perceive me, if they would accept me. I think one of the things that someone criticized me about before I was hired is that they didn't want to hire me because they were afraid that I wouldn't be able to make the hard decisions."

While there is no precedence for female football coaches in Texas, these women knew that the expectation for rising in their careers was direct football experience not only to understand the inner workings of football operations but also to gain the respect of male colleagues and subordinates.

Need for Desirable Feminine Traits

The overall tone of every interview was very positive, and the women all focused on their positive leadership experience. Although the participants did not immediately note the discrimination inherent in their application process, one particular question sparked emotive language and deep personal reflection and even frustration. When asked, "In what ways did you observe that male colleagues experienced their path to leadership roles differently than you?" each participant gave specific feedback about the differences in the career path that were common in their advancement.

Lilian first described the vast number of men in roles that "do not deserve to be in those positions" and the unprofessional behaviors that were evident among some other male athletic directors including but not limited to playing online during important conferences, making inappropriate jokes during job interviews, and being threatened easily by the presence of a strong woman. She stated, "If people expect me to be emotional and to flip out over stuff, then I try to just stay real, real calm about it. Just break their stereotype of what they think." Lilian described the necessity of calm but strong feminine qualities in her role as an athletic director for a large school district especially when dealing with men who might be sexist or who received their roles without merit. Lilian further commented:

"It is difficult. Now, it's part of life, and it's something we have to deal with. I don't think we can be angry about it. We can't be bra burners. We can't be everything that men expect us to be. They expect us to get pissed about it and throw a fit. I don't think we can do that... Look, I don't need you to be threatened by me. I just want to be here and do a good job."

Heather also noted that there were many males in athletic director roles simply because they were "old guard football." However, she felt that this created an environment where

younger, sharper women were a desirable, value-added for organizations.

Selena also noted that she gained favor among the male coaches because they felt that her attributes as a woman may have actually helped her to develop good relationships, and she noted that she is able to have strong, positive communication with other women in leadership in academic roles in the district. She commented that male colleagues have stated that her feminine qualities are a bonus in her role.

All interviewees noted personality traits like abrasiveness as a particularly damning quality among female leaders. All described traits using desirable feminine traits in their approach with coaches. Words, such as, caring, mother-figure, supportive, and listening were used consistently among every participant.

Lilian suggested that even when mentoring other district executive athletic directors, she was not able to take a firm or direct tone. She felt that using kindness and support was the only acceptable approach with her weaker male colleagues, but at the same time she felt that she must be confident and strong but not emotional. Lilian indicated that male colleagues would get emotive or enthusiastic about something, but it would be called passionate; however, women would be labeled as emotional for the same behavior. She said, "He is just passionate about it... They will say the exact same emotion and call it two completely different things." Similarly, Daniela noted that there were instances when a woman might say or do the exact same thing as a male, but she would be disliked for it and a man might even be celebrated for the same behavior.

Value of Support and Mentorship from Influential Male

Throughout the process, Heather, Denise, Lilian, Kendra, Gloria and Selena stated that it was important for their career to have a successful and respected male support their advancement. These six participants were directly recruited and supported by a male colleague to apply and to train for a leadership role early in their careers. Furthermore, four of the six of these influential males also mentored the women in the recruitment, negotiation, and advancement of their careers. All eight indicated mentorship in general as an important part of their career.

Denise also stated that it was a key influential male in the district who supported and promoted her value as part of the organization. He encouraged her to continue her education and get the appropriate certifications. Furthermore, he put her in a position as a football operations director to do logistics and planning during games. Denise felt that this experience has been key to gaining the respect of her male colleagues, especially other football coaches. She said:

"He had me in the football coaches' picture that was in the football program... It was great, great experience. I was able to sit in the chair. All the other football coaches would be around, and they'd go through the

script for the week and stuff and I knew every part of it. Yes, that was invaluable for sure."

When asked about her experience being recruited from coaching to athletic administration, Gloria stated that she was "100% recruited" by her athletic director and superintendent. After being a head volleyball coach for 26 years, she was approached to help address the needs of her growing district by these influential males in her system of schools. Similarly, Lilian felt that an influential male athletic administrator was actually the one to push her into the role of head coach and then into athletic leadership. He began mentoring her early in her career and then maintained strong communication and mentorship. Lilian believed strongly that it was his advocacy of her leadership that led to the position she holds currently. She commented:

"That is truly where that reputation starts. You have some man who believes in you, and convinces the other ones, "Look, she's not some crazy female. She's got it." Because, unfortunately, that's what they think about us. They think that when we handle any situation we're going to flip out, we're not going to be able to handle it, we're going to get too emotional. For him to be able to kind of – I can tell people that I'm not that way, but for it to come from a respected athletic director, those guys really bought into it. "

When Lilian was first offered a position of Athletic Director of a school district, it was also a male mentor who helped her navigate an appropriate pay. Her first offer was \$12,500 below her current salary which was a lower level administration position, but he was able to impart enough confidence for her to turn down the offer. Eventually, the district came back with a salary offer more appropriate to her years of experience and value. Lilian recounted her story of support:

"If it wasn't for him, pushing me through the whole thing, the interview process, my salary negotiation, everything. Because we, as women, we will just go, "Hey, okay, I accept that." He made me decide a number. What are you not going to accept less than? And even at one point, I was like, "No, I'll take this \$12,500 pay cut." He's like, "No, you won't.""

Additionally, Heather's mentor supported her in learning how to lead football at the district level. He saw this as vital to her growth in the lead district role. She stated:

"I was really fortunate that from the very beginning. When I got started, my boss said, "Look, the only way that you're going to become the Head AD here, if you ever even have a chance is that you've got to know football and be in charge of it." I was in charge of it and so I would be down on the sideline, and they would think that I was the athletic trainer. They didn't know

who I was. They were not accustomed to having a woman be in charge of the stadium.”

While these participants emphasizing mentorship all personally had a male mentor, it was noted that a male was not necessarily an important factor in their advocacy. Given that there are only 24 female athletic directors in the state of Texas, it is likely that many aspiring women will require male mentors in their career development.

Perceptions Regarding Advancement

The need for a culture of acceptance and the right timing to hire a female were inherent among the participants with seven of the eight participants specifically stating that timing was a factor in their hiring. The participants consistently stated that it was important for women to be represented because approximately half of their athlete demographic were women. Every participant also cited work-family balance as an important factor in the advancement of women in athletic administration.

Need for a Culture of Acceptance and Right Timing

Throughout the interviews, 75% of the athletic directors reiterated multiple times that their advancement came at a time when the school district was ready for a female athletic director. Denise, Selena, and Heather all described a domino or snowball effect that led to the hiring of women in athletic administration at its current rate.

Denise, a respected leader in sports administration throughout the state of Texas, gave detailed information on the culture and timing historically that has led to a new era of women in athletic administration. She pointed out that in the 90s, there were only two or three women in athletic administration in the entire state. However, this began to change in the last fifteen years. The trend became that male athletic directors hired female assistant athletic directors, and then many of those women eventually moved up. She stated:

“What was the trend was for the males that were these athletic directors to hire female assistant athletic director. There were one or two districts that did it before [names district] did it. When everything was going down the way it was and with the Title IX deal. All of a sudden, you saw [another district] do it, you saw [another district] do it, you saw [another district], you saw [another district]. And it took off like wildfire. It was like, "Hey, everybody, get a female assistant.”

Denise further stated that once these assistants obtained significant years of experience in the larger school districts, it created an environment where women were very qualified for the lead district athletic director role:

“The bigger school districts, or the more well-known ones, you had, finally, that glass ceiling is broken. You had those females in those assistant athletic director roles. So many school districts did that when the old

guys start retiring, I'd say within the last 10 years, as those guys start retiring like the LP Jones of Spring Branch, the Rusty Dowling of Katy, some of those things. Guess what? The females were the only qualified applicants besides somebody that basically just walked off the field.”

Similarly, Selena felt that women have a better chance at obtaining roles in district level athletic administration from the snowball effect. Once a few districts began hiring women, more followed suit. “That worked out well for [names district] or that worked out well for [names additional district]. Why wouldn't we look at a female?”

Work-family Balance

Every interviewee stated that the prolonged work hours are a significant factor limiting women from entering into sports administration in schools. However, it is noted that this is an issue facing males in coaching as well. The job requirements have increased significantly in the last ten years, and there are more jobs available than ever before; however, the hours and the expectations have also increased. Participants and the executive directors of THSADA, TGCA, and THSCA all noted a particular concern over this phenomenon as being a major point of discussion in the industry. It is a regular topic at professional organization board meetings and conferences where various strategies are being discussed as possible avenues for facing this growing concern.

Kendra almost left coaching early in her career when she became pregnant as her husband did not want her to work the long hours without someone else to support their growing family. She recalled:

“When I was just an assistant basketball coach, my husband mentioned we might want to see about getting a live-in person to help with the baby, and I said no. Because I grew up with my mother working all the time, we always had some cousin or aunt or somebody coming in living with us so that they could help take care of us. I didn't want another adult in my house. My husband says, "Well, if we don't do that then you probably can't coach." Well, I guess we'll find somebody- [laughter] - and we did.”

Daniela stated that the number one reason women leave the industry is the time commitment: “The amount of time involved. That would be number one. That would be it.” She stated that when women are “wanting to start families” they often leave coaching. In addition to wanting time off to spend with children, Daniela found that many of her female coaches were leaving the industry when they wanted to start a family as well. Daniela was adamant that the workload is exceptional, and her personal life has suffered dramatically.

Similarly, Heather reflected that it may be easier for males to rely on a spouse to support the family needs in general. She stated:

“If you have males that are ADs and if you listen, you go to coaching school and you go to the hall of honor, whether it's for coaches or for ADs, they constantly talk about how great their wives were and about how their wives raised the kids. They always, always talked about how, "I thank my wife because she was the one who was there. Meanwhile, I was out coaching and my wife was one who was there because I was coaching football and I was doing it seven days a week.”

Societal expectations and work family balance are a key issue in the retention of female coaches, which was ubiquitous among study participants

Challenges Regarding Advancement

Every participant cited work-life balance or the need for a family environment as a key challenge in the advancement of more women in the industry. Additionally, six of the eight participants specifically stated that their advancement was due in part to having the right timing in their school district and the district being ready and accepting of a female applicant. However, many districts do not have such a structure in place and do not consider female applicants, which is cited by the participants as a significant challenge for the advancement of women.

Need for Family Time or Environment

Throughout all the interviews, participants consistently stated that having a family environment is a key element of success for women in athletic administration. The very long working hours are an industry norm, so flexibility and family inclusion are a key facet of success. Daniela reflected that women are typically still very focused on raising their family, and there are still societal expectations that women make it home to cook, clean, and take care of the family. She stated that it is very hard to raise a family while being in a leadership role in athletic administration. Daniela noted that she has lost strong female coaches because they wanted more family time, and it was something they could not do and keep the long working hours.

District Trust

Throughout the interviews, participants noted the need for districts to trust that women can handle the role of district athletic director. District size was listed as a significant factor in the hiring of women for athletic administration. It was also noted that districts must follow the example of the pioneers of women in leadership and trust that women are able to do the job.

Denise felt it was specifically smaller school districts lacking in the numbers of women in athletic administration. Every participant was from large school districts with high schools in the 5A-6A range. Denise stated that in 1A-3A, and even possibly 4A, school districts it is highly likely that the position is going to be filled by the head football coach, even though requiring it is a violation of Title IX.

Selena also found that 4A and below rarely have women in athletic administration due to the financial implications of

football. She stated that to her knowledge, there are no women in athletic administration at school districts from 1A-4A in the state of Texas, which includes over one thousand school districts.

Heather stated that even after more than thirty years in her district and extensive experience as her district executive athletic director. Her ability to hire a head football coach was still questioned:

“Then they're always going to be situations where they see you, that they see you as a woman and that they're not sure how your over the—“You're at the school? You're over the school? You're what? -- You're over the school DISTRICT? [capitalized for verbal emphasis], "Say what? You're over what?" "Yes." "Football?" It's fine. It's something that comes with the territory just like they're probably people that-- recently when we hired a new football coach, and they were like, "Well, can you do that?" I was like, "Yes, I can do it." You just have to have a little bit of thick skin and just say," Well, I didn't play it, and I didn't coach it, but yes I can hire a head football coach." They just have to know that you can.”

The lack of exposure to football remains a constant barrier for women in sport leadership in Texas.

Suggestions to Increase Opportunities

Two questions were used in the protocol to elicit suggestions on increasing the opportunity for other females. Responses centered on accessibility for women including the creation of additional opportunities for women and removing barriers currently in place. It was consistently suggested that provisions be made for making work-life balance a priority for the future. Additionally, district readiness for the inclusion of women in athletic leadership was a key suggestion. All participants cited the importance of their professional organizations for training, support, exposure, and networking.

Accessibility: Creating Opportunity and Removing Barriers

Beginning very early in the athletic careers of both Daniela and Heather, they observed significant disproportionate gender representation. Both personally lead campaigns in their hometowns to add sports for girls when they were children. Although Title IX had been passed, both girls saw an opportunity for girls' sports in their cities. With strong mother figures, both began campaigns to add girls' sports whether in the city sport teams or in their school.

The biggest roadblock that is inherent in the structure of school districts is the connection of the title Head Football/Athletic Director for smaller districts and the connection of Head Football/Campus Athletic Coordinator in the larger districts. Every interviewee had the latter arrangement within the district, except Kendra's district which had three campuses with a female

athletic coordinator. The opportunity and accessibility of these roles are not available to women when the link for a majority of positions is tied to football.

Heather noted that women are less likely to have a voice in decision making due to this policy. When she needs to hear the voice from campuses, she is more likely to hear from the campus athletic coordinator, who is always the head football coach in her district. She can request to speak with the female coaches, but it is much more difficult because they are teaching classes. Denise stated that “there’s no doubt” in a 1A-4A school that the athletic director is going to be male. There is no accessibility for females in the vast majority of school districts in Texas. She stated:

“Because it’s probably going to be the head football coach at that particular school unless it’s a multiple high school district and then all of a sudden those opportunities come along easier.”

When nearly every district in Texas connects the role of head football and athletic leadership, it becomes very nearly impossible for women to advance.

Prioritizing Work-Life Balance and Family Environment

Because child care and family time were consistently among the participants with every participant listing it is a major reason more women are not advancing in athletic administration, some of these female athletic directors, specifically Kendra, Lilian, and Selena, stated that they have tried to emphasize some flexibility of work hours and family support to make the jobs more accessible for young families.

Lilian’s district has emphasized that children are welcome during the summer to meetings or strength and conditioning camps. Even as the district athletic director, she will watch a child if a coach needs more time. She stated, “I was actually watching his one year old because he needed 30 more minutes of practice. He was just hanging around in my office.”

District Environment of Readiness

Repeated numerous times throughout the interviews was the idea that a district must be ready to consider female applicants with seven of the eight participants specifically using the word “timing” to describe their appointments in athletic leadership. Districts must create an environment where women can thrive in athletic administration. This includes work-life balance and family environment, but it must start with a willingness to consider the strengths of a female leader in the athletic administration role according to the participants.

Kimberly, who was a campus assistant athletic director, stated that she found barriers to job interviews related to district readiness. Recently, a friend recommended her for a district level

athletic administration position. She felt immediately upon meeting the interviewer that she would not be considered for the position as his first question was, “Are you sure you want to get out of coaching?”

Kimberly also frequently stated that not being a football coach was a major barrier for women in pursuing athletic administration. In fact, Kimberly planned to assume significant football responsibilities “as an intern” even though it is well outside her job duties, and she has nearly 20 years of athletic coaching experience.

Professional Organization Support

Participants listed their professional organizations as a major factor in their success. Whether it was from general knowledge or networking to accepting leadership roles for the region or state, the professional organizations have been a significant factor among the participants. The Texas Girls Coaches Association (TGCA), the Texas High School Athletic Directors Association (THSADA), National Interscholastic Athletic Administration Association (NIAAA), and the Texas High School Coaches Association (THSCA) were consistently mentioned among the interviewees. Networking and personal connections were considered very important to the career advancement of the participants.

Selena was pleased to be nominated by her colleagues for a regional leadership role in THSADA and felt that it was a good indicator that women have gained significant ground in leadership roles in Texas. She also pointed out that the organization is currently chaired by a female president, only the second in the history of the organization. She stated that this opportunity and others like it have helped to ensure that women have a voice. Selena also stated that THSADA is actively investigating ways to promote the industry of coaching and athletic administration for women and in general because fewer people are entering the career field.

Implications for Practice

This study suggests several strategies for future practice which may be impactful for women including: be involved in professional organizations, organize and involve women in mentoring programs, provide opportunities for female coaches to work directly with student athletes aspiring to join the athletic administration industry, review hiring practices limiting the advancement of women, and provide training on work-life balance at the state, district, and campus level. Picariello et al. (2020) also emphasized the importance of mentoring as a key factor in the success of women in sport leadership and whose study “confirms that women perceive mentoring as a pivotal factor in their careers.”

Be Involved in Professional Organizations

All women interviewed were deeply involved in their professional organizations. All consistently referenced the

importance of these organizations in their personal development and their success in post. Prior studies also support the need for networking and social capital development (Clarke, 2011; Cunningham & Sagas, 2008).

As all participants heavily emphasized the importance of these organizations, there are many recommendations based on the research that will continue to support women interested in careers in athletic administration. While the THSADA has many women in leadership roles, the THSCA currently has no women in any leadership positions and has also never had any women in leadership in the past. Because THSCA is essentially feeding into THSADA, as athletic directors are all former coaches, it is very prohibitive that the organization has not promoted women in leadership. While these organizations work closely together on many issues, there has not been a partnership on women in leadership.

THSCA is the largest professional coaching association in the world. Its massive database of coaches from all sports backgrounds makes it a powerful organization in Texas sports. THSCA has never had a female board member in its history.

Organize and Involve Women in Mentoring Programs

Almost all the participants also emphasized the importance of an advocate and a mentor within their professional growth. The women felt fortunate to have experienced that level of support but also recognized that it is not necessarily available to everyone. They emphasized that they were in the right place and the right time. In order to ensure that all promising female athletic administrators have access to mentors, the professional organizations can provide a concrete structure to support this professional growth. Smucker and Whisenant (2005) found that without opportunities to develop a mentorship, women reduced their opportunities to lead. In fact, six of the eight participants had a strong, influential male mentor early in their career. With only 24 female athletic administrators in the state of Texas, it would not be sustainable to have only female-to-female support structures in place even though each participant cited deep willingness and commitment to the development of others. Bower's (2009) meta-ethnographic work comparing 15 qualitative studies found that having both male and female mentors are important to the growth of women.

Provide Opportunities for Female Coaches to Work Directly with Aspiring Student Athlete Leaders

Furthermore, working directly with student athletes on their career aspirations would eventually help to recruit more female and minorities into the career path. Nearly all the participants cited the importance of representing the student demographics among their coaching staff. According to Whisenant (2008) and Suggs (2000), having female role models in sports administration at a young age is a key factor to the perception of job opportunities in the future.

Review Hiring Practices Limiting the Advancement of Women

Participants also cited the difficulty for women to obtain leadership roles in athletic administration in smaller districts across Texas, which make up the vast majority of districts. Participants stated that this is due to the role being almost exclusively advertised as Head Football/Athletic Director. One participant, also an industry expert and highly knowledgeable on Title IX, agreed that this is likely a Title IX violation which eliminates the possibility of female candidates in the majority of districts in the state of Texas. Smaller districts may not be aware that this hiring practice is a Title IX violation. The University Interscholastic League (UIL), which oversees all athletics in the state of Texas, can educate districts on the legality of hiring practices.

Provide Training on Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance was very heavily emphasized among the participants as a key factor in their successful careers. All participants cited that a sense of work-life balance is essential for staff. Flex hours was recommended as an acceptable method of allowing more family time. Family environment was also listed through making sure children and spouses are always supported to attend games and participate in various summer activities. Three participants specifically mentioned that children are welcome to attend summer meetings or training. One interviewee stated that she had high school athletes use volunteer hours to watch the children of her coaching during off-season or summer training to alleviate the child care concerns and also create a family atmosphere. This was consistently cited as an issue that affects all athletic administrators and not only females, though the impact on women might be greater as few males are stay-at-home parents to support a coaching spouse. This is supported by research from Dixon and Bruenig (2005), Greenhaus and Powell (2003), and Ely and Meyerson (2000).

Concluding Remarks

Research indicated highly common experiences and concerns for the future among the participants. Several factors were repeated as salient experiences leading to their successful career advancement. Based on research findings, practical recommendations include a focus among professional organizations such as THADA, THSCA, and TGCA on improving opportunities for aspiring women in coaching who are interested in becoming athletic administrators. Mentorship programs, professional development, and the invitation to participate are all important components of the successful matriculations in advancing from coaching to athletic administration. Similarly, individual school districts can adopt these strategies.

The most common theme among the participants was the need for a stronger work-life balance in the industry with 100% of participants citing it as a concern. Several suggestions to improve this balance include flex hours, creating a family environment, and supporting coaching with child care concerns. These emphasis points are key for school districts to recruit and

advance all quality coaches and not only women and minorities, though these groups might be more highly impacted.

School districts throughout the state of Texas, particularly smaller districts which make up the majority, are continuing to engage in hiring practices that violate Title IX. School districts should discontinue offering and advertising the position in athletic administration as Head Football/Athletic Director which remains a common practice.

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