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The Dilemma of the Senior Woman Administrator Role in Intercollegiate Athletics

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All National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) member institutions designate the highest-ranking woman in athletic administration the senior woman administrator (SWA). This role is “intended to encourage and promote the involvement” of women in decision-making, enhance the representation women’s experiences and perspectives, and support women’s interests in intercollegiate athletics (NCAA, n.d. [a]). However, previous research reveals inconsistency in the tasks and responsibilities associated with the SWA role. Furthermore, it is not well established if this role is a mechanism to advance women to leadership roles or a terminal position (Hatfield, 2009).

To better understand the influence of the SWA role on the advancement of women leaders, this research introduces the historical context of women’s leadership in higher education. This historical context draws on the strategies women leaders used prior to the passage of Title IX. These strategies form a framework to analyze interview data with women who hold the SWA title among Division I institutions in the Far West. Findings illustrate four dilemmas – The Early “SWA” vs. Today’s Senior Associate Athletic Administrator, The SWA – The Sole Woman Administrator?, The SWA and Title IX, The SWA As A Terminal Position, and “My SWA” – The Senior Woman Advocate. Together these dilemmas characterize this role and its limitations for promoting a critical mass of women leaders in intercollegiate athletics.

If that title [SWA] did not exist, I wonder how many people would be an associate or would be a senior associate. I can look here for examples in my own [department] I'm one female and there are seven or eight others. You can't tell me you can't find a qualified woman that couldn't sit in those exact same chairs.

- *Karen, Associate Athletic Director and Senior Woman Administrator*

When the young women tell me, their goal is to be the SWA, I tell them no, that should not be your goal, your goal should be to be an athletic director or an associate senior athletic director, not necessarily to be an SWA, hopefully that role will go away someday.

- *Chris, Senior Associate Athletic Director and Senior Woman Administrator*

The Senior Woman Administrator (SWA) role is designated for the highest-ranking woman in athletic administration among National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) member schools (National Collegiate Athletic Association, [NCAA], n.d [a]). The SWA role evolved out of the NCAA takeover of the AIAW in intercollegiate athletics that emerged after the passing of Title IX policy in 1972. First named the Primary Woman Administrator (PWA) in 1981, then renamed to the current title in 1989, the SWA was assigned to the individual (man or woman) responsible for overseeing women's athletics at each institution after the NCAA took over the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) (Cahn, 1995; Carpenter & Acosta, 2001; Sack & Staurowsky, 1998). This role was created as a strategy to involve women in decision-making at the institutional, conference, and national level (Sweet & Morrison, 2006; see also Stallman, Kovalchik, Tiell, & Goff, 2006).

Today, there is often only one woman in senior level leadership positions. Acosta and Carpenter reported that among all NCAA member institutions there is an average of 3.78 administrators per institution, but only 1.32 women (Acosta & Carpenter, 2010). Among Division I athletic programs, the administrative team is larger with 5.78 administrators, but an average of only 1.71 women (2010). This underrepresentation of women means that there is "often a solitary female voice" in intercollegiate athletics administration (2010, "Administration," page 6). Several factors contribute to the low number of women in athletic leadership positions. Gender-stereotyping in leadership, gender bias in evaluation and mentoring networks (Kellerman & Rhode, 2007), homologous reproduction, (Kanter, 1993; Stangl & Kane, 1991), backlash and women's resistance (Kane, 2001), male hegemony and hegemonic masculinity (Bryson, 1994), sexism, racism, and homophobic exclusion (Cahn, 1994), gender schemas (Valian, 1998), and socially constructed stereotypes about leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007) all shed light on the low number of women in leadership.

In athletics administration, the SWA role creates a specific leadership role for women. Yet, as illustrated in the opening quotes, the senior woman administrator title creates a dilemma for women. On the one hand it helps propel women to leadership opportunities. On the other hand it is a role, not an actual position in the athletic department. This article examines the SWA and illustrates the challenges and benefits this role presents in promoting women to leadership positions after Title IX passed in 1972. Specifically, this research focuses on the question - since the passage of Title IX what influence does the SWA role have in promoting women to leadership in athletics administration?

Utilizing interviews with women in senior athletic administrator positions at Division I athletics programs this research highlights the dilemmas that the SWA designation presents. First, the historical context of the SWA of this role is described. This is followed by an overview of the previous empirical research on the SWA. This literature illustrates the persistent confusion about the SWA designation and how it creates unique dilemmas for women in athletic leadership roles.

Next the historical context of the coeducation period and the parallels to strategies women have used in attaining higher education leadership positions is described. These strategies form the conceptual framework for the data analysis. Four themes describe the dilemmas of the SWA role. The findings from this study add an additional perspective to the influence the SWA role has in promoting women to senior leadership positions today.

Background

Created in 1981 by the NCAA during an aggressive takeover of the AIAW and women's championships (Cahn, 1995; Carpenter & Acosta, 2001; Festle, 1996; Hult, 1994; Sack & Staurowsky, 1998), the stated purpose of the SWA was to integrate women in the governance of women's athletics. During this time, most institutions were merging the previously separate men's and women's athletic departments into one program (Estler & Nelson, 2005). Under these new organizational structures and combined athletic department arrangements, the men's program director assumed leadership of athletic department. The women's athletic program director was demoted to a title of associate or assistant athletic director.

The NCAA created the Primary Woman Administrator (PWA) designation as an "inducement to gain votes" from women leaders in the AIAW for NCAA sponsorship of women's championships (Hult, 1994, p. 99). This ensured the representation of women in the governance structure (Hosick, 2005; NCAA, 2005) by guaranteeing 16 percent of the NCAA Council and 18 to 24 percent on other committees (Hult, 1994). Through the PWA, "a token number of women entered the NCAA hierarchy" (Hult, 1994, p. 99). In 1989 however, the title was changed to Senior Woman Administrator or SWA. Renaming the role clarified the responsibilities of the SWA and designated the SWA role for women.

The SWA role also infused women into decision-making under the old NCAA convention structure. Prior to 1997, NCAA voting for legislation took place at the annual convention. Each NCAA member institution sent a delegation that included the university president, faculty athletic representative, and senior woman administrator. Together the delegation submitted the institutional vote on NCAA legislation from the convention floor (Crowley, 2006). Later, concern over the potential legal issues associated with the SWA designation, prompted review and clarified it even further to a role rather than a job title or description (Copeland, 2005; Hosick, 2005).

Today the intent of the SWA position as described by the NCAA is focused on “active involvement of female administrators as part of the athletics management team with program-wide administrative responsibilities, including decision-making at the institutional, conference, and national levels” (Sweet & Morrison, 2006, p. 8; see also Stallman, et al., 2006). Among the potential areas of responsibility at the institutional level are: senior management team decision-making, gender equity and Title IX, student-athlete advocate and educator, role model and resource, assisting student-athletes with balancing athletics and academics, and the Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act report (Sweet & Morrison, 2006; see also Stallman, et al., 2006). Areas of suggested involvement include many areas of department work including: supervising sports programs, budget, fund-raising, marketing, compliance, governance, hiring, supervising, and dismissing personnel. Also noted is monitoring implementation of the gender-equity plan and advocating for women in the athletic department (Sweet & Morrison, 2006; see also Stallman, et al., 2006).

Previous Literature on the SWA

Since its implementation, the SWA role has been inconsistent and women serving in this capacity have been highly vulnerable to the athletic director or the department culture. In some cases there are no women in athletic department administration or the role is designated but with little authority or support (NCAA, 2005). Despite more recent efforts to define the role from a legal standpoint and add clarity for women at the institutional level, there remains a wide range of differences in perceptions about the tasks and responsibilities associated with this role.

Among the first research that investigated the SWA role, Carpenter and Acosta (1992) gathered data on career experiences and job application patterns of women SWAs across all NCAA divisions. The study focused on women who held the SWA designation for greater than 10 years because they provided “significant historical perspective and professional experience,” had been in athletic leadership positions before the demise of the AIAW, and witnessed the decline of women leaders in intercollegiate athletics (Carpenter & Acosta, 1992, p. 3). The women in the 1992 survey reported stability in their coaching and administration positions. The results suggested that despite their qualifications, including an average of 2.2 higher education degrees per respondent, most women in the study had not contemplated a job change or sought other positions. However, when asked what incentives would encourage them to change jobs, the top three responses were: higher salary, matching authority with responsibility, and “don’t make me wear more than one hat” (p. 4). The theme of inconsistency and variation in perceptions of tasks, authority, responsibility, particularly for decision-making authority, are themes that continue throughout the literature (Watson, 1994; Clausen & Lehr, 2002; Tiell, 2004; Pent, Grappendorf, & Henderson, 2007; Grappendorf et al. 2008; Tiell & Dixon, 2008).

Shortly after the 1992 Acosta and Carpenter study, the NCAA surveyed women SWAs, and found confusion and inconsistency about the SWA title and responsibilities among member institutions (Watson, 1994). Furthermore, only 18 percent of the respondents indicated that they had decision-making authority. In a 1999 survey of Division I and III SWAs, uniformity in the profile of women SWAs between divisions was found with only some differences with regard to Title IX responsibility (Swearingen, 1999). In addition, both groups reported that the “SWA was in ‘name only’ with no assigned duties” (Swearingen, 1999, p. 37).

Tiell (2004) examined differences in perceptions of the SWA role and tasks between athletic directors and SWAs at Division II institutions. Among the findings, athletic directors and SWAs are in agreement about jobs and duties performed by SWAs for men's issues and gender-neutral roles, but their beliefs about the roles related to decision-making and women's issues were not consistent. Additionally, athletic directors believed SWAs are more involved in "group work participation, athletic program governance, and decision-making" which was conflicting with what SWAs responded to in the survey (Tiell, 2004, p. 204).

The differences in perceptions between athletic directors and SWAs at the Division III level in later research by Tiell (NCAA, 2005) found similar differences between SWAs and athletic directors. In particular, the differences were in the areas of budget and finance, fund-raising, and personnel decision-making (NCAA, 2005). This was also true of differences between SWAs and athletic directors with regard to how much SWA perform roles "related to core management team participation" (Tiell & Dixon, 2008, p. 339).

Variability in decision-making authority among SWAs was also found by Tiell (2004) and is consistent with earlier studies by Clausen and Lehr (2002), Grappendorf, Pent, Burton, and Henderson (2008) and Tiell and Dixon (2008). Clausen and Lehr (2002) examined the degree of decision-making authority in 11 areas among SWAs at athletic programs at all three NCAA divisions. The 11 decision-making areas include: student-athlete concerns, gender equity, business affairs, personnel affairs, external communication, marketing/development, athletic advisory committee, legislative process, disciplinary/grievance procedures, strategic planning, and mission/philosophy formulation. Their findings suggest that most SWAs have "only advisory authority for most functions" (Clausen & Lehr, 2002, p. 223), such as being consulted or informed rather than responsibility or approval for decisions.

However, SWAs among Division I athletic programs did have decision-making authority to a greater degree than their peers at Division II and III (Clausen & Lehr, 2002). This may be due to SWAs in Division I having administrative titles rather than coaching roles, as is often the case with Division II and III. This is also consistent with Tiell's (2004) findings about the SWA role among Division II institutions. Tiell (2004) found that 56 percent of the respondents did not have an administrative title (i.e. Assistant or Associate Athletic Director) associated with their SWA role.

The greater incidence of decision-making in an advisory capacity among Division I SWAs is also thought to be attributed to the specialization inherent to athletic department areas such as compliance, media relations, finance, and advising (Clausen & Lehr, 2002). Women collect in service roles and "paperwork jobs" (Groth as cited in Maurer, 1999, p. 127) of the department (i.e. compliance and advising). Furthermore, the SWA role emerged at the same time as the compliance unit. This coincidence "wasn't too good for women" further tracking women into roles with organizational and advisory functions, rather than decision-making authority (Groth as cited in Maurer, 1999, p. 127).

Women are also "tracked" into overseeing women's programs rather than external roles such as marketing men's sports that generate revenue (Clausen & Lehr, 2002, p. 224). A notable exception for decision-making authority among Division I programs is related to gender equity. Women reported having authority in this area. The perception that the SWA is responsible for representing women's interests is seen as "a natural part of the SWA's realm of responsibility, regardless of their actual job description" (Clausen & Lehr, 2002, p. 224).

Grappendorf et al. (2008) examined the perceptions of SWA regarding their participation in areas of financial decision-making within intercollegiate athletics. Analyses of SWAs from all three NCAA divisions showed that SWAs “were often not involved in various areas of financial decision making” (p. 40). Grappendorf et al. found that respondents from all divisions wanted more decision-making authority in financial areas such as operations, budgeting, capital outlay, salary considerations, media broadcast contracts, and sponsorship advertising. Pent, Grappendorf and Henderson (2007) also studied the actual versus desired levels of participation in financial decision making of SWAs in all three NCAA division categories. They found SWAs desire more participation with finance decision-making than they are currently involved in.

Finally, SWAs at Division I athletics departments noted the role’s potential for the future (Hatfield, 2003; Hatfield, Hatfield & Drummond, 2009). When participants were asked to select from a list of SWA responsibilities and respond to the question, “*What should be the primary functions of the SWA?*” advocating for women’s athletics or supporting others received the highest response. Specifically, 88.3 percent of respondents noted advocating for women’s athletics, 80 percent noted gender equity, and 75.2 percent indicated serving as role model. Over half of SWAs also indicated that mentoring should be a primary function of the SWA. SWAs reported moderate levels of satisfaction with their responsibilities, job, authority, and their ability to mentor others in the department. Respondents were also aware that they served as role models in the department.

Less than half responded that the primary function should be in financial areas such as budgeting (40%), marketing women’s athletics (33.1%) and fundraising for women’s athletics (24.8%). This finding is in contrast to the Pent, Grappendorf, and Henderson (2007) study that found SWAs indicated a desire for *more* financial decision-making opportunities. Lough & Grappendorf (2008) argue that without experiences in financial decision-making, “women will continue to systematically be denied access to the athletic director position” (p. 204). Experience related to highly visible football and basketball programs that generate revenue is an established track to the highest levels of leadership in the athletic department (author, forthcoming). The contrast in the findings on related to the SWA role and financial decisions from previous studies further illustrate the confusion about this role.

The previous research describes the discrepancies that surround the SWA role, some of the unintended outcomes, and the pipeline of potential women in intercollegiate athletics. Still, the complexities of this role are not fully understood. For example, it is not clear whether the SWA role is a terminal career position or prepares women leaders for career advancement (Hatfield 2003; Hatfield, Hatfield, & Drummond, 2009).

Introducing an additional framework is helpful for untangling the discrepancies and unintended outcomes related to the SWA role and build on the previous literature. The context of higher education and parallels to other women leaders in traditionally male-dominated fields of the academy presented in the next section provide an alternate lens to analyze women’s leadership in this area of the campus environment. College athletics is situated in higher education institutions, and the history of women leaders in higher education provides a rich framework to further examine the SWA role today. The historical context of women physical education leaders that precluded women in athletic administration and the implications for women in contemporary athletic leadership is presented in the next section.

Historical Context of Women Higher Education Leaders in Coeducation

The Senior Woman Administrator, “The SWA,” is an artifact reminiscent of the separate sphere, coeducation period of higher education (Clifford, 1989; Gordon, 1990; Newcomer, 1959; Nidiffer, 2000). From the onset of coeducation at the turn of the century until the late 1960s, the purpose of education was differentiated by gender. Educating women for a separate purpose in previously all-male institutions was met with resistance. For example, women were only allowed to enroll only in “certain departments such as domestic science or the normal program” (Nidiffer, 2000, p. 25). It was also feared that women students would feminize the university, lower academic standards, and were in need of supervision (Nidiffer, 2000). Responding to this resistance was met in part by women faculty and staff such as Deans of Women and Women’s Physical Education faculty.

Throughout this period early women leaders utilized four strategies and combinations of strategies to overcome resistance to women students and barriers to their own leadership within higher education. Initially, described by Glazer and Slater (1987), these four strategies were further developed by Nidiffer (2000). The strategies used by women leaders throughout the coeducation period are super-performance, subordination, innovation, and separatism.

First, through super-performance women “sought status through extraordinary efforts and a willingness to sacrifice traditional relationships” in professional roles (Nidiffer, 2000, p.8). These women rarely married or had children and were often the “token woman – the isolated individual functioning with, but never fully accepted by, the male enclave” in professional settings such as the men’s medical schools or the practice of medicine (Glazer & Slater, 1987, p. 71).

Second, using subordination as a strategy, women accepted a “subordinate position within a male-dominated profession” (Nidiffer, 2000, p. 8). Women were constantly under pressure to out-perform men and found limitations to the number of super-performers. Therefore subordination allowed women to develop occupations that required higher education in fields such as nursing, home economics, and library science (Glazer & Slater, 1987).

A third strategy was innovation, by which women established new professional fields that were out of the direct competition with men. This meant moving to locations with few men or areas ignored by dominate professions. In higher education the emergence of Deans of Women, was in part an innovation strategy, serving “a ‘client’ (women students) largely ignored by men” (Nidiffer, 2000, p. 8). Often this allowed women to remove themselves from direct competition with male professionals. Women kept out of chemistry and nutrition faculty roles initially found success studying human nutrition research by establishing home economics departments, while men were focused on animal research in biology departments (Glazer & Slater, 1987). Finally, through separatism, women assumed leadership roles in traditionally male disciplines within all-women environments. For example women held senior administration and faculty roles at all women’s colleges (Nidiffer, 2000).

During coeducation women leaders in physical education used combinations of these strategies to create a women-led profession and protect their control on women’s athletic participation. As the interest for competitive, spectator athletics grew among women students separate women’s athletics departments were created, and led by women athletic directors. This separatist strategy was effective during the end of the coeducation period when men and women were educated for a different purpose.

Women leaders in physical education and the organizations that eventually formed the AIAW had success in developing a distinct model of competitive women's athletics. This model also used innovation strategies. This model emphasized participation and placed limits on commercialization. Establishing a new model of athletics and a separate department kept women's athletics out of direct competition with men's programs in the early years of the AIAW.

Through combinations of subordination, innovation, and separatism women's athletic departments initially thrived. However, the onset of gender equity and other civil rights reforms, post-World War II initiated cultural shifts that gave momentum to Title IX policy. These changes influenced the purpose of educating women, reinforcing the notion that education for men and women should be equal and not for separate purposes. These extraordinary social, political, and educational changes also ushered changes in the ways women navigated the ascent to leadership roles in higher education.

After the NCAA takeover of the AIAW, the NCAA created the SWA role. The combinations of innovation and subordination strategies characterize the SWA role and are significant in explaining the dilemmas with this role after Title IX. The equity that Title IX mandated changed the purpose of education. This limited the usefulness of the strategies women leaders had used in the coeducation era. Title IX made these strategies ineffective and reduced the strategies for advancement available to women leaders to one: super-performance. This reliance on a single strategy, characterized by tokenism and isolation, does not give a critical mass of women access to leadership roles.

The historical context of shifting from a separatist women's athletic department governed by the AIAW to the subordinate SWA role overseeing women's athletics within the NCAA is significant. The previous literature on the SWA and the historical context of women's leadership strategies frame the dilemmas of the SWA role today. These frameworks are used to address the influence the SWA role has on promoting women to leadership in athletics administration after the passage of Title IX.

Method

To address what influence the SWA role has in promoting women to leadership in athletic administration, women who currently serve as SWAs were interviewed. The data for the analysis of the SWA role was drawn from a larger study investigating the role of Title IX on the decline of women in athletic leadership roles today. Since the passage of Title IX in 1972, there are roughly three generations of women in senior athletic administration: 1) the re-pioneering women that were in athletic administrators during or shortly after Title IX passed, 2) the contemporary generation of women who are currently senior associate and athletic directors, and 3) the next generation of women at the assistant and associate athletic director level today. This study focuses on the perspectives of women in the contemporary generation of senior woman administrators in the Far West among Division I institutions. Qualitative interviews were conducted to examine the senior woman administrator role and how it presents dilemmas for women in athletic administration in the post-Title IX gender equity era of higher education.

Potential institutions were identified from the Far West region based on NCAA Division I member status and generational history of women's athletic leadership. Although there is some slight variation by institution, the schools represented in this study had no more than two women at the senior associate level since the NCAA takeover of the AIAW in 1982 – a re-pioneer and a contemporary. However, the contemporary generation is the focus of this study.

Next, eligible participants were determined based on years of service at their institution, relationship to the re-pioneering generation, and Senior Woman Administrator status. The experiences of women in the study vary in terms of geographic region and conference affiliation within the Far West. However, regional constraints, NCAA division, and generational criteria limit the number of participants.

Six women participated in the study; two self-identified as ethnic minorities. All participants are involved in decision-making at their institution and hold leadership roles, including the SWA role at their institution and on the athletic department senior management team. Lastly, all participants were recruited using publicly available sources and in accordance with Human Subjects guidelines established for this study. The women participating in this study were assured that neither their names nor the names of their institutions would be revealed and would be held in the strictest confidence. The pseudonyms, Beth, Chris, Karen, Kim, Melanie, and Pam, are used to distinguish participants in the study.

Interviews were conducted in person using a standard set of guide questions in a semi-structured format. Interview questions were developed from previous literature on women's leadership in higher education. External experts reviewed the interview guide questions. Interviews were 60-90 minutes in length.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. From the transcripts a coding system was developed that identified themes and concepts. The codes and themes were integrated into conceptually dense concepts (Strauss, 1987) about the role of the SWA and women in athletic leadership. Patton's (1980) indigenous and sensitizing concepts were used to identify concepts and develop theory. The data analysis was guided by "a highly self-conscious" grounded theory approach (Strauss, 1987, p. 9). Grounded theory develops conceptually rich concepts from empirical evidence (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of women's athletic leadership opportunities and roles in higher education.

Additionally, the data was evaluated using a critical post-structural feminist view of women's leadership in college athletics. Feminist post-structuralism illuminates the ways in which power is socially constructed through practices that disadvantage women. Feminist post-structuralism acknowledges the multiplicity of power relations between women and men and among women (Baxter, 2003) in organizations, social relationships, language, customs, practices, and policy (Weedon, 1997). This integration of critical post-structural feminist perspectives and grounded theory in the data analysis illuminates the gendering of power and the dilemmas the SWA role creates for women in athletic leadership.

Analysis

The SWA designation started as a role for women in the all male-governance structure of the NCAA and some athletic conferences. However it has pinched the pipeline to a single woman, often confined to gender equity or compliance. From the interviews and institutional analysis with the women of the contemporary generation of this study, five themes that explain the influence of the SWA on women's leadership in athletics emerged. The first theme describes the evolution of the SWA role. The next four themes describe the dilemmas of the SWA role today. The analysis of these themes is divided into the following sections: *The Early "SWA" vs. Today's Senior Associate Athletic Administrator*, *The SWA – The Sole Woman Administrator?*, *The SWA and Title IX*, *The SWA As A Terminal Position*, and, *"My SWA" – The Senior Woman Advocate*. These themes help clarify the influence the SWA role has on women leaders in intercollegiate athletics today.

The Early "SWA" vs. Today's Senior Associate Athletic Administrator

Despite the subordinated role, the SWA designation was initially an effective strategy for women to gain entrance to NCAA governance during the transition shift from an all-male governing organization to one serving both women's and men's departments. In particular, the SWA role gave women access to university presidents in two important ways in the early years of the designation - at the NCAA conventions and later in the NCAA athletic certification process. Under the old convention style, delegates voted on legislation from the convention floor. Delegates included university presidents, athletic directors, the faculty athletics representatives (FAR) and the SWAs. This convention and voting style gave women high contact with university presidents in important decision-making opportunities.

According to Melanie, "when we used to have NCAA conventions, I got to know our presidents very well, because we'd sit there and got to vote together and all that, plus being a senior woman administrator, that really helped in terms of getting to know the president" (2006). The contact with university presidents during this era was important for networking and for creating opportunities for women to be seen in leadership roles by other high-ranking decision makers and administrators.

Not only was the SWA role helpful in getting to know the president at the institution, but it also afforded the opportunity to meet other presidents as well. The NCAA certification process and convention formats created more opportunities for the SWA to work with several university presidents. One SWA stated,

The women in my era, we got to know the presidents, because of the conventions and the old convention styles and [NCAA] athletic certification. A lot of us were on those early certification teams... that were headed up by presidents. I got to know 4-5 presidents just through that, so you knew them one-on-one.

This visibility with presidents is important because it positioned women in the SWA role in visible decision-making roles and high contact with university presidents. The SWA role helped create opportunities to interact with presidents that most likely women would not have.

Chris also noted that the NCAA athletic certification was helpful in giving SWAs access to leadership and decision-making situations. However, that is quite different today. The NCAA convention no longer provide such opportunities. She recognizes that “they’ve changed that process now...that has all changed.” Melanie recalls how helpful the convention experiences were for her early in her career,

As a young woman, I got to sit there and [I’d know] everybody. We’d see faces and really get to know each other, and took a vote on each [legislative item]. Now the convention, I didn’t even go last year. [A former AD] called me the other day because he is doing a lot of consulting and stuff and [an institution] is looking for an AD, DIAA or AAA, [and said], “I just really need some young, energetic up and coming [candidates].” I don’t know them anymore. It’s sad.

With both the NCAA convention and certification changes, opportunities for presidents to get to know women leaders in athletics have been eliminated. These changes impact networking for women among university presidents and reduces the opportunities presidents have to see women as leaders in athletics.

This role initiated by the NCAA wasn’t solely designed to increase women in NCAA governance. It also gave women a role at the institutional level, “my generation in particular, in the early and late 80s, [there were] a lot of hires” However, this mainly occurred because women’s sports were not viewed very highly. According to Karen, the men athletic directors weren’t interested in oversight of women’s athletics. She notes, “[after] the NCAA took over women’s championships athletic directors didn’t want anything to do with women. Here is where the SWAs came in, [the men ADs said] ‘here you take the these teams’” When viewed through the strategies used by women leaders in coeducation, the oversight of an area of athletics that the athletic director was not interested in helped women carve out this leadership role under the combined athletic department arrangement.

Although the SWA role initially created a place for women leaders, it also presented a new dilemma. This innovative strategy created a situation where women at the senior level were only seen as SWAs – not senior associate athletic directors. Melanie elaborates on this dilemma,

What I despise, is being introduced as the senior women’s administrator. I want to be the senior associate director of athletics. I don’t want to be a senior woman administrator, and that clarification is not clearly out there. The other day we had an event and men’s basketball coach said, ‘here’s (colleague), senior woman administrator.’ They don’t even know what a senior woman administrator is but ...its always on everything, so they get up at their banquets and they say, “I want to thank [Melanie], our senior woman’s administrator.” But I’m not. I’m your senior associate AD.

Today, the role has evolved into the only title that women are known for, rather than their status as senior level athletics administrators.

When the SWA role is viewed through the strategies used by women leaders during coeducation one can see that it has lost some of its initial benefits. Pam described how the innovation strategy – serving a population ignored by men – devalued the work of the SWA. She explained how an SWA was treated at another institution,

SWA was treated in an old school model, she only had women’s sports...She had all this stuff piled on her plate, which freed the AD up to do whatever he wanted and not only that, she was sort of gender relegated to only “women’s stuff,” the women’s banquet, etcetera.

In the era of gender equity, this strategy of accepting a subordinate position within a male-dominated governance structure initially created more opportunities for women leaders, but not every woman was able to use the SWA role for advancement. Instead, the role has posed four dilemmas for women athletic leaders.

The SWA – The Sole Woman Administrator?

Today, the senior woman administrator is often the *only* woman administrator, if any, in the senior management team. This is a situation that many institutions are satisfied with. This complacency with promoting just one woman to senior athletics administration is described by Melanie, Kim, and Beth. Melanie shared, “if there is one woman on the senior administration team, then I think at a lot of schools, they are happy.” Kim and Beth described it this way:

Here's the worst part, heaven forbid we have two women at the senior level. 'I've filled my SWA role - I got that done. Now I can go out and hire these males my African-American or white, because I've got my SWA role.' Oh my goodness, two? Rarely, in any athletic department do you have two high level females and where you see it is if the AD is female then you see it.

I think of a lot of institutions, [say] 'Ok, we've got our one woman, that's all we need.' Where people should be looking to number one hire the best people available, number two to have diversity in their staff, because it strengthens all of us. But there is sure a heck of a lot of institutions, that you don't see that kind of diversity, you have the one woman, and 'Ok, we've fulfilled our commitment now, we've got our one woman, let's move on.'

The SWA designation reinforces the sole woman administrator in two ways – through changes in the athletic director and how SWA vacancies are handled. Institutions, usually through the athletic director, have the choice of hiring another woman into the senior administration from the outside or assigning the role of SWA to the next highest-ranking woman in the organization. Melanie describes both scenarios. If there is a vacancy Melanie said, “hopefully, [a woman] gets pulled up [into senior administration], but he could just be bringing his woman [SWA] too.”

In addition, the SWA designation makes women vulnerable to changes in athletic department senior level administration. Newly hired athletic directors (ADs) may bring in another woman to serve in that role, displacing the current SWA. It is also not uncommon now for a newly hired athletic director to bring additional staff, including a senior woman administrator. In the case of an SWA vacancy, schools can just give the SWA role to the next highest woman without promoting her to senior associate athletic director; therefore, the requirement has been fulfilled. “That's why at lot of places, when the SWA leaves, they are just elevating somebody internally...instead of going out and trying to find one of the top women administrators in the county” leaving a senior associate team with a lower ranking woman.

What results is shifting a few women around from institution to institution, keeping only one woman on the senior management team, rather than pulling more women into the senior team. Karen noted the practice of promoting only one woman at a time,

If that title (SWA) did not exist, I wonder how many people would be an associate or would be a senior associate. I can look here for example in my own area I'm one female and there are seven or eight others. You can't tell me you can't find a qualified woman that couldn't sit in those exact same chairs.

With the changes in education brought on by Title IX, both in terms of providing program equity and changes in attitude about women's sports, women's programs are rarely separate and are seen as more valuable. Karen describes the attitudes of the mostly male athletic directors toward women's athletics today. She notes that initially, the all-men AD's had little interest in women's athletics. She notes, "then what started to happen was, 'We like these women's teams. They are good students.' Our current AD loves our women's teams."

This has also created a shift in strategies the SWA role can leverage. Previously, SWAs used subordination, separatism, and innovation. In most cases, this has been replaced by super-performance, which reinforces tokenism and reduces the number of women in the upper levels of leadership, instead of promoting a critical mass of women. Furthermore, being the only woman creates a burden for women SWAs.

Chris describes the difference between being the only woman and opportunities she's had to work with more women senior associate athletic directors. She shared, "it's a blessing to me, actually, it's prolonged my career. I'd probably be retired by now if it weren't for that." Chris elaborated on the day-to-day challenge of being the only woman in the leadership of the athletic department,

After you spend so many years that you are the only woman, no matter, all the people I've always worked with have been good people, but it's a grind. It wears on you, because you are usually the person with a different point of view or so you are always playing these mental games, should I speak up, should I keep quiet, how important is this? Is this worth fighting about? Well I don't have to do that anymore.

Being the only woman on the senior team presents constant conflict for SWAs. The continual inner dialogue of being the only woman is further compounded by the roles and responsibilities of the SWA role.

The SWA and Title IX

Institutions are responsible for compliance with Title IX. However it is the SWA role that has the obligation of bringing Title IX issues to the attention of the department. Although SWAs are not individually responsible, the woman with the SWA designation often works under the direction of the institution's Equal Opportunity Office to monitor Title IX and supervise the institution's NCAA gender equity plan. As the SWA role has evolved, the responsibility has shifted from the obvious Title IX issues to subtle differences within the overall program. Beth describes the obligation of the SWA to raise equity issues,

So I do think it is incumbent on the SWA to sort of ring that bell. I would be disappointed if the SWA wasn't ringing that bell. Subtle as it is, I'm fully expecting an SWA to ring that bell and if she is not, shame on her. You have to have that courage, to say "hey AD" by the way. You don't have to do it with force or anything, but I think the SWA is in the room to keep ringing that bell.

Although all members of the senior staff are responsible for Title IX compliance, including the athletic director, the SWA position still assumes a lot of this responsibility.

Yet, this obligation creates a dilemma for women in the SWA role. Chris describes the danger that gender equity oversight presents for the SWA,

I used to be quite a crusader, and it hurts you professionally, [but] it is my responsibility. It came up just the other day we were talking about a program [issue]. [I said], “we have an equity issue here.” It is my job to do that, the problem is you have to have good working relationships, because otherwise you get pigeonholed and I've seen it. It has happened to me as sort of the rebel, the person carrying, it's hard. It's a burden for women to carry it and they shouldn't [have to] carry it.

The women in this study did not have to fight directly for Title IX legislation, largely because those battles had been fought by the previous generation. Karen expressed how it is not as difficult today as it was for the generation before her,

I mean it was tough going - my generation, I felt it to a certain degree, but [predecessor]'s generation, really felt it. They really fought the battles, but it wasn't easy. It's still not easy. Still people don't want to hear it. In some ways though I've changed because, women athletes are having the most terrific experience they can have.

Even though it is better today in terms of Title IX compliance and equity for women student-athletes at the institutions in this study, it is still not easy. Being the only woman on the senior management team coupled with the responsibility for gender equity issues brought on by the SWA role create a dilemma trying to meet this obligation.

There are some issues for women student-athletes where the role of SWA is the designated point of oversight. Beth spoke of being the only woman and the burden of having to make tough Title IX decisions or raise equity issues. She states,

We are not all going to like each other, but I'm at least going to get my point across. Sometimes, I feel like, I should have done, more. I did this and I did this, you get frustrated, because you are caught between. I don't always want to go to work and fight a conflict battle day in and day out, but I also don't let all these people down that are looking up to you. Because guess what, there is only one of you.

Similarly, Kim spoke of instances of being the only woman on the senior team and the only person with a different perspective on Title IX issues. Even though the athletic directors and other administrators on the senior team are very supportive of gender equity and respectful of differences in her department, there is a palpable effect of gender,

I think it is very unconscious because I did see it in [former AD] and [another former AD]. Even though, I would say things and they would say, ‘that is so not true’ and I'm like, alright, whatever, I'm not saying that because I'm a woman, I'm saying that because that is what I see... maybe it is because I'm a woman.

Even though the burden of fighting for Title IX compliance has not been the same for the contemporary generation that it was for the re-pioneering generation, the responsibility of the SWA role while being the only woman at the table has created a narrow path for women leaders who want to advance. If a woman is vocal about Title IX she is often seen as only concerned about women's issues; however, if she is not speaking up enough about Title IX, then she is not fulfilling the SWA obligation.

The SWA as a Terminal Position

Women leaders are hard pressed to avoid caretaking units such as academic support and compliance within the athletic department even though responsibility in these areas can advance woman leaders into the senior team through the SWA role. However, once designated with that role, the caretaking units can direct women on a career path as far as a senior associate athletic director and not to the athletic director role. As a result, the SWA may increasingly be a terminal role rather than mechanism for career advancement (Hatfield, 2003; Hatfield, Hatfield, & Drummond, 2009), disadvantaging women leaders as individuals if athletic departments are highly compartmentalized in how responsibilities are designated among the senior staff.

Chris noted that the SWA role combined with supervising other department units makes it more difficult for women to advance, “I think it can be a disadvantage, depending on how you are pigeon-holed in your institution. For example, if your only experience is overseeing women's sports or in the traditional women's roles of academics or compliance or something like that, it can be a disadvantage.” The SWA role provides no long term advancement benefit if it is coupled with the many of the service-oriented areas of the department.

Beth spoke of the services “ghetto” (i.e. academic advising) that often accompany the SWA role and the dilemma it presents for women’s advancement in athletic administration.

If women don't start thinking of it as a ghetto and getting out of it, if you say ‘ooh it brings value and I'm working with student-athletes,’ but the men see it as a ghetto. You can look at the [organizational] structure and just see ‘oh the SWA has no power at that school.’

Kim was aware of this stigma when she was asked her to oversee academics during a departmental reorganization. She resisted because she knew that the implications of this career decision would curtail her ability to become an athletic director. More specifically, Kim is well aware that the work of caring for athletes is perceived as the domain of women and therefore, caretaking work does not prepare or promote advancement into leadership.

Karen also worked in academic support and explained how this can develop into a career in advising, whereas compliance has been a path to more decision-making roles as SWAs for women. Karen notes,

I think when you are in academics, you stay in there because you truly, you really like that. When you go into compliance, you'll notice a lot of SWAs, a majority will oversee compliance in some manner or form, or they have come up through the ranks in compliance. Of the ten women that I was on (the NCAA) committee with, at least seven of them did compliance directly, came up through compliance, or oversee compliance.

Although compliance is seen as less gender-specific compared to other work, it is not a viable path for athletic leadership preparation or advancement. Compliance in combination with the SWA role simply creates short-term advancement for women leaders. Beth reaffirms this as she noted the increase of women administering or overseeing compliance since the rise of the SWA. She states, “what's happened in the last decade, the last 15 years, more and more SWAs are doing compliance, they are not necessarily at the decision-making table.” Chris also cited an example of the trap that compliance can create for anyone who wants to become an athletic director,

We had a young woman who had worked with us as an intern and she worked with the NCAA and she was in compliance. We had a compliance position open and she took that position and actually I advised her to really think about it...it's real easy to get pigeon-holed into compliance. For both males and females. If you look at whose getting athletic director's jobs, its not compliance people.

Similarly, Beth pointed out specifically why compliance creates a difficult path to the athletic director chair. She states, "women that are in compliance aren't going to be ADs...you might get some of the management over here in compliance, but you're not managing coaches."

The SWA role and responsibility for compliance does position women at the decision-making table, but not in the important external areas of managing money and coaches related to men's football and basketball that are essential for advancement. Interestingly, current SWAs understand the limitations of the role and tend to communicate this with the next generation of women in athletics. One SWA shared,

When the young women tell me, their goal is to be the SWA, I tell them no, that should not be your goal, your goal should be to be an athletic director or an associate senior athletic director, not necessarily to be an SWA, hopefully that role will go away someday.

Ultimately, for contemporary and next generation women leaders, combining the SWA role with service-specific responsibilities further reinforces the SWA as a terminal career role.

"My SWA" – The Senior Woman Advocate

The role of the SWA is often seen, and promoted by the NCAA, as an advocate for women student-athletes and women staff. This is another delicate balance to navigate for women athletic leaders. Too much advocacy for women and women's programs by a woman athletic leader, especially when framed in terms of Title IX, is viewed negatively. Chris described this as "crusading" and limits a woman's advancement within an institution's athletic leadership structure.

Nonetheless, the need for providing a safe haven and an open door for anyone in the department who has a question or a concern that might relate to a women's issue is still very much needed. Chris noted, "as new people are coming in from other institutions, that have had different experiences as coaches of women's sports they see me as their advocate and I really didn't appreciate that until we started to have some turnover in our coaching positions." This is not only true for women student-athletes, coaches, and staff, but men who coach women's teams or work with women student-athletes who have also benefited from this role. According to Kim,

For whatever reason if it is sexual, we have quite a few female coaches, but we have quite a few male coaches that supervise female students, they don't know how to address that either, so they will come to me. Staff members that are female and are having a problem with their supervisor who happens to be a male, or is it a higher level than they are, equal to me or lower than me, they would come to me.

Navigating the territory of creating a source of women's advocacy, working towards providing a safe place for mentoring and problem solving, while still being taken seriously as a senior associate athletic administrator is difficult. Chris, Melanie, and Karen all spoke to this issue. Chris added,

Earlier in my career, problems came up and you want to solve all the problems well, it took me longer than it should have, but it didn't take me long to figure out, you can't solve everybody's problem, so I focus on how I can help people deal with their own issues and to attack them and present them and talk about them and those kinds of things. But they say things like "my SWA," like I'm a possession of theirs so its a phenomenon I can't even say I understand.

Karen just avoids using the term when she can, "I think that is why the senior woman administrator title, a number of women don't use it. I rarely use it because it pigeon holes you" (2006). While there is definitely a need for an advocate and a safe place for women student-athletes and staff, balancing the caretaking role of the SWA and the leadership role on the senior management team, creates a complicated position for women leaders. The SWA title and role creates a symbol and perception of women only as caretakers, rather than as decision-makers.

The Dilemma of the SWA

When the NCAA initiated the SWA role it replicated strategies from the coeducation era in which women's athletics were a separate, distinct entity. Many women in the contemporary generation of SWAs effectively used the combination of separatism and innovation to achieve leadership roles. However, the shift in the purpose of educating women to equity has left these strategies inadequate for advancing a critical mass of women to leadership roles.

Today, the SWA role reinforces super-performance, the "token woman – an isolated individual functioning with, but never fully accepted by, the male enclave" in intercollegiate athletics (Glazer & Slater, 1987, p. 71). Super-performance remains the only strategy available to women who seek the highest levels of athletic leadership among Division I institutions -- the senior associate and athletic director positions.

The analysis in this study illuminates the dilemmas presented by the SWA. Despite the benefits of this role in practice for a few women who effectively leverage super-performance, this role limits the advancement of a critical mass of women. The gender equity advocacy responsibility and perception, oversight of student-athlete welfare, the responsibility for Title IX, combined with the complacency of only having one woman reinforces the SWA role as a terminal role. In many ways the dilemmas of the SWA role further inhibit the individual efforts of women leaders to advance in intercollegiate athletic administration.

However the most striking dilemmas are in the inconsistency of this role. It offers protection and advancement for some women but results in problems for other women. Two women in this study characterize these dilemmas in a striking way. Both leveraged their SWA status to gain access to opportunities and remain in management. Even as changes in staff and organizational structures have occurred, they remained in the athletic department at their institution. Without the SWA role, their status on the senior management team would have been threatened or curtailed. In different ways, they leveraged the SWA role to ensure a seat at the leadership and decision-making table.

This role was also used to ward off threats to their senior administration status. Both attributed their initial management status to athletic directors and university leaders who took an interest in them or recognized their contribution within the department and helped them advance. The SWA role positioned them to remain in those decision-making seats and continue to move up. The SWA role gave them opportunities for learning skills and meeting the people that would reinforce their status in that position. For Kim, as changes occurred in her department, the SWA role was integral in maintaining the ground she had gained. She notes that without the SWA designation, her seat on the senior team would have been compromised when there was a change in athletic directors. She explains,

In the first year [of a previous AD's] tenure, [he] made a lot of changes in the department...and I was promoted to SWA....There is no doubt in my mind that I would not be a senior associate, if I wasn't a woman [in the SWA role], no doubt. Not under the leadership that was here formerly.

For Kim, being on the senior team is essential to her career advancement and the SWA as a pathway was a benefit. Kim was part of the department's leadership team, but she was at the associate level. Without the SWA designation, she would have lost her status on the senior team. Under the new department structure and the change in athletic directors, she would have remained at the associate level and not promoted to the senior associate athletic director if not for the SWA designation. This is an important promotion because it positioned her to work with football and university presidents that she otherwise would not have had. Kim's example is particularly poignant. It underscores the fact that individual women are much more vulnerable to circumstances in the athletic department, regardless of their job responsibilities.

Pam also took full advantage of the opportunities the SWA role provided. In combination with super-performance, she leveraged the SWA role at the conference level. However, the SWA role is inconsistent at both the conference and institutional level. She states,

You are really, really rubbing shoulders with other ADs and other presidents, you can't do that from any other seat....Within some conferences the SWA is relegated to a secondary role. I was fortunate to be in a conference, where the SWAs are at the table.

Pam spoke directly to this issue for the SWA role at the institutional level too noting, "you can really tell that the [NCAA] is trying to develop women's leadership. It's a great position; the intent is good. What the NCAA is trying to force everybody to do with it, but the [institution] can totally neuter the position." This can greatly impact their access to opportunities that would position them to be recognized as senior associate athletic administrators or potential athletic directors. As a result, the SWA designation is an inadequate tool to create a critical mass of women athletics administrators at the most senior levels of athletic administration.

Conclusion

"Unfortunately, if you're a woman in athletics...you have to do it better than anyone else."

Karen, senior associate athletic administrator and SWA

This study illuminates the dilemmas presented by the SWA role in Division I athletic departments. Despite the benefits of this role in practice for women who effectively leverage super-performance, this role limits the advancement of a critical mass of women in athletic administration. This role pinches the pipeline at the senior level of department leadership and allows only one woman to advance. Even by the NCAA's own account, "The SWA provides a female voice at the table, many times the *only* female voice, by providing a diverse, different view – a different perspective" (emphasis added; Copeland, 2005). Previous research shows the dilemmas faced by women leaders who are the only ones at the highest level of athletic administration.

This study highlights the perspective of women in the Far West region who followed the first generation of women leaders in college athletics after the NCAA took over the AIAW. From this analysis four themes that describe the dilemma of the SWA were found. First, super-performance reinforces designating a single woman to the leadership team, positioning the SWA as the *only* woman administrator, if any in the highest levels of athletic administration. Second, the SWA is an important position for Title IX oversight, but despite the NCAA suggestion for collaboration among the senior team, obligations for raising gender equity issues fall to the SWA. Third, women leaders are positioned in caretaking units, but when combined with the SWA role, creates a terminal position for women, not preparation for career advancement. Fourth, the SWA is seen as an advocate for women in the department, which overshadows department responsibilities that serve the interests of all student-athletes and coaches. These dilemmas further reinforce the need for women who hold both the SWA role and senior associate position to rely on super-performance to be taken seriously as athletics administrators.

Yet this role still provides access to leadership opportunities that may not be as accessible by super-performance alone. For those women that do leverage super-performance in the SWA role, it is a very effective path for advancement. Nonetheless, super-performance as a strategy by individual women has not been successful mechanism to elevate a critical mass of women in leadership roles at Division I athletic programs. Among the over 300 NCAA Division I programs, there are just 30 women athletic directors (Acosta & Carpenter, 2010; NCAA, n.d [b]).

When viewed through the framework of strategies from women leaders in other areas of higher education from the coeducation era, findings from this research provide further explanation of the dilemmas the SWA role raises at Division I athletic programs. The SWA role was built on a foundation of strategies that were effective when the purpose of educating women was separate and distinct from that of men. As the purpose of educating women became the same as men in the wake of Title IX, women leaders are left with one strategy for advancement – super-performance. Super-performance in combination with the SWA contributes to a token woman at the senior level of athletic administration. The greatest dilemma of the SWA becomes the failure of this role to advance a critical mass of women to the highest level of athletic administration among Division I institutions.

Future research should build on the framework of strategies used by women leaders in higher education pre- and-post Title IX. The perspective of the re-pioneering generation of women leaders on the development of this role and the next generation of women currently in the pipeline will further illustrate the influence of this role on the advancement of women leaders. Essential in continued research on the influence of the SWA role on the advancement of women is refining the framework to focus on women of color. Additionally, regional comparisons and analyses that investigate the context of Division II and III and institutional type will add to the understanding of the dilemmas this role presents. Continued research on the SWA role can inform future policy decisions within the NCAA, its member athletic departments, and athletic conferences.

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