

At a Crossroads: The Senior Woman Administrator Designation

Allison Smith¹, Elizabeth Taylor², Jessica Siegele³,
and Robin Hardin⁴

¹University of New Mexico, ²Temple University,

³University of North Carolina at Pembroke, and ⁴University of Tennessee

The Senior Woman Administrator (SWA) designation was established by the NCAA to increase involvement of women in the management of collegiate athletics. However, research has found SWAs may not be afforded opportunities needed for further career advancement. This study explored the perceptions of NCAA Division I SWAs through role congruity theory. Interviews revealed two major themes: *Unintended Consequences* and *Future of the Designation*. Themes highlighted how the designation itself is problematic and accompanied with gender stereotypes. Furthermore, participants detailed the designation should be removed due to tokenism and marginalization. This call for removal of the designation demonstrates a new and unique finding to contribute to the literature as the participants found the designation and its practices archaic, outdated, and contrary to their overall career goals. The women in the study believed the designation of SWA limits ascension into leadership roles within collegiate athletics.

Keywords: collegiate athletics, senior woman administrator, role congruity theory

The position of Primary Woman Administrator (PWA) was created by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 1981 for the individual, man or woman, overseeing women's athletics (Hult, 1994). It was renamed to its current title, Senior Woman Administrator (SWA) with modified responsibilities in 1989, in order to create a means for women to be more involved in the overall management of collegiate athletics (Hoffman, 2010; Hult, 1994). This has, however, created a situation where there is often only one woman in a senior-level administration position at NCAA member institutions (Hoffman, 2010). The SWA designation does create a leadership position for a woman, but it is just that, a designation or role, not an actual position (Hoffman, 2010).

There has been inconsistency in the responsibilities and duties of SWAs throughout the NCAA despite the intent of the designation. The involvement of SWAs in the actual decision-making process in athletic departments varies across institutions (Grappendorf, Pent, Burton, & Henderson, 2008; Hoffman, 2010; Tiell & Dixon, 2008; Tiell, Dixon, & Lin, 2012). Women are often tasked with overseeing wom-



en's programs and funneled into the "soft" areas of athletic department management such as marketing, academics, and student-life (Grappendorf et al., 2008; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). SWAs are many times not part of the decision-making process or involved in the financial management of the athletic department (Pent, Grappendorf, & Henderson, 2007, Tiell et al., 2012). This has created a situation where the SWA designation may be perceived as the ceiling of career attainment for women in collegiate athletic administration. This is problematic as research has found female collegiate athletic administrators do have a desire to be a part of the decision-making process which would assist them in preparing for the role of athletic director (AD) or more senior-level positions (Lough & Grappendorf, 2007; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Tiell et al., 2012). Despite acknowledgement, resources and best practices provided by the NCAA (NCAA Inclusion, 2018a; 2018b), there is still confusion surrounding the designation and actual responsibilities of the SWA warranting a further investigation to better understand how this ambiguity affects women in this designation. Thus, the purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of the Senior Woman Administrator (SWA) designation by the women who hold this designation within NCAA Division I institutions.

Women in Collegiate Sport Administration

Women's collegiate athletics was first organized on a national level in 1941 with the establishment of the Division for Girl's and Women's in Sports (DGWS) within the organizational structure of the American Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance (AAHPERD). The governance structure of women's collegiate athletics fell under various governing bodies during the following three decades culminating with the establishment of the Association of Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW). The AIAW was established in late 1971 and began overseeing the governance of women's collegiate athletics in early 1972 with more than 280 member institutions (Crowley, 2006).

The AIAW continued to grow and develop and offered 41 championships in 19 sports by 1981 and had nearly 1,000 members in the late 1970s (Crowley, 2006). However, the passage of Title IX greatly changed the landscape of women's collegiate athletics and eventually lead to the downfall of the AIAW. The passage of Title IX in 1972 by Congress prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in any federally-funded program (Crowley, 2006; Staurowsky, Zonder, & Riemer, 2017). Although there was no mention of collegiate athletics in the language of Title IX, college athletics fell under the guidelines set forth by Title IX. NCAA members had little interest in women's sports with the initial passage of Title IX, but colleges and universities soon began funding women's sports. As a result, the NCAA began offering championships for women, and eventually the AIAW was absorbed by the NCAA and its member institutions. NCAA members could offer more financial resources for female collegiate athletes, so AIAW members chose to participate in NCAA championships. The impact of these events was the eventual demise and ceased existence of the AIAW in mid-1983 (Crowley, 2006; Hoffman, 2011).

Another impact of the NCAA members absorbing women's collegiate athletics was the elimination of many administrative positions. More than 90% of women's teams were coached by women and women athletic departments were led by women prior to women's athletics being governed by the NCAA (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). However, there was no need for many of the administrators who oversaw women's athletics, as administrators who were overseeing men's athletics assumed those duties when the NCAA began to govern women's collegiate athletics. Many career opportunities and leadership positions for women were no longer available since the administrators who oversaw men's athletics were primarily men (Hoffman, 2011).

The number of women competing at NCAA institutions has increased dramatically in the past 35 years. Women comprise 43.8% of collegiate athletes within the NCAA and compete for 73 national championships on more than 19,600 teams (Irick, 2017). The number of women competing within the NCAA in 1982 was approximately 74,000 and that number stood at more than 217,500 in 2017 (Irick, 2017). Despite this growth in the participation rates of female collegiate athletes, there has been a stagnation in the percentage of women coaching women's teams and in athletic administration positions during the past several years (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). Women held 39.8% of Division I head coaching positions and 11.2% of Division I athletic director positions in 2017 (Lapchick et al., 2018). There has been an increase in the actual number of women employed by collegiate athletic departments, but this employment is often seen at the assistant coach level or in entry-level positions (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). The concentration of women at these entry-level or "support" positions, may be due to gender biases that see women as inferior in leadership roles, homologous reproduction or the idea of hiring those who look similar to you, and lack of female mentors preventing them from ascending to leadership positions (Hoffman, 2011; Kamphoff, 2010; Stangl & Kane, 1991; Taylor & Hardin, 2016).

Senior Woman Administrator Designation

The SWA designation has created confusion since its inception as the description of the designation and duties involved are limited. The SWA is defined by the NCAA Division I Manual in Article 4.02.5.1 as "the highest-ranking female involved in the management of an institution's intercollegiate athletics program" (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2019, p. 18; NCAA Inclusion, 2018a), but exact responsibilities of the SWA are not specified by the NCAA and are left to the discretion of individual athletic departments. As such, although the purpose of this designation is to encourage meaningful involvement of women in the administrative structure of collegiate athletics, this meaningful involvement can differ greatly by institution and division. Stemming from the limited structure associated with the designation, common misconceptions surrounding the SWA designation include (1) confusing Senior Woman Administration with "Senior Women's Administrator," suggesting the purpose is to oversee women's sports, (2) confusing the SWA as the longest serving woman in the department instead of the most senior woman, and (3) believing the SWA designation is required by the NCAA (NCAA Inclusion, 2018a).

The NCAA reported only 59% of Division I SWAs and 50% of conference SWAs at the Division II and III level agreed with the statement, “SWAs are actively engaged in key decision-making at the institutional level” (NCAA Inclusion, 2018a) in comparison to 71% percent of ADs and 45% of conference commissioners, suggesting a perception gap among administrators. Although 75% of SWAs from all three divisions reported they were actively engaged in hiring decisions within their department, only 46% indicated they were involved in major financial decisions (NCAA Inclusion, 2018a). Grappendorf et al. (2008) also found SWAs lacked involvement in key financial decision-making and desired increased opportunity. Additionally, the NCAA reported minimal involvement for SWAs with regards to football or men’s basketball oversight. Sixty-six percent of SWAs reported having sport oversight responsibilities, but only 13% oversaw football and 9% oversaw men’s basketball at the Division I level (NCAA Inclusion, 2018a).

Limited involvement in financial decision-making as with football and men’s basketball may inhibit the upward mobility of women working in collegiate athletics (Grappendorf et al., 2008). A typical progression to the AD position prior to the 1990s was to transition from (football) coach into administration. However, recently those in charge of hiring ADs, namely university presidents and donors, are interested in candidate’s ability to make financial decisions and oversee successful football and men’s basketball programs (Hardin, Cooper, & Huffman, 2013; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). SWAs’ ability to ascend to the AD position may be limited if they are not involved in the financial decision-making process or able to oversee high-profile sports. Taylor and Hardin’s (2016) study of female ADs had this theme emerge in their interviews with 10 female ADs. The participants acknowledged their perceived lack of knowledge in managing a Division I football program was a hindrance in their career advancement opportunities (Taylor & Hardin, 2016). This limited career mobility is problematic as 65% of SWAs indicated they desired a more senior position (NCAA Inclusion, 2018a).

Research has consistently shown that financial decision-making and managing high-profile sports are instrumental in advancing to senior-level positions in collegiate athletics. Hancock and Hums (2016) found women in assistant and associate athletic director roles noted that “effective problem solving, budgeting and finance, compliance and eligibility, and facility operations as critical for professional success” (p. 202). A combination of all of these skills is necessary for women to advance to more senior-level positions including that of athletic director (Hardin et al., 2013; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Taylor, Siegele, Smith, & Hardin, 2018). Women in senior leadership positions encounter gender stereotypes and organizational barriers that limit their input and effectiveness on the senior management team which will hinder their professional development (Hancock & Hums, 2016). So regardless of the direct responsibilities (i.e., compliance, academics) of the SWA, they should be involved in other aspects of the overall management of the athletic department to enhance their professional development. Women have traditionally been limited in the amount of influence they have in an organization, and this seems to be the case in regards to SWAs as well (Kanter, 1977; Smith, Taylor, Siegele, & Hardin, 2019). The SWA should not have a

“silent” seat at the table, but be involved in major decisions and the overall direction of the athletic department. The SWA should be engaged in the financial decision-making, long-term strategic planning, and hiring decisions of other senior-staff members (Grappendorf et al., 2008; Tiell & Dixon, 2008; Tiell et al., 2012).

Tokenism and Marginalization

The SWA designation was created by the NCAA in an attempt to increase the presence of women within senior leadership in collegiate athletics. However, women in this designation may experience “tokenism” as many senior leadership teams within collegiate athletics are male-dominated (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Kanter, 1977). A token employee is defined as a member of a small minority (15% or less) in an environment with a dominant homogenous group (Kanter, 1977). By having only a small number of women in senior leadership positions (e.g., sometimes the SWA is the only female on this leadership team), athletic departments are allowing men to maintain their dominance while simultaneously demonstrating the athletic department, and more specifically senior leadership team, is open, nondiscriminatory, and democratic (Hardin, Whiteside, & Ash, 2014; Kane & Stangl, 1991; Siegele, Hardin, Smith, & Taylor, 2020; Whisenant & Mullane, 2007). Tokenism may serve to open doors for some women (i.e., provide them with opportunities they may not otherwise be afforded because of their minority status), however, women who experience tokenism have been found to struggle to behave naturally, fit in, and gain acceptance of their peers due to heightened performance pressure, social isolation, and gender stereotyping (Kanter, 1977; Siegele et al., 2020).

Marginalization has also been a significant barrier that has contributed to the lack of women in leadership roles in collegiate athletics. Marginalization occurs when women are segmented to less desirable positions within the same profession in comparison to their male peers (Hardin et al., 2014; Kane & Stangl, 1991; Kanter, 1977; Siegele et al., 2020; Whisenant & Mullane, 2007). Women may face horizontal segregation that forces them to enter certain fields which are marginalized or less powerful (Hultin, 2003). These career fields women are channeled into are typically positions of lesser authority therefore are considered gender-appropriate (Smith, 2002). This horizontal segregation is illustrated in collegiate athletic departments through the funneling of women into the “soft” areas of athletic administration (e.g., academics, life-skills, marketing; Grappendorf et al., 2008). Women’s career mobility may be limited by this marginalization into the “soft” areas of athletic administration as they then are not gaining experience in the financial aspects of collegiate sport or oversight of high-profile sports.

Theoretical Framework

Role congruity theory was used to understand the perceptions of the designation of Senior Woman Administrator (SWA) by the women who hold this designation within NCAA Division I institutions. Role congruity theory explains how the perception of individuals in social group membership does not align with the perceived need-

ed characteristics to obtain membership or status (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Reaching beyond social role theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000), which focuses on how gender norms shape understanding of societal expectations and roles, role congruity theory focuses on how gender and societal norms influence leadership status (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Due to the gender roles and expectations of what behaviors women should exhibit (e.g., being nurturers and caretakers, working in the home), when women obtain leadership roles they may be met with prejudice. The qualities associated with being a successful leader (e.g., dominant, aggressive, objective, self-confident) are attributed by societal and gender norms to be masculine traits. When female leaders display the aforementioned traits, it is viewed as incongruent or in violation with their communal and societal norms causing disapproval and even poor evaluations from their employees and superiors (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Furthermore, demonstrating societal expectations of gender, NCAA Division I athletic departments are male-dominated, especially within leadership positions. A potential cause of this skewed gendered make-up is society's views of masculinity and femininity, particularly in the context of sport. As masculine characteristics are often associated with superior leadership (Anderson, 2008), women may be perceived as lacking the skills necessary to assume leadership positions in sport (Burton, Barr, Fink, & Bruening, 2009). Additionally, Walker and Satore-Baldwin (2013) found masculinity to be deeply embedded within the culture of collegiate sport and found men saw women as intruders in these spaces.

Thus, it is challenging for women to secure and maintain leadership roles within collegiate athletics (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Burton et al., 2009; Hardin, Taylor, Smith, & Siegele, 2017; Lapchick et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2018; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Taylor, Smith, & Hardin, 2017). Sport research grounded in role congruity theory has been used to explain this phenomenon and explore the designation of SWAs. Tiell and Dixon (2008) and Tiell et al. (2012) found a discrepancy between ADs and SWAs regarding the decision-making responsibilities of the SWA. Athletic directors consistently rated SWAs higher in regards to their actual involvement in job performance of masculine tasks such as fundraising, budgeting, or being involved in senior-level decision making, in comparison to SWAs themselves, who rated themselves much lower, especially in the Division II and III levels. This suggests a disconnect between perceived job duties and actual job duties. SWAs were rated the highest by ADs in the tasks of advocacy for female sports, Title IX, being a role model, and working within the group. Tiell et al. (2012) found SWAs low task involvement in fundraising and budgeting was especially prevalent in men's programs and these women lacked the training and mentorship necessary to enhance and advance their careers. These results highlight SWAs aligning congruently with their gender and communal expectations, however this alignment limits them from developing the skills (i.e., budgeting and fundraising) deemed necessary to ascend to leadership positions in collegiate athletics (Grappendorf et al., 2008). Pent and Grappendorf (2007) also found SWAs reported less financial decision-making responsibilities than their male peers and attributed this to a lack of experience and

knowledge. These studies reinforce previous work in this area (see Clausen & Lehr, 2002; Inglis, Danylchuk, & Pastore 2000; Raphaely, 2003) that has examined how SWAs and other women in collegiate athletics are assigned tasks deemed nurturing or gender specific in nature, such as athlete welfare and overseeing women's sports.

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of the Senior Woman Administrator (SWA) designation by the women who hold this designation within NCAA Division I institutions. This research sought to understand how the participants constructed meaning and value around the SWA designation. Research has explored the designation of SWA, particularly in relation to whether the designation leads to leadership opportunities for women in collegiate athletics (Clausen & Lehr, 2002; Grappendorf et al., 2008; Inglis et al., 2000; Pent & Grappendorf, 2007; Raphaely, 2003; Tiell & Dixon, 2008; Tiell, et al., 2012). The designation was created as an avenue to empower and provide leadership opportunity for women, however, research has found women are still perceived to lack the skills and experience to move to more senior leadership roles (Burton, 2015; Burton et al., 2009; Burton, Grappendorf, & Henderson, 2011; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Taylor et al., 2018; Tiell & Dixon, 2008). Furthermore, the NCAA SWA report found confusion is present on the purpose and responsibilities of the SWA (NCAA Inclusion, 2018a).

Method

A qualitative, descriptive approach was implemented to best understand the experiences and perceptions of the NCAA Division I SWAs, as the researchers were "seeking to describe an experience" (Sandelowski, 2000, p.335). In a historically patriarchal industry such as sport, it is important to understand the perceptions and experiences of those within the minority, such as women in leadership positions, in order to grow, diversify, and change potentially discriminatory cultures (Cunningham, 2008; Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001).

Participants

Purposeful, criterion sampling was used to identify participants who fit the inclusion criteria of being a SWA in a NCAA Division I athletic department (Creswell, 2014). E-mails were sent to 121 NCAA Division I SWAs found through searching athletic directory websites inviting them to participate in interviews. Sixteen SWAs responded to the interview request. Interviews were conducted with 14 participants based on their availability to commit to an interview.

The participants for this study ranged in age from 32 to 66 with an average age of 51. The majority of participants were white ($n = 11$). This is representative of the overall SWA population within Division I as only 18% of SWAs are women of color (NCAA Inclusion, 2018a). There was a wide variation in the length of time the participants had been in their current roles; experience ranged from less than 1 year to 19 years with an average of 10 years. Their length in the field of collegiate athletics ranged from 10 years to 45 years with an average of 27 years. The participants had an array of previous experiences in collegiate athletics such as: coaching, athletic training, mar-

keting, development, compliance, life skills, conference office, and two participants had previously been ADs. This information is reflective of the broader population of women in collegiate athletic administration, as research has found women in senior level positions typically have a long history of experience and in a variety of areas (Taylor et al., 2018; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Tiell & Dixon, 2008; Tiell et al., 2012). All but one of the participants held at least a master's degree, while three participants held or were in the process of completing a doctorate degree. Ten of the participants were former collegiate athletes and six were former collegiate coaches (See table one).

Table 1

Participant	Age	Length of Time in Field	Length of Time in Position	Previous Area of Collegiate Athletics
Afton	49	27 years	5.5 years	Athletic Training
Beth	62	35 years	13 years	Coach; WBB
Cathy	62	40 years	17 years	Development
Donna	56	30 years	19 years	Coaching
Edith	51	30 years	19 years	Athletic Training
Faith	44	21 years	17 years	Compliance
Gretchen	53	20 years	2.5 years	Athletic Director
Hallie	55	29 years	12 years	Athletic Training
Irene	43	21.5 years	1.5 years	Coaching
Jacky	66	45 years	6 years	Athletic Director
Kim	53	30 years	10.5 years	Coaching; WVB
Lauren	47	19 years	10 years	Life Skills
Monica	44	20 years	2 years	Athletic Relations
Nora	32	10 years	One month	Internal Operations

Data Collection

An interview guide was developed based upon research conducted with female athletic administrators including SWAs, ADs, and conference commissioners (e.g., Clausen & Lehr, 2002; Grappendorf et al., 2008; Pent & Grappendorf, 2007; Inglis et al., 2000; Raphaely 2003; Taylor et al., 2018; Tiell & Dixon, 2008; Tiell et al., 2012). The interview protocol consisted of three parts: (a) history of the career experience, (b) understanding and perception of the designation of SWA, and (c) navigation of career path (See table two). All participants were asked similar questions, however there was some variation due to the use of probes and follow-ups by the interviewer (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

The participants consented verbally during the audio recording of the interview prior to the start of the interview. All of the interviews were completed via phone. Participants were reminded their participation was voluntary and of their ability to withdraw from the study at any time. Interviews were transcribed via a third party and compared to the audio file to confirm accuracy. Identifying information such as names, employers, conferences, or colleagues were omitted from the transcriptions to protect anonymity and pseudonyms were assigned. The interviews ranged in length from 26 to 58 minutes and averaged 42 minutes.

Table 2

Interview Guide Questions

1. Tell me how you got where you are? Was working in collegiate athletics administration always your aspirations?
 2. Did/Do you see the role of SWA as a stepping-stone to move up in collegiate athletics administration?
 3. Was mentorship influential in your progression? Why or why not? If so, can you describe those relationships?
 4. Describe the job/role of the SWA in your department.
 5. Describe a typical workday as SWA.
 6. What is the perception of the SWA position in your department? Conference? In athletics in general?
 7. Do you think women are more inclined to enter into the soft areas (academic advising, life skills, etc.) of sport? Why or why not?
 8. Describe the process or how you manage your personal, professional, and work life.
 9. How do you think we can attract and keep more women in collegiate athletics administration?
 10. What are the best parts of your job as SWA? What are the worst?
 11. What are your future career goals? Where do you see yourself in 5-10 years?
 12. Is there anything else you think I missed or want to tell me about being an SWA or woman in collegiate athletics administration?
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Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Three researchers read each transcript multiple times to become immersed in the words of the participants, as this allows them to embed the narratives of the participants in the final research outcome (Charmaz, 2006). The data were coded by each member of the research team first separately using the initial coding methods of in-vivo coding and descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2013). In-vivo coding creates codes from direct words, phrases or quotations by the participants in relation to the creation of meaning (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). In-vivo coding was used to keep the analysis in the participants' voices as much as possible (Saldaña, 2013). Descriptive coding was also used when in-vivo codes were not sufficient as descriptive coding summarizes a passage in a short word or phrase (Saldaña, 2013). This method was chosen to match the descriptive nature of the study (Wolcott, 1994). The second round of coding was done collaboratively as the researchers discussed initial codes and a master code sheet was created which aggregated all the codes from all the researchers. The researchers jointly grouped the codes into categories using a code sheet. This approach is widely seen as beneficial in qualitative research as "a research team builds codes and coding builds a team through the creation of shared interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon being studied" (Weston et al., 2001, p. 382). The researchers jointly agreed and identified categories that were most applicable to the research questions in order to generate themes (See table three). Quotes were identified that best characterized the participants' views consistent with the researchers' analyses.

Table 3
Example of the Coding Process

Theme	Major Categories	Codes
Unintended Consequences	Misrepresented and misunderstood, Marginalization, Tokenism	<i>Male dominated space, Negative perception of SWA, Combating gender norms, Misperception of SWA responsibilities, Personnel issues/concerns, Gender differences, Tokenism, Gender bullying and intimidation</i>
Future of the Designation	Lack of role and responsibility, Hindering career mobility, SWA Progression for athletes, not administration	<i>Title can limit women, Role of designation, Desire to be AD, Not a role or responsibility-simply a title, Lack of improvement or growth as SWA, Remove title, SWA is not a stepping stone</i>

Findings and Discussion

The SWA designation was created by the NCAA to increase the number of women seated at the senior-level administration table within collegiate athletics (Hoffman, 2010; Weight, 2015). However, the lack of guidance provided by the NCAA to athletic departments surrounding the designation creates a situation where athletic departments are able to provide as much, or as little, power to the SWA as they see fit. This then influences the experiences and career development of SWAs. Within the sample of Division I SWAs interviewed for the current study two primary themes emerged: (a) Unintended Consequences and (b) Future of the Designation. The difference in afforded power can help explain why the opinions of the participants in this study may be different from the participants of the NCAA Inclusion report (2018) where 62% of SWAs felt that the SWA designation made them more marketable for senior positions, and 69% felt the designation had positively impacted their career advancement. In this study, four of the participants saw benefit in the designation, while three participants expressed opinions of the designation being outdated, but also feared the repercussion of its removal, and seven participants felt the designation was holding women back.

Unintended Consequences

Misunderstanding. All 14 of the participants discussed how the designation itself was accompanied with negative perceptions from their peers, collegiate athletes, superiors, and the general public causing unforeseen consequences for the women in the designation. More specifically, the women discussed how many times the designation of SWA is confused with being the only administrator overseeing women's sports, when in actuality these women are awarded the designation of SWA due to their status as the most senior female member of the athletic department. Role congruity theory may explain the root of this misrepresentation and misunderstanding could be in the name itself: Senior Woman Administrator. The use of the word "woman" in the title leads to the misunderstanding and assumption that this person oversees women's sports or their tasks and responsibilities should align with stereotypical gender norms. Role congruity theory explains this occurs because women are perceived to lack the masculine characteristics associated with leadership roles or the "hard areas" of athletics such as fundraising, budgeting, and oversight of revenue generating sports, thus, they are given responsibilities in areas such as women's sports, life skills, and academic advising (Burton et al., 2009; Cunningham, 2008; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Grappendorf et al., 2008; Kanter, 1977).

Jacky explains these underlying gender norms associated with role congruity theory through her frustration with this misrepresentation of the SWA designation by saying, "People still don't understand it [the SWA title]. People still call it the women's AD or administrator and think that we're only over women's sports." Gretchen reiterated this frustration with the SWA designation saying, "I'm still disappointed that people still refer to it as senior women's administrator. I had somebody speak

to me today that used that title, and I always correct them.” Cathy also echoed the sentiments surrounding the misrepresentation of the SWA,

When people hear that (SWA title), they assume that you have a responsibility for the women’s programs, and that’s not what I do here. And so I don’t want to be locked into that stereotype, because I think it limits what people think of my sphere of influence or what I can do to help the entire athletics program.

Lauren explained the common misunderstanding and lack of education surrounding the designation and its existence is troubling especially when female collegiate athletes do not understand its history, purpose, and impact. She said,

I get introduced as the senior AD, associate, or the women’s AD. Nobody knows the title and can get it straight. Which is sad. What is even sadder, is our female student-athletes have no idea about Title IX. (They) have no idea about the designation or why I am in this role, why this role is a designation. And even when you try to educate, it doesn’t even register.

Research has found this misnomer is common and problematic for women in collegiate athletics. Claringbould and Knoppers (2012) detailed how gender normalcy or the acceptance of unequal presentation frequently occurs in sports organizations by both men and women. Furthermore, Ely and Padavic (2007) exemplified the underlying influences behind role congruity theory through power and gender social norms. Men are perceived as powerful and women as compliant, hence tasks and positions were constructed to favor men (Ely & Padavic, 2007). Research on role congruity theory has found a female administrator is less likely to be hired for an AD position in comparison to a male peer even though both deemed equal in regards to qualifications and possible success (Burton et al., 2011). This suggests the deeply embedded gender norms and perceptions of the roles of women are in conflict with positions of power (such as an AD) despite being qualified for the positions. Additionally, despite the creation of a designation that was intended to increase the voice of women within leadership circles, women are still perceived as less qualified to lead than men suggesting the designation is not fulfilling its intended goal.

Role congruity theory can also assist in the understanding of why 76% of all SWAs in the NCAA divisions directly oversee gender equity and compliance in comparison to their male athletic administrator peers (NCAA Inclusion, 2018a). Due to the influence of gender norms, role congruity theory explains Title IX and gender equity issues are associated with women’s work and should be handled by a woman. Although the NCAA Inclusion (2018b) report includes SWA best practices which state that part of the designation of SWA is to strategize ways to support and manage gender equity and Title IX plans and concerns, as well as complete reporting on these two issues, SWAs are continuously and almost synonymously associated with the oversight of gender equity and compliance and their additional responsibilities and titles (e.g., Assistant Director of Compliance or Marketing) are forgotten. Thus,

the perception of the SWA's oversight over women's sports is solidified and remains associated with stereotypical gender norms and job responsibilities.

The women in this study were not alone in their frustrations with the lack of understanding and clarity given to the designation of SWA. The NCAA found 92% of ADs felt they understood the designation of the SWA, in contrast to only 45% of the women in the designation of SWA felt their AD had role clarity surrounding their designation (NCAA Inclusion, 2018a). Furthermore, SWAs themselves reported a lack of role clarity in regards to being the SWA, 50% reported understanding their campus role, 41% their conference role, and 27% their national role (NCAA Inclusion, 2018a). The women in this study asserted the misunderstanding and lack of role clarity had negative consequences for their careers. If SWAs are only associated as the "AD of women's sports" or dealing with "Title IX and gender equity" they are not being perceived with the skills to operate and manage an athletic department. The SWA designation is supposed to give women a seat at the table and a voice, but the women in this study are voicing it is failing in its efforts. SWAs and the ADs (or those in power) must work together to create a more concrete set of tasks and responsibilities for the designation to develop the women professionally and allow them the growth that could potentially secure more senior positions.

Authority limitations. The participants also detailed how the designation of SWA itself was used to marginalize and limit their power and influence demonstrating role congruity theory. Edith detailed how the designation of SWA limited her stating,

I'm introduced 97% of the time as "this is *name*, our senior woman administrator." Does that tell you what I do? No, it just tells you that by "senior" I could be the highest ranking woman in the department, and by "woman" it just tells you that I'm a woman, but it does not tell you what I do. How many men are introduced, and I'm just going to say a black man, how many black men are introduced as this is our senior black administrator? Never. Or senior male administrator. Never. I'm an executive associate athletic director. Okay what does that entail? Well, if you say "executive," you immediately think well that's probably fairly-high ranking, because in our world assistant, associate, senior associate all matter, but I'm never introduced as that. Never. This is *name*. She's our SWA. I think that there's a lot of women out there that that's what they're introduced as, and I think immediately when you say that it is delimiting. I can't necessarily prove it yet. I feel it's delimiting in my role over the years, and you'll have men that tell you "oh it's not delimiting." Well, you're not being introduced that way, you're being introduced as the athletic director, or the senior associate athletic director, or the deputy athletic director. You're not being introduced as the senior male administrator.

Gretchen discussed how women were questioned more frequently than men in her space and this contributed to limited power. She said, "People don't question male senior associates, but they certainly do question senior associates that happen to be

female and why they're there. Definitely whether they're SWA or not, we still have that element of having to prove ourselves." Similarly, Kim felt being introduced only by the title of SWA marginalized her from her peers as less important. She said,

On the one hand, I want to say we should be removing it, because it removes any of the confusion from the community and outside. For instance, if you have a female athletic director, she is the senior woman administrator, so nobody at the institution technically needs that title, because she is the senior woman administrator, but she isn't required to have a senior men's administrator or a senior man administrator, so why are we using this? We kind of have that double-edged sword. We're kicking the glass ceiling and we're putting women in that athletic director role, but we're not mandating a senior men's (administrator). I believe it's becoming an antiquated title. The other piece too is that perception is reality, so when I am introduced in a room and they introduce the athletic director, and they introduce the associate athletic director for facilities, who is a man, and they introduce me as the senior woman administrator. Automatically, I am a lesser title.

Being introduced as the SWA and not their primary job title in comparison to male peers being introduced by their job specific titles leads to perceptions of inferiority. In the cases described by participants in this study, the designation and introduction of SWA, whether intentional or unintentional places women at a disadvantage. This is especially problematic as these women have primary job titles that could be utilized in their introduction, however these titles are often ignored and the designation of SWA is inappropriately utilized. Referring to these women solely by their SWA designation may also suggest there is more confusion about the SWA designation within the AD population than individuals in that position are reporting, as 92% reported understanding the SWA designation (NCAA Inclusion, 2018a). Kim discussed consequence stemming from this phenomenon stating,

I see my role as associate athletic director helping me move up, but because there's still confusion around the SWA. You've seen the studies, the athletic directors don't even know what the SWA does. No, I don't think the SWA is the stepping stone. I think the title of the associate or assistant athletic director is the role and the title that helps a woman to the next step of athletic director.

If the designation was fully understood one might assume these women would be first introduced by their primary title (e.g., senior associate AD of marketing) followed by the mention of the SWA designation to add further legitimacy to their expertise.

Eagly and Karau (2002) described how women are constrained in two distinct ways using role congruity theory. First, in conforming to their gender role (i.e., being introduced as the SWA or associated with the SWA designation) limits their capacity and ability to meet requirements for leadership roles or opportunities (e.g., by the

omitting of their assistant, associate, or executive titles, and areas they oversee such as marketing, fundraising, etc.). Second, if the women step out from beneath their gender roles, historically female leaders are viewed less favorably and more scrutinized than their male peers (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Thus, these two forms of prejudice produce less access for women to leadership roles and more obstacles for women to overcome to be seen as successful in these roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Unfortunately, as Edith and Kim explained being introduced as SWA delimits their status and importance on the senior leadership team and perpetuates the perception that they are less influential and important. This further solidifies gender norms and the problems highlighted with role congruity theory. The utilization of the SWA designation also suggests to those outside of the senior leadership circle that these women secured their spot on the leadership team because of their gender, which is false. These women first secured their primary role (e.g., director of compliance or marketing), then secured the SWA designation if their primary role made them the most senior-ranking woman. This again works to delegitimize women within the SWA designation, suggesting they are not capable of securing a position within senior leadership without utilizing their minority gender status.

Some of the women detailed how the designation helped provide them with a seat at the senior leadership table, but they still felt inability to voice their concerns or ideas due to the nature of the male-dominated space, as well as the acceptance and encouragement of masculine traits that are deemed compatible with male leadership. Monica explained her inability to voice concerns and ideas in athletic department meetings, "I don't occasionally get respect that I would if I were a male. I am treated a little differently at times." Cathy reiterated being segmented due to her gender, "I think sometimes women are segmented by others. Like you're not going to get the track of being an athletic director because you're not male."

Societal views of masculinity and femininity, especially in a context like sport, privilege masculinity and associate it with superior leadership skills (Anderson, 2008; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Role congruity theory then provides men with the platform to ascend to power and leadership positions more quickly and frequently, leaving women to be viewed as inferior and in industries such as athletics to be seen as intruders (Anderson 2008; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). Furthermore, homologous reproduction or the perpetuation of dominant groups hiring those who are physically, socially, and intellectually similar to them (i.e., male senior leaders) leads to a lack of women in collegiate athletic administration (Stangl & Kane, 1991). This is especially problematic in collegiate athletics as the dominant group is men. Socially constructed views of masculinity and femininity and homologous reproduction within sport organizations perpetuate the belief that women are not capable of obtaining, keeping, or succeeding in leadership positions (Burton, 2015; Mazerolle, Burton, & Cotrufo, 2015; Staurowsky & DiManno, 2002), thus, women continually get placed in positions with limited power such as the SWA designation.

Limited professional development. The participants discussed how the designation of SWA does not allow them opportunities to diversify their skill set in areas

needed to ascend into the AD role. The NCAA Inclusion report (2018a) found that 66% of SWAs have sport oversight, however, that statistics drops dramatically in revenue generating sports, with only 13% of SWAs having oversight over men's basketball and football. This creates a challenge when attempting to develop the skills necessary to obtain leadership positions (i.e., AD) as these women lack experience with financial and fundraising decision-making responsibilities (Grappendorf et al., 2008; Pent & Grappendorf, 2007). Although there are fundraising and decision-making responsibilities in non-revenue sports, research has found oversight in budgeting and leading men's sports teams are skills associated with being a successful AD (Grappendorf et al., 2008; Hardin et al., 2013; Hoffman, 2010; Pent et al., 2007; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Tiell et al., 2012). Specifically, Hardin et al. (2013) found in their survey of NCAA ADs the skills most valued by hiring committees were fundraising and managing a successful football program. Furthermore, Taylor and Hardin (2016) found female Division I ADs felt there is still a strong perception that women are incapable of running a successful athletic department, especially one with a football program. This manifestation about the ability of women to lead athletic departments with focuses on football and men's basketball can be seen in reports on Division I leadership. As recent as the fall of 2019, there are 130 Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) ADs and women only make up 6.9% of that total (Lapchick et al., 2019).

Kim detailed how the designation does not demonstrate her diverse set of skills and her work with men's football, a revenue generating sport associated with AD experience,

If anybody in the outside world, in the community, they see my title as senior woman administrator, and they assume it's a senior women's administrator. That all I do is deal with the women's sports teams. That can be deflating, defeating, demeaning, because in their own eyes many times they think of men's basketball and men's football as the important sports. They have no idea that 25% of what I do is dealing with the men's football team. They just have no idea, because they don't understand my role and my associate athletic director responsibilities.

Further discussing how only a small amount of SWAs are given the opportunity to diversify their needed skill sets Lauren said,

There are several women that are out there in this role and are overseeing football and men's basketball. Now it is a shame when you can sit here and name the majority of them, but there are some women out there that are not just your typical SWA overseeing the women's sports programs.

These quotes from Kim and Lauren demonstrate the association with the "SWA position" is accompanied by the perception of lesser skill and power or that the SWAs should not have other duties, skills, or responsibilities in other areas. This lack of skill development associated with sport oversight of football and men's basketball

programs is problematic as these are skills deemed necessary to secure AD positions and 65% of SWAs indicated they were interested in ascending to more senior-level positions (NCAA Inclusion, 2018a). Nora was particularly candid on how the designation of SWA could limit her ability to diversify her skill set and hinder her career saying,

I will be candid with you. I didn't want to build my career based on the SWA designation. Because it has been my experience, viewed experience, and just my personal thought, there are times when it is just a designation and doesn't really serve. That person doesn't really get a seat at the table, make decisions, make executive decisions, and sometimes you get pigeon-holed in that position or in that title.

It appears the NCAA created the SWA designation to provide women a seat at the table, but did not include any mechanisms to assist in their skill development while they were there. This is problematic as many women in the current study felt as though their seat at the table came with limited organizational power or the ability for professional development.

Future of the Designation

Eliminating the designation. Ten out of the 14 participants felt eliminating the designation was appropriate due to its contributions to tokenism, the marginalization they received in the designation, and its lack of outlined responsibilities. Edith stated she feels the designation should be removed as it is delimiting women's ascension. She said, "What I'm concerned about now is that it's a role that may be delimiting women if they want to become athletic directors." Lauren explained the designation should be removed since women are still undervalued, "I feel like women are moving the needle and making a difference, but we still have a long way to go because there are a lot of women out there that are not valued the way they should be."

Research has found the designation may be contributing to tokenism as the participants in this study expressed similar feelings of struggling to fit in and gain acceptance in the male dominated space of collegiate athletics and this caused social isolation and stereotyping (i.e., the way they are introduced to others; Hardin et al., 2014; Kane & Stangl, 1991; Kanter, 1977; Siegel et al., 2020; Whisenant & Mullane, 2007). Additionally, Hoffman (2010) found the SWA designation has resulted in a token or single woman on the senior management team. The women in this study were in the minority in their athletic department's executive team indicating their token status (15% or less in an environment with a dominant homogenous group; Kanter, 1977). Out of the 14 participant institutions, on average the executive team was made up of 20% women, with the lowest school having 15% women and the highest 42%. These low levels of women on the executive team is especially problematic as the NCAA originally created the SWA designation to increase diversity. However, the SWA designation may not be effective in creating this diversity as only 15% of SWAs are women of color, and 25% of Division I and more than 70% of Division II

and III institutions reported they have zero or one female administrator in 2015-2016 (NCAA Inclusion, 2018a). Furthermore, in relation to advancing into collegiate leadership roles, approximately 7% of those who hold the position of AD in the Division I FBS are women, and only 20% of those who hold the position overall across all three divisions are women (Lapchick et al., 2019; NCAA Inclusion, 2018a).

Adding to the understanding of role congruity theory, many of the women in this study are calling for the removal of the designation. The participants felt the designation and its direct association with gender led to inequality and perceptions of inferiority in comparison to their male peers. The women in this study had an average of 27 years of experience in the field of collegiate athletics in areas such as marketing, development, athletic training, coaching, compliance, and internal operations, but these areas and their expertise were not emphasized as prevalently as their designation of SWA. The NCAA also found SWAs desire an additional title that more clearly defines their job and influence in the athletic department. Ninety-two percent of SWAs believed they should have an administrative title such as Assistant AD or Associate AD as it would provide clarity on the daily tasks and responsibilities of these women (NCAA Inclusion, 2018a).

Role congruity theory posits removing the designation and only addressing women with titles that outline their responsibilities (i.e., assistant AD for compliance, senior executive AD) could negate some of the gender norms. Sagas and Cunningham (2004) found in their study of male and female athletic administrators how men profited more from their social capital than women, resulting in women having to work harder to establish this capital and women were more limited in their influence than their male peers. Katz, Walker and Hindman (2018) found the SWA designation might not be beneficial for upward mobility as the SWA designation can limit informal networks needed to gain the knowledge and relationships necessary to become an AD. In the cases provided by the participants, social capital and informal networks could increase with the removal of the SWA designation as it is associated more with gender than job responsibilities. The removal and focus on the other duties associated with the women's titles could allow them to be perceived and associated with agentic attributes (e.g., assertive, self-sufficient, independent, and self-confident) that are believed crucial to success in leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). More specifically, focusing on titles that describe their duties highlights the capabilities of these women in a multitude of areas. This could aid in allowing decision-makers within collegiate athletics to view these women as potential leaders or executives.

Furthermore, previous studies on SWAs have proposed the designation isn't as beneficial as it could or should be, however this study is the first study where participants are actually calling for the *removal of the designation*. For example, in the Lough and Grappendorf (2007) and Grappendorf et al. (2008) studies the results suggest the SWA designation is limiting (e.g., limited financial oversight, lack of fundraising experience and development activities), but the participants and authors do not call for removal of the designation, instead call for "further discussion and more aggressive action needs to be taken by the NCAA to better define the true roles and responsibilities of the SWA" (p. 41). Similarly, in the studies by Tiell and Dixon

(2008) and Tiell et al. (2012) results found a discrepancy in NCAA SWAs and ADs perceptions of SWAs involvement in the management and decision-making within the executive team. Both studies recommended that SWAs become more incorporated into the senior or core management team and be provided necessary training and mentoring to enhance the effectiveness in the designation. Thus, this study's call for the removal of the designation from both the participants and authors demonstrates not only a unique contribution to the existing literature on SWAs, but also further indicates that the designation is not providing these women the experiences and support needed to create upward mobility into the role of AD.

Career enhancement. The participants in this study also discussed women need to be provided decision-making abilities and opportunities to learn outside their domains through the support of their AD. Irene discussed gaining exposure meant opportunities to make decisions, "I think in general being able to be involved in high-level decision-making and engaged at the highest level is what is going to prepare you for the next step." Additionally, Gretchen discussed in order for women to gain the necessary exposure they need to be given resources to explore domains outside their current roles, specifically those needed for leadership positions. She said,

It's just that we need to make sure that the women that are in the role feel empowered to take on or to tailor the role or tweak the role so that they get the exposure to things that they want to get exposure to. I still have to assert myself and make sure that people see me as a senior-level executive rather than just an administrative role. It's still, the role, the title itself, it's still not enough to get the professional development and exposure that was intended for the women in it.

Nora detailed this exposure was based on support and cooperation from the AD,

Ultimately, the intent behind the designation was to sit at the table and contributing to making executive decisions. It is not about the role or unique responsibilities. It is about the institution's commitment to diversifying the leadership and the authority or the executive folks that have authority, the executive level titles. The designation, its worth, the responsibilities, it takes shape and forms in the organization based on the leader of the organization, what their priorities are, what their objectives are, and how they see that role, or how they see the person that will serve in that designation will serve in that role.

Kim reiterated this by stating how her AD had demonstrated support and encouragement by advocating she expand her network by joining *Women Leaders in College Sports*, an organization committed to advancing women in collegiate athletics,

My AD at the time really pushed me to get involved with NACWAA, but now it's *Women Leaders in College Sports* and he really pushed me to get involved and advance my career that way. So that is really how I got involved and started

making contacts, and again going to different NCAA conferences. I made contacts at the NCAA and through those conferences.

Furthermore, Edith detailed that support needed to be specific to allowing women the opportunities to make AD decisions,

I'm blessed that the athletic directors I've worked with let me make independent decisions. If I chose to dismiss a head coach I would go in, and I would've been having conversations with our athletic director, but I would manage that, and then I would run the search to replace that person.

Beyond the call to action by the participants in this study, research has found although the SWAs were gaining momentum in terms of greater acceptance into the field of athletic administration, they still lacked the access and ability to be part of the core decision-making team (Pent & Grappendorf, 2007; Tiell & Dixon, 2008). Research has noted that women are many times horizontally segmented into "soft" areas of athletic administration leaving them without the financial and oversight experience needed to move into a more prominent leadership role (Grappendorf et al., 2008). Specifically, Tiell and Dixon (2008) noted marginalization occurred within the SWA designation, as women in this position expressed they were not empowered to make decisions in the department, while their ADs felt they assumed roles as decision-makers leading again to conflict and role ambiguity. Recently, the NCAA (2018) advocated that athletic departments should capitalize on diverse leadership perspectives (including the SWA), share the commitment to equity and well-being, support training and mentoring opportunities, involve SWAs in conference governance, and engage SWAs in national issues (NCAA Inclusion, 2018ab). Thus, the support of the AD in women's pursuit of leadership skills and opportunities is crucial. Athletic departments centered on diversity and inclusion are more likely to encourage participation in mentoring activities by underrepresented individuals and take a proactive approach to the hiring process (Cunningham & Singer, 2009) and this approach begins with the AD's vision and emphasis on such initiatives. Support and opportunities for human capital (e.g., education, job experience, and training) and social capital (e.g., relationship building with peers and supervisors) can assist in career advancement for women and minorities (Sagas & Cunningham, 2004). This is an area where ADs can provide assistance to their female staff members, as the majority of male ADs have large and dense person-to-person and global networks (Katz et al., 2018). Furthermore, ADs can use their platform to publicly support the advancement of women in collegiate athletics (Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010) through providing not only inclusive environments, but more specifically policy changes, mentorship, and sponsorship or working with a protégé directly for career advancement (Taylor & Wells, 2017; Wayne, Linden, Kraimer, & Graf, 1999). Providing these opportunities can allow for a more diverse and inclusive environment within the current male-dominated space of collegiate athletics, which could lead to more positive outcomes and effectiveness as organizations continue to change and grow.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the complexity and consequences experienced by women who hold the designation of SWA. As the women in this study demonstrated, the intent from the NCAA to include a woman to the senior level athletic staff was promising, but in reality, the designation has caused women to experience marginalization and hardships when attempting to ascend into further leadership opportunities. Specifically, the women in this study called for a removal of the designation as it contributed to the gender stereotypes and norms that have been well-cited by role congruity theory research to limit women's ability to move into leadership positions. This is possibly the first instance in the literature where women within the role are calling for the designation's removal as they noted the designation does not contribute to their career goals and in its overall current state the designation is archaic, outdated, and unbeneficial to the women who are in the designation. Adding to the understanding of role congruity theory, the women in this study felt removal of the SWA designation would assist with aligning their careers and positions around their abilities and skills and not gender norms. Furthermore, collegiate athletics is continuing to evolve and change, thus, the SWA designation needs to evolve or be eliminated.

Limitations of this study include the qualitative nature of the study as there is an inability to generalize this study and its findings. However, qualitative experts have noted that transferability may be possible in qualitative research indicating "the power to create in readers the idea that they have experienced the same thing in a different area" (Papathomas, 2016; Smith, 2018, p. 141). Another limitation is the study's sole focus on the perspective of women and women from the highest division. Future research should explore the perception of the SWA designation from SWAs from Division II and III, the few men that have acquired the SWA designation, and from male administrators, especially ADs who are in positions of power to make hiring decisions as well as assign job responsibilities. In addition, future research should explore if this proposed removal of the designation would be encouraged and accepted by other women within collegiate athletics, as well as NCAA administrators in general.

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