



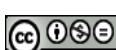
Chasing the AD Chair: Bridging Career Paths, Professional Development, and Mentorship from Classroom to Athletic Department Leadership

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As intercollegiate athletic programs evolve, the role of the athletic director (AD) has become increasingly complex, with varied career paths leading to this position across different NCAA divisions and NAIA institutions. Traditionally, the AD career trajectory followed a linear progression, often starting with coaching experience. However, recent research reveals individuals from diverse professional backgrounds and educational experiences now enter the AD role. This study explores the career trajectories of ADs based upon work experience, internships, education, mentorship, and professional development across NCAA Divisions I, II, III, and NAIA, aiming to identify unique pathways specific to each division. A total of 160 participants completed surveys related to their path to the AD chair. Through chi-square analyses and analysis of variances (ANOVAs), the study reveals statistically significant differences in work experience across the four groups. Key findings include variations in prior roles such as associate AD and head coach, as well as differences in internship experiences. Specifically, the results indicated a high prevalence of coaching backgrounds among NAIA and Division III ADs, while those ADs in DI more often come from roles as an association or assistant athletic director. The results highlight the importance of practical experiences in shaping career trajectories, offering valuable insights for faculty mentoring students aspiring to become ADs. These findings can guide faculty as they create curriculum for students related to selecting appropriate educational and practical opportunities based on their aspirations within different divisions.

Keywords: athletic director, career, internships, intercollegiate athletics



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As intercollegiate athletic programs continue to evolve, the role of the athletic director (AD) has become increasingly multifaceted and complex. For faculty mentoring students aspiring to become athletic directors, it is crucial to understand the diverse career paths that lead to this position. These paths can vary significantly across different National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) divisions and the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) institutions, with each requiring unique skills and experiences. Traditionally, the journey to becoming an AD was considered to follow a linear progression, often beginning with coaching experience. However, research has shown that this is no longer the case, as athletic directors now come from a variety of professional backgrounds and educational experiences (Fitzgerald et al., 1994; Lumpkin et al., 2015).

Research by Lumpkin et al. (2015) highlights notable differences in the backgrounds of athletic directors across NCAA divisions. Specifically, Division I athletic directors were more likely to have no coaching experience compared to their counterparts in Divisions II and III. Division I ADs may need more expertise in administration, as they will be required to navigate the complex financial and strategic aspects of a larger more lucrative athletic department. On the other hand, students aspiring to become ADs in Divisions II, III, or NAIA may be more likely to benefit from a coaching background, where the focus is often on student-athlete development and maintaining strong relationships with sports teams.

Although differences in career paths have been noted in the literature, practical guidelines suggest that ADs in Division II institutions still need experience beyond coaching. An NCAA working group created a “guidebook” for those interested in being an AD at the Division II level. In the forward of the book, Schroeder and Brasfield (n.d.) note:

If you are a Division II assistant or associate AD, you probably have a specific task – for example, rules compliance or communications – without much assistance. If you are the sports information director, you may not have given much thought to compliance, ticket management or drug-testing policies. If you are the compliance person, you may be deficient in promotional skills or how to relate with media. It’s understandable, but those deficiencies hinder your quest to fill one of the few positions that come available each year. You must be able to set yourself apart by demonstrating a broad skill set, and you especially must be able to present business or fundraising experience (p. 1).

This quote underscores the importance of a well-rounded skill set for aspiring athletic directors.

This study builds on the work of Lumpkin et al. (2015) and Fitzgerald et al. (1994) to examine the varying experiences and educational backgrounds of athletic directors across NCAA Division I, II, III, and NAIA institutions. By exploring these differences, the study seeks to provide insights that can help students navigate

the diverse career paths leading to the athletic director role. Additionally, this study introduces new factors — such as internships, graduate assistantships, professional development, and mentorship — that may play a significant role in shaping students' career trajectories to the athletic director position, with these factors potentially varying by division. These insights will provide faculty with valuable information to guide students in selecting appropriate educational paths and gaining relevant experience aligned with their aspirations to become athletic directors. The study will address the following research questions:

1. What significant associations exist between the work experiences of athletic directors at NCAA Division I, II, III, and NAIA institutions?
2. Are there significant associations in the educational backgrounds of athletic directors at NCAA Division I, II, III, and NAIA institutions?
3. What significant associations exist related to professional development training for athletic directors at NCAA Division I, II, III, and NAIA institutions?
4. What significant associations exist related to mentorship development trends for athletic directors at NCAA Division I, II, III, and NAIA institutions?

By answering these questions, this study will provide essential insights that will help better prepare students for athletic director positions, tailored to their division of interest. By understanding the specific needs and opportunities within each division, faculty can better support students in tailoring their educational and career strategies, ensuring they are well-equipped to pursue the athletic director role that best aligns with their goals.

Literature Review

Understanding the career paths and educational backgrounds of ADs across various collegiate athletic divisions is crucial for preparing students to pursue leadership roles in athletic administration. While previous studies have examined the career paths and education of athletic directors, there remains a gap in understanding differences across NCAA divisions and the NAIA, specifically related to internships, professional development, and relationship development. Insights into these pathways can help faculty design curriculum and courses that align with the career goals of students. Furthermore, by examining these pathways, students and entry-level employees can gain a clearer understanding of the steps needed to reach their desired career destinations.

Career Pathways of Athletic Directors

Research on ADs often focuses on how the ADs got into their current positions. The focus looks at different elements of the ADs background such as work experience, education, internships, and graduate assistantships. This section will review previous literature to provide insight into these elements of the career pathways.

Work Experience

One factor to review when trying to prepare ADs is the work experience the individual had prior to becoming an AD. Early research on the career paths of individuals who become ADs shows those serving at NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) Power 5 institutions often have backgrounds in fundraising and development (Kirkpatrick, 2018). At the NCAA Division II level, Elliott and Webster (2020) found 23.5% of the ADs in their study had previously held head coaching positions. Similarly, Lumpkin et al. (2015) conducted content analysis of athletic director biographies and observed that ADs in NCAA Division I were more likely to have no prior coaching experience compared to those in Divisions II and III, further emphasizing the shift toward more business-focused leaders in the highest tier of collegiate athletics. This finding was inconsistent with previous research that asserted the career paths of ADs included coaching experiences (Fitzgerald et al., 1994). The work of Fitzgerald et al. (1994) suggested ADs careers include varied backgrounds of both coaching and administrative roles.

Education

Another factor that is often reviewed is the educational background of the ADs. Elliott and Webster (2020) revealed Sport Administration was a common academic discipline among athletic directors, with 46.4% of respondents holding degrees in that field. Research by Lumpkin et al. (2016) and Kirkpatrick (2018) suggested advanced degrees are common among athletic directors. Many viewed the master's degree as a credential necessary to enter the profession, emphasizing the importance of understanding the AD's role across NCAA divisions and the education needed for the position (Bernhard, 2016).

In an attempt to understand the educational element, it is important to understand the sport management curriculum. DeLuca and Braunstein-Minkove (2016) found students in sport management programs expressed satisfaction with the sport management curriculum and found value in courses like sport management, introduction to the sport industry, and sport marketing but felt less engaged with sociocultural courses such as sport and society. This finding indicates a possible gap in understanding courses that best prepare students for serving in the AD position. While these courses offer important sociocultural context, they may not always provide the practical tools necessary for roles such as athletic director, particularly in divisions where budget constraints and institutional demands are at the forefront.

Sellars et al. (2023) found courses like introduction to sport management and legal aspects of sport management were highly regarded by students, while courses such as sport finance and case studies were considered less enjoyable and more challenging. Future research is necessary to understand the value these courses, especially in areas that directly impact athletic directors' roles, such as financial management and legal matters in sport. In NCAA Division I programs, where the complexity of athletics administration is higher, ADs often deal with more intricate financial and legal matters, so the integration of business-oriented coursework (e.g., sport finance, risk management) would be critical for preparing these leaders.

Popp et al. (2015) evaluated master's-level sport management programs and found students who were pursuing leadership roles in athletic administration expressed a desire for more business-oriented coursework. These findings suggest that incorporating business and management courses into the curriculum is necessary to equip future athletic directors for the leadership demands of higher-tier programs, however future research is needed to determine if these courses properly prepare students for roles as athletic directors in NCAA Divisions II, NCAA Divisions III, or NAIA institutions where there may be a higher need for coaching or leadership experience.

Internships

DeLuca and Braunstein-Minkove (2016) went further and evaluated how well sport management programs prepare students for careers in the industry. The research included student participants who just completed their internships as well as participants who served as site supervisors for student interns. Student participants indicated finding value in the mandate to have an internship as a requirement of their Sport Management degree program. This study highlighted the significance of providing more internship opportunities for students. Additionally, the study emphasized the need for more applied learning within courses. However, later research from Hawzen et al., (2018) examined the concept of "cruel optimism," where students are motivated by idealized dreams of working in sports, despite the industry's exploitative nature, particularly in the realm of unpaid internships. Walker et al. (2020) noted that many sport management students view their internships as unpaid, time-consuming, and lacking in educational substance. Their study suggested institutions may inadvertently legitimize exploitative labor practices by awarding academic credit for unpaid internships.

Research by VanSickle et al. (2023) found a trend toward a decreased emphasis on experiential learning in sport management curriculum, which may reflect shifting priorities within the field of sport management education. However, for aspiring ADs, particularly in NCAA Division I, where the leadership and operational demands are highest, a robust internship experience, hands-on practice, and a curriculum that combines both theoretical and business-focused content may be critical.

Mashburn (2023) argues existing literature on sport management internships tends to focus on student satisfaction with their internship rather than assessing how well sport management coursework prepared the student for their internship. Brown et al., (2018) noted that unless students, institutions, and site supervisors collaborate, internships may fail to promote critical thinking and reflection. Similarly, Odio and Menaker (2023) argue internships should cultivate transferable skills aligned with student development and not just fulfill organizational needs. These recent studies challenge the notion of a required internship and possibly question if the internship is necessary in helping students achieve career goals of serving as an AD in each division.

Graduate Assistantships

Another area of focus related to career pathways is graduate assistantships and their role in assisting students to reaching the AD position. Bernhard (2016) found graduate students aspiring to work in intercollegiate athletics often choose their graduate program based on the reputation of the athletic department and the availability of graduate assistantships. Smith et al. (2017) indicated that although graduate assistantships provided an opportunity to gain entry into the field, not all opportunities provide the same value. These studies highlight the need for further research to determine whether holding a graduate assistant position is a critical step on the path to becoming an AD.

Professional Networks and Mentorships

Professional networks, mentorship, and relationship-building are perceived as critical factors influencing the career advancement to the athletic director role. Welch et al. (2021) highlighted the unique challenges faced by ethnic minority female ADs, who often encounter compounded barriers due to both gender and racial biases. Their study emphasized the importance of professional relationships, mentorship, and support networks in overcoming these barriers. The findings of this study underscored the importance of mentorship programs and networking opportunities for aspiring athletic directors. Similarly, Hancock and Hums (2016) explored the challenges faced by female administrators in advancing to senior leadership positions within NCAA Division I athletic departments. Their study highlighted the importance of interpersonal relationships with supervisors and mentors and access to professional development activities aided in participants' career advancement.

Research on professional development within athletic departments highlights the importance of communication and relationship-building in effective leadership. Elliott et al. (2023) examined the dynamics between athletic directors and their direct reports within NCAA Division II athletic programs. The importance of communication was a key theme that emerged from the semi-structured interviews. . Additionally, the relationship between ADs and university presidents plays a significant role in career success. LeCrom and Pratt (2016) studied the relationship dynamics at the NCAA Division I level between athletic directors and university presidents. Through qualitative interviews with athletic directors, the study highlighted how ADs feel there should be trust and open lines of communication in the relationship. Additionally, presidents who respect the athletic director's expertise led to more positive relationships between the two parties.

These findings indicate that while professional networks and relationships play a critical role across all divisions, the nature of the relationships and their impact can vary by NCAA division. NCAA Division I programs, due to their size, visibility, and complexity, may place more emphasis on high-level connections with university presidents, whereas NCAA Division II institutions may focus more on day-to-day communication between ADs and their direct reports.

Furthermore, Bravo et al., (2012) surveyed athletic administrators and found communication skills, relevant work experience, and work ethic were valued highly

in the hiring process. However, recent graduates often lacked these attributes, highlighting the need for sport management programs to provide rigorous, experiential coursework that cultivates these essential skills.

Preparation in Evolving College Athletics Landscape

Based upon the different education and professional experiences of ADs across NCAA divisions and NAIA institutions, there appears to be a need for more research to understand the preparation of ADs. An additional gap in previous research suggests preparing future athletic directors requires not only providing technical knowledge but also fostering the development of these skills through internships and mentorship.

In conclusion, while there are general trends in the preparation of athletic directors through work experience, education, internships, mentorships, and professional development, the specific needs and demands can vary significantly by NCAA division. This research addresses the gap in the literature related to understanding the necessary education and experiences required for ADs by division to help better prepare students for these roles.

Method

To answer the four research questions of this study, a systematic approach had to be used to collect data. The following section will provide insight into this systematic approach. The participants, the survey instrument, and the data analysis techniques used to answer the questions will be discussed.

Participants

This study surveyed ADs at NCAA and NAIA member institutions. The target population included individuals who were designated as ADs on the official institutional websites of NCAA and NAIA member schools. A comprehensive list of NCAA and NAIA institutions was compiled, and the survey link was distributed to those individuals listed as the AD on each institution's website. A total of 1,130 ADs were invited to participate in the survey.

A total of 160 participants completed the survey, which is 14.2% response rate. Although the response rate is relatively low, the participants represent each division, and the rate aligns with those reported in previous studies within the sport management field (see Bravo et al., 2012; Sattler, 2018; Stokowski et al., 2022; Stokowski et al., 2018). Of the 160 participants, 33 (20.6%) were from NCAA Division I, 22 (13.8%) were from NCAA Division II, 63 (39.4%) were from NCAA Division III, and 42 (26.3%) were from NAIA institutions. Approximately, 75.6% of the respondents were male and 24.4% were female. The average age of participants when they became an athletic director was 40.61 years ($SD = 7.98$), with the youngest at 23 and the oldest at 64. On average, participants had worked 8.95 years ($SD = 6.85$) in their current AD positions and 11.74 years ($SD = 8.53$) total as an athletic director.

throughout their careers. Table 1 provides the response rates by division while Table 2 provides a demographic comparison between the study's sample and the 2023-2024 NCAA demographics for ADs at all levels and NAIA (A. Grosbach, personal communication, May 14, 2025, *National Collegiate Athletic Association B*, n.d.). For all divisions of the NCAA, 75% of ADs are males and 25% are females (NCAA, 2025).

Table 1.
Response Rates by NCAA Division

Division	Total Member Institution in Division	Total Number of Responses in Each Division	Percent of Division Represented by Survey Responses
Division I	365	33	9.04%
Division II	304	22	7.24%
Division III	431	63	14.62%
NAIA	237	42	17.72%

Table 2.
Comparison of Demographic Information between Study Sample and NCAA/NAIA Data

Division	Percentage Male in Study	Percentage Female in Study	Percentage of Male ADs	Percentage of Female ADs
Division I	97.0%	3.0%	84.0%	16.0%
Division II	77.3%	22.7%	76.0%	24.0%
Division III	71.4%	28.6%	66.0%	34.0%
NAIA	64.3%	35.7%	79.8%	20.2%

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was developed by the research team following an extensive review of the literature on the roles and responsibilities of athletic directors, with a particular focus on the prior roles, educational backgrounds, and professional development experiences used in previous studies (See Fitzgerald et al., 1994; Lumpkin et al., 2015). The survey instrument also included experiences such as internships, graduate assistantships, and other career-related training that may not have been included in previous studies related to the career path of athletic directors. Based on this review, the survey was designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative data, addressing several key areas relevant to the research questions. The final version of the survey consisted of a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions.

The survey instrument is included in appendix A. Prior to distributing the survey to the broader sample, a pilot study was conducted with a small group of athletic directors from three NCAA conferences. The purpose of the pilot study was to assess the clarity and reliability of the survey questions and to ensure the survey instrument was effective in capturing the intended information. Feedback from the pilot study participants led to minor adjustments in the wording and formatting of some questions. The revised survey was then distributed to all athletic directors in the sample.

The survey was distributed electronically via a secure online platform, with a link sent to the email addresses of ADs listed on institutional websites. Participants were given a two-week window to complete the survey, with reminder emails sent at the one-week mark. The survey was voluntary, and respondents were assured that their participation would be confidential, with all responses aggregated for analysis.

Data Analysis

Following the completion of the data collection process, the responses were cleaned and coded for analysis. Descriptive statistics were initially computed to summarize the demographic characteristics of the participants, including their educational backgrounds, professional experiences, and institutional types. The next phase of analysis involved chi-square tests, conducted using SPSS statistical software, to examine whether there were significant associations in experience and educational backgrounds across four distinct groups: NCAA Division I, NCAA Division II, NCAA Division III, and NAIA athletic directors related to each research question. Chi-square tests were chosen to determine the relationships between categorical variables and Cramer's V test were performed to measure effect size. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$ for all tests.

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). All participants reviewed the informed consent before completing the survey, the study did not collect identifying information to protect participant confidentiality. Participants were given the option to withdraw from the study at any time if they desired. Results are discussed in the section below.

Results

Overall, participants were also asked if they felt prepared for the position of athletic director. No significant association related to the participant feeling prepared for the athletic director role between divisions. Results related to each research question are included in this section.

For RQ1, the researchers completed chi-square statistical tests related to work histories that included the participant serving as an associate athletic director, assistant athletic director, head coach, or an assistant coach prior to taking on the role of an athletic director. The chi-square analysis identified significant associations for participants who held associate AD positions prior to taking on the AD role ($\chi^2 (3, N = 134) = 13.43, p < .001$), Cramer's V = .317 indicating a large effect size (Cohen, 1988). The chi-square analysis also identified significant associations for participants

who held an assistant AD positions prior to taking on the AD role ($\chi^2 (3, N = 134) = 7.83, p = .05$), Cramer's $V = .166$ indicating a medium effect size. The chi-square analysis identified significant associations for participants that held coach positions prior to taking on the AD role ($\chi^2 (3, N = 134) = 24.68, p < .001$), Cramer's $V = .429$ indicating a large effect size. The chi-square analysis did not reveal significant associations in career history related to having a previous coordinator position, having a previous assistant coach position, or having a position outside of athletics prior to serving as an AD. Tables 3, 4, and 5 below include significant findings related to each of these positions. To further analyze the data, researchers conducted a one-way ANOVA to reveal any significant differences identified in the number of years an AD worked prior to becoming an AD in each of the divisions. The researchers did not find any statistically significant differences related to the number of years the participant worked prior to being an AD at the different levels, $F(3,152) = 1.06, p = .37$. Additionally, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if there were any significant differences in age when became AD and division level. The researchers did not find any statistically significant differences related to the age of the respondent when the individual became an AD in each division, $F(3,129) = 1.15, p = .33$.

Table 3
Percent of Participants Who Held an Associate AD Role Prior to Becoming AD

Division	Percent of Participants who Held an Associate AD Role Prior to Becoming an AD	Percent of Participants who Did Not Have an Associate AD Role Prior to Becoming an AD
NCAA DI	79.17%	20.83%
NCAA DII	50.00%	50.00%
NCAA DIII	56.14%	43.86%
NAIA	31.43%	68.57%

Table 4
Percent of Participants Who Held an Assistant AD Role Prior to Becoming AD

Division	Percent of Participants who Held an Assistant AD Role Prior to Becoming an AD	Percent of Participants who Did Not Have an Assistant AD Role Prior to Becoming an AD
NCAA DI	79.17%	20.83%
NCAA DII	66.67%	33.33%
NCAA DIII	61.40%	38.60%
NAIA	55.56%	44.44%

Table 5*Percent of Participants Who Held a Head Coaching Role Prior to Becoming AD*

Division	Percent of Participants who Held a Head Coaching Role Prior to Becoming an AD	Percent of Participants who Did Not Have a Head Coaching Role Prior to Becoming an AD
NCAA DI	12.50%	87.50%
NCAA DII	44.44%	55.55%
NCAA DIII	56.14%	43.86%
NAIA	77.14%	22.86%

Additionally, related to RQ1, chi-square tests indicated previous internship experience reported by participants was different across the groups of ADs ($\chi^2 (3, N = 134) = 10.84, p = .013$), Cramer's $V = .281$ indicating a medium effect size. However, chi-square analysis did not reveal statistical associations related to the area in which the participant had the internship experience or the participant having a graduate assistant position prior to the AD role. Table 6 below includes the percent of participants that held an internship by division.

Table 6*Percent of Participants Who Had an Internship Role Prior to Becoming AD*

Division	Percent of Participants who Held an Internship Prior to Becoming an AD	Percent of Participants who Did Not Have an Internship Prior to Becoming an AD
NCAA DI	75%	25%
NCAA DII	61%	39%
NCAA DIII	49%	51%
NAIA	33%	67%

Related to RQ2, the results did not find any statistically significant associations between the AD's undergraduate degree and the division (Table 7). Similar findings were also suggested between the AD's master's degree major and the division (Table 8). A chi-square analysis did reveal significant associations in the highest degree held and the division ($\chi^2 (3, N = 134) = 21.73, p = .04$), with a medium effect size (Cramer's $V = .213$). Additionally, the chi-square analysis revealed a significant association across courses recommended for those interested in becoming an AD ($\chi^2 (39, N = 57) = 57.97, p = .036$). The calculated Cramer's $V = .582$ indicating a large effect size. Tables 9 and 10 report the highest degree held by participant by division and recommended courses reported by division respectively.

Table 7*Percent of Participant Undergraduate Degree Majors by Each Division*

Major	Division I	Division II	Division III	NAIA
Business	24.2%	22.7%	12.7%	16.7%
Science/Math	6.1%	4.5%	3.2%	7.1%
Education	9.1%	0.0%	9.5%	11.9%
Health/Physical Ed	12.1%	27.3%	15.9%	26.2%
Health Promotion	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%	0.0%
Coaching	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.4%
Athletic Training	0.0%	9.1%	1.6%	2.4%
Kinesiology	0.0%	0.0%	3.2%	7.1%
Social Studies/ Humanities	18.2%	18.2%	22.2%	11.9%
Government & Legal Studies	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%	0.0%
English	3.0%	0.0%	6.3%	0.0%
Communication	15.2%	4.5%	12.7%	11.9%
Christian Ministries	0.0%	4.5%	0.0%	0.0%
Recreation/Sport Management	12.1%	9.1%	4.8%	0.0%
General/ IDS	0.0%	0.0%	4.8%	2.4%

Table 8*Percent of Participant Master's Degree Majors by Each Division*

Major	Division I	Division II	Division III	NAIA
Business	28.6%	5.3%	8.8%	23.7%
Sport Administration	32.1%	36.8%	35.1%	31.6%
Athletic Training	0.0%	0.0%	3.5%	0.0%
Coaching	0.0%	0.0%	1.8%	0.0%
Physical Ed	7.1%	15.8%	7.0%	5.3%
Kinesiology	0.0%	10.5%	10.5%	10.5%
Christian Ministries	0.0%	5.3%	0.0%	2.6%
Education	25.0%	21.1%	22.8%	21.1%
Counseling	3.6%	0.0%	1.8%	5.3%
Science/Math	0.0%	5.3%	1.8%	0.0%
Criminal Justice	0.0%	0.0%	1.8%	0.0%
Communication	3.6%	0.0%	1.8%	0.0%
English	0.0%	0.0%	3.5%	0.0%

Table 9*Percent of Participants Who Held Each Degree*

Division	Bachelor	Master	JD	PhD/EdD
NCAA DI	9.09%	57.58%	12.12%	21.21%
NCAA DII	13.64%	77.25%	0%	9.09%
NCAA DIII	7.93%	80.95%	0%	9.52%
NAIA	7.14%	78.75%	0%	11.90%

Table 10
Undergraduate Courses Recommended by Participants

Division	Most Recommended Course	Second Most Recommended Course	Third Most Recommended Course
NCAA DI	Finance 36.4%	Sport Law 27.3%	Accounting 9.1%
NCAA DII	Administration 40.7%	Sport Law 25.5%	Marketing 25%
NCAA DIII	Sport Law 40.7%	Finance 22.2%	Administration 7.4%
NAIA	Sport Law 33.3%	Finance 19.3%	Administration 12.3%

For RQ3, no significant associations were found across divisions related to participating in professional development by athletic directors. Professional development opportunities participants completed included leadership programs, mentorship programs, and coursework. In total 88.9% ($n = 120$) of participants indicate they participate in some type of professional development opportunity. Additionally, there was no significant associations revealed between divisions related to the frequency of professional development opportunities reported by athletic directors. Of the participants who indicated they participated in professional development opportunities, 98% ($n = 105$) of participants indicated they participate in professional development at least once a year.

For RQ4, while the majority of the respondents ($n = 101, 74.8\%$) indicated they had a mentor, no significant associations were identified between divisions related to the AD having a mentor. Additionally, there was no significant association to the impact of the mentor between divisions. Participants indicated using their mentor for advice and guidance ($n = 26, 16.3\%$), as a sounding board ($n = 14, 8.8\%$), and for practical help ($n = 13, 8.1\%$). Finally, related to mentors, there was no significant association related to type of mentors for athletic directors in each division. Mentor types included informal mentors, previous AD as a mentor, and the participant's supervisor as a mentor.

The next section will include a discussion of these results and implications for faculty preparing students for the AD role and students looking to plan their career paths toward serving in an athletic director role.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and education of athletic directors (ADs) across NCAA Division I, NCAA Division II, NCAA Division

III, and NAIA institutions and identify any differences between divisions. This study builds on the work of Fitzgerald et al. (1994) and Lumpkin et al. (2015) by identifying key differences and providing deeper insights into the factors that shape athletic director career paths and how they may vary by division.

Work Experience

One of the study findings is the statistically significant association in work experiences across divisions. The results from RQ1 indicate ADs at Division I institutions are more likely to have held roles as assistant or associate athletic directors whereas ADs in Division II, Division III, and NAIA institutions are more likely to have backgrounds in coaching. These findings align with the research by Lumpkin et al. (2015), which highlighted the growing trend in Division I institutions for ADs to have expertise in administration rather than coaching. In contrast, Division II and III, and NAIA ADs appear to be more likely to have coaching experience, suggesting that these divisions place a greater emphasis on developing relationships with student-athletes and fostering team dynamics. This differentiation in career pathways reinforces the notion that the role of an AD is tailored to the unique needs of each division's athletic program (Fitzgerald et al., 1994; Lumpkin et al., 2015).

Educational Backgrounds

Similar to Elliott and Webster (2020), the results suggest sport administration was the most common degree choice, at least at the master's level for ADs. The study also revealed additional differences in educational backgrounds across divisions. In reference to RQ2, the results suggest Division I ADs were more likely to hold advanced degrees, with a portion possessing doctorates. In contrast, ADs in Division II, Division III, and NAIA were more likely to hold master's degrees. Additionally, Lumpkin et al. (2015) and Elliott and Webster (2020), found there was a prevalence of advanced degrees among ADs. These findings align with Bernhard (2016) who found that many graduate students pursue sport management degrees as a necessary credential for advancement in intercollegiate athletics.

When reviewing the results on educational background, the results suggest some similarities and differences to previous research. The results from the current study suggest the ADs at the different divisions varied on the classes they believe were important to prepare students to work in the field. These differences in recommended academic preparation come back to the division differences in the AD role. Sport finance was recommended at all levels except Division II as an important class. However, Sellers et al. (2023) found students indicated sport finance was less enjoyable and more challenging, indicating a disconnect between student and AD perceptions. Additionally, while sport marketing and introduction to sport industry were classes found by students to be helpful (Deluca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016), these classes were not recommended as the top three except sport marketing with Division II ADs. These findings suggest differences in perceptions between ADs and students. One reason for this difference is the foundation aspect is already established in the ADs while the students are just getting that foundation created. Both the student partici-

pants and ADs value the importance of legal aspects of sport management (Deluca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016).

The advanced educational differences may be indicative of the varying skill sets and knowledge required at each level (Lumpkin et al., 2015). This finding highlights the need for academic programs to market and structure themselves not just as degree-granting institutions, but as career accelerators for those looking to serve in the athletic director role. These distinct career routes may point to the need for flexible academic programs that offer both administrative, leadership training, and coaching-related development, depending on a student's intended career trajectory. As suggested by DeSensi et al. (1990), a single curricular model may not adequately meet the diverse needs of sport management graduates; instead, sport management programs should consider offering specialized tracks or electives aligned with different NCAA division.

Internships

Internships were a key component of the pathway for many athletic directors in this study. However, significant variations in internship experiences were observed across divisions. While the study revealed a statistically significant association among divisions and internship experiences, it was reported by the respondents that these opportunities play a crucial role in preparing individuals for leadership roles within athletic administration. To further support the role of internships, Bravo et al. (2012) found related work experience as a lacking attribute in job candidates for entry-level athletic administration roles. The results from this study suggest ADs at all levels recommend internships and hand-on experiences as means to prepare students. Faculty must therefore be intentional in preparing students for roles in athletic administration. For example, if the student plans to pursue an AD position at a DI member institution, faculty should work to ensure the student has skills that can lead to an assistant or associate AD position. Conversely, if a student plans to pursue an AD position as a NCAA DII, NCAA DIII, or NAIA institution, faculty may have the student take more classes related to coaching and earning coaching certificates as opposed to going through an internship route.

As faculty work to include internships in the sport management curriculum, faculty should ensure a quality experience for the student that ensures the student is able to work on skills to help reach their goals, not just the goals of the organization. Publications have challenged the idea that all internships are inherently educational and should be required in the sport management curriculum (Brandon-Li et al., 2016; Brown, 2025; Odio & Menaker, 2023). The results from this study suggest current ADs feel they are valuable.

Professional Development and Mentorship

RQ3 and RQ4 explored the role of professional development and mentorship in preparing ADs for their roles. Interestingly, the study found no significant differences across divisions regarding participation in professional development activities or mentorship opportunities. The lack of significant differences in professional de-

velopment may suggest that, while professional development is critical, it may be similarly available across divisions, albeit in varying formats or frequencies. For example, the NCAA offers three professional development opportunities to student-athletes – the Student-Athlete Leadership Forum, Career in Sport Forum, and the NCAA Postgraduate Internship Program (See National Collegiate Athletic Association, n.d.). Additionally, the NCAA website offers many resources for those interested in pursuing an AD role.

The results in this study regarding mentorship are also noteworthy. The lack of significant associations between mentorship and division may indicate mentorship is not a universally implemented or structured component of AD career preparation. This aligns with the findings of DeLuca and Braunstein-Minkove (2016), who emphasized the importance of internships and mentorship in preparing students for careers in athletic administration, yet also noted the inconsistency of these opportunities across institutions. Faculty may want to focus more on ensuring students have access to formalized mentorship opportunities that align with the specific needs and goals of their desired division.

As the findings from this study and previous literature (e.g., DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016; Welch et al., 2021) demonstrate, internships and mentorship are vital components for aspiring athletic directors. It is important for faculty and mentors to recognize the differences in internship opportunities across divisions and to help students strategically select experiences that align with their career aspirations. Tailoring these opportunities to the unique needs of each division will not only help students develop the skills required for their desired role but also enhance their ability to succeed as future athletic directors.

Implications for Students and Faculty

This study provides valuable insights for both students aspiring to become athletic directors and faculty members who are guiding them. For students, the findings suggest those aiming for Division I AD roles should prioritize gaining administrative and leadership experience. In contrast, those pursuing Division II or III and NAIA AD positions may benefit more from gaining coaching experience and developing strong relationships with athletes and teams.

For faculty, the results emphasize the importance of offering a curriculum that reflects the varied career paths and educational requirements across divisions. For example, programs designed for aspiring Division I ADs should include courses focused on business management, fundraising, and finance, while those for Division II and III and NAIA ADs should emphasize coaching, leadership, and team development. Additionally, the study suggests faculty should consider implementing more structured internship and mentorship programs to provide students with the hands-on experience and professional networks necessary for career advancement.

As faculty prepare students for future roles as ADs, it is crucial to acknowledge the evolving landscape of intercollegiate athletics. The financial strain brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic — particularly the sharp decline in revenue from lost ticket

sales (Williams & Mathis, 2021) — highlighted the need for ADs to possess strong financial insight. Future leaders must be prepared to manage constrained budgets and make strategic resource allocation decisions, even when those choices involve difficult measures such as staff reductions or the elimination of athletic programs to maintain departmental sustainability. Additionally, with emerging developments such as Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) policies and potential revenue-sharing models, the role of the AD is becoming increasingly complex. Particularly at the NCAA Division I level, a solid business background will be essential, along with the ability to build and lead teams equipped to navigate these changes while supporting both student-athletes and the broader athletic department.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The relatively low response rate (14.2%) may limit the generalizability of the findings, particularly given the diversity of institutions included in the sample. Future research could explore these career pathways with larger, more representative samples, as well as investigate how factors such as gender, race, and institutional resources influence career trajectories in athletic administration. Additionally, further exploration of how mentorship and professional development programs are structured across divisions could yield valuable information for improving career preparation in this field.

Conclusion

Overall, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the diverse career paths, educational backgrounds, and professional development opportunities available to athletic directors across NCAA and NAIA divisions. By highlighting the distinctions between divisions, the study provides important guidance for students and faculty, helping them to better navigate the varied routes to becoming an athletic director. This study contributes to an important and growing dialogue about how to best prepare future athletic administrators. Given the diversity of pathways into athletic director roles across divisions, sport management programs may want to consider curricular flexibility to ensure students are getting required skills and education to match career goals. Programs that offer tailored experiences aligned with career goals — whether administrative or coaching-focused — will better equip graduates to meet the complex and varied demands of leadership in intercollegiate athletics.

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