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# Paths to leadership of NCAA Division I female athletic directors

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**PATHS TO LEADERSHIP OF NCAA DIVISION I FEMALE  
ATHLETIC DIRECTORS**

by

Haley Blount Taitano, B.S., M.S.

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements of the Degree  
Doctor of Education

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION  
LOUISIANA TECH UNIVERSITY

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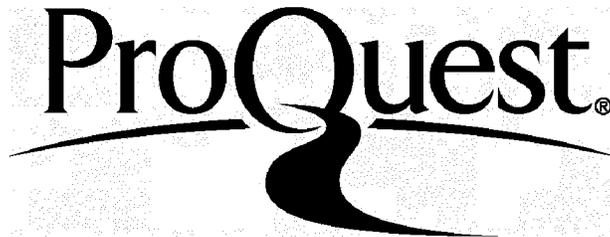
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## **ABSTRACT**

The focus of this study was to examine the paths to leadership of NCAA Division I female athletic directors. Over forty years after passing Title IX of the Education Amendments Act, female athletic directors still make up less than 10% of NCAA Division I athletic directors. This stagnant statistic along with a limited amount of existing research on the subject were the main catalysts for this investigation.

This study examined the career paths of eight NCAA Division I female athletic directors, paying particular attention to their personal and professional experiences that led to becoming a Division I athletic director. Critical Feminist Theory (CFT) was used as a theoretical framework for the study. A qualitative case study was conducted, using one-on-one phone interviews to elicit in-depth responses to open-ended interview questions. Through thematic coding analysis, interview data was coded, categorized and conceptualized to represent emergent core concepts related to the career paths and experience of NCAA Division I female athletic directors. The analysis revealed three core concepts: Relative Experience, Leadership and Support, and Overcoming Obstacles. Findings support existing research indicating that athletic director positions are obtained through work experience, networking and leadership. Findings also support existing research regarding the benefits of career mentoring for women. New findings reveal obstacles and gender inequities that Division I female athletic directors face and ways in which those obstacles may be overcome.

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Author Shuly Taitano

Date 10/31/16

## **DEDICATION**

This paper is dedicated to my dad: Terry Blount. He is, plain and simple, my hero.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Historical Framework

Since the civil rights and women's liberation movements of the late 1960s, women have been steadily making their climb to the top of the corporate ladder, elevating the roles of women as leaders (Chandler, 2011). Women, who had previously been viewed as inferior to men in most facets of corporate America, were now making significant strides by seeking and obtaining more leadership roles than ever before. The emergence can be attributed to a number of cultural shifts, including increased educational opportunities for women, shifting gender equality and norms, and increasing scholarly interest in the study of women leaders (Chandler, 2011; Northouse, 2007).

Educational opportunities for women increased with the passing of Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972, which requires all educational institutions receiving federal funding to allocate equal resources to male and female participants (Daulton, 2013; Wong, 2015). The implementation of Title IX resulted in a marked increase in the number of women participating in collegiate athletics, and in turn, opened the door for females to pursue a career in athletic administration (Parther, Deranek and Michel, 2014). However, despite this progress towards equal opportunities for women in sports, as of 2014 only 10% of NCAA Division I athletic directors are female, which is the lowest representation of females of all NCAA divisions (Acosta and Carpenter, 2014).

In an article titled, “Why aren’t more women reaching the top of college sports,” author Jason Belzer (2015) writes, “While issues concerning the absence of female executive leaders have been apparent for a long time, getting meaningful action to move the numbers in a positive direction has proven all but impossible” (para. 2). Catalysts for women in leadership are not yet fully understood, in particular, for women wishing to work in intercollegiate athletics, a traditionally male-dominated industry. As more and more women rise to the top of corporate America, additional research is needed to determine avenues to assist women in reaching upper leadership positions (Northouse, 2007; Chandler, 2011; Belzer, 2015). While many researchers believe that men and women lead differently, little research examines ways differing leadership qualities specifically effect women working (or wishing to work) in intercollegiate athletics. Researchers are attempting to answer those questions by exploring the history of women’s participation in intercollegiate athletics, identifying what makes women effective leaders, and investigating how women may lead differently than men (Eagly and Carli, 2003; Northouse, 2007).

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Despite the passing of Title IX in 1972, gender inequities still exist within college athletics today, particularly within athletic administration (Bower and Hums, 2013; Parnter, Deranek and Michel, 2014). Prior to the passing of Title IX, athletic departments were typically segregated and administration of each department was gender specific. Ninety percent of women’s athletics programs were led by female administrators. However, following the implementation of Title IX, most men’s and women’s programs were combined, resulting in women leaders taking a back seat to the

2014). According to Acosta and Carpenter (2014), the total percentage of athletic administrators who were female declined from twenty percent in 1980 to eight percent in 1992. Looking at this evidence alone suggests that the amendment actually had a reverse impact on female administrators in collegiate athletics (Acosta and Carpenter, 2014).

The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions within intercollegiate athletics warrants a deeper look at their career paths and leadership styles (Bower and Hums, 2013). Even as women first began to break through the glass ceiling, they did so by utilizing leadership styles that had traditionally worked for men. As Judy Rosener described in the *Harvard Business Review* (1990), women were attempting to fit the mold by demonstrating a “command-and-control” style of management. However, in more recent years women have been able to recognize that style as a disadvantage for them, and consequently adapted their leadership styles in order to utilize their feminine strengths. This change has proven to be successful for both the women in leadership roles and the organizations that they’ve been chosen to lead (Rosener, 1990). Parnter et al. (2014) write:

Transformation of departments need to occur in order to accept that women’s leadership qualities are as effective, but different, from that of the preferred male-dominated leadership style. Strength is valued in several forms and a change in perception could arguably alter the way athletics administrative leadership is viewed and valued (p.53).

In order to decrease the existing gender inequalities and improve leadership opportunities for women in athletic administration, significant time and attention still need to be dedicated to discovering the proper mechanisms for ensuring equal opportunities for all (Parnter et al., 2014).

### **1.3 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the paths to leadership of NCAA Division I female athletic directors in order to gain greater insight into ways women can successfully navigate their way through a traditionally male-dominated industry. The study also explored reasons why women leaders are still highly underrepresented in intercollegiate athletics' leadership, specifically NCAA Division I, and sought to expose any barriers that women may face or have faced throughout their career (that may help explain that underrepresentation). Finally, the results of this study may bring to light some of the leadership qualities needed to be a Division I female athletic director and illuminate specific characteristics of women as leaders in intercollegiate athletics. Findings of this study may also assist women who wish to become NCAA Division I athletic directors (or obtain similar positions), as well as assist administrators who are tasked with hiring of such positions.

### **1.4 Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of NCAA Division I female athletic directors and was guided by the following research question:

1. What do female NCAA Division 1 athletic directors perceive as career paths to leadership for NCAA Division I female athletic directors?

The following sub-research questions were used to guide the researcher in answering the main research question, and also served as a framework for the interview questions:

2. In pursuit of a career in athletic administration, what, if any, obstacles have female athletic directors had to overcome, and how did they overcome them?

3. What do NCAA Division I female athletic directors perceive as reasons for the low numbers of women in NCAA Division 1 athletic director roles?
4. What do NCAA Division I female athletic directors perceive as ways to increase opportunities for women wishing to attain NCAA Division 1 Athletic Director positions?
5. What leadership qualities do female athletic directors value and/or possess?

### **1.5 Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that was used to guide this study is Critical Feminist Theory (CFT). “Researchers who study gender inequities in society and sport typically use a critical theory perspective through the lens of feminism” (Yiamouyiannis and Osborne, 2012, p.3). Critical Feminist Theory as it pertains to this research is the combination of two social theories: Critical theory and feminist theory (Kies, 2014).

Critical theory research perspectives are concerned with empowering human beings to transcend the constraints placed upon them by race, class, and/or gender (Creswell, 2013). Critical theory is often used as a theoretical framework in case study research where the exploration of social struggles, interactions, phenomena and experiences are at the center of the investigation (Rhodes, 1990; Creswell, 2013). Therefore, critical theory in this case allowed the researcher to examine the paths to leadership of NCAA Division I female athletic directors, giving special consideration to the social constraints placed upon participants based on their gender while working in the traditionally male-dominated industry of sports. Additionally, because this study is focused on the unique perspectives and experiences of participants of the female gender and the inequalities that may exist for females in college athletic administration, adding

feminist theory to the framework provided an even more intimate consideration for examination of this group.

Feminist theory, or feminism, is, at the most basic level, the support of equal rights for men and women, and feminist theory uses gender as a basic category of analysis, acknowledging women's successes in spite of sexism (Nicholson and Pasque, 2011). As NCAA Division I athletic directors, the women in this study have reached the highest level of intercollegiate athletic administration, despite potential sexism in the industry. Again, because this research used gender as a basic category of analysis, and because of the aforementioned focus, feminist theory was an appropriate complement to critical theory as it pertained to this study.

When critical theory and feminist theory were combined, Critical Feminist Theory (CFT) was born, and provided a solid framework for understanding the paths to leadership of NCAA Division I female athletic directors. Rhode (1990) said, "What distinguishes feminist critical theories from other analysis is both the focus on gender equality and the conviction that it cannot be obtained under existing ideological and institutional structures" (p. 619). Specifically, CFT is focused on the following (Rhode, 1990; Geisinger, 2011; Kies, 2014):

1. CFT seeks to promote equality between women and men.
2. CFT makes gender a focus of analysis, aiming to reconstitute legal practices that have excluded or undermined women's concerns.
3. CCFT considers history and historical context when evaluating current policies and practices that affect women.

4. CFT focuses on women's experiences in social settings and how those experiences might identify social transformations necessary in order for equal opportunities to be achieved between the sexes.

Because of the ongoing problem of a significant lack of women filling the role of NCAA Division I athletic director, the unique and specific nature of the experiences of the women in this group, and the expressed desire to discover ways in which to enhance existing practices to be more inclusive of women in athletic administration, using CFT as a theoretical framework adequately allowed the researcher to explore these particular areas of interest to this study.

### **1.6 Significance of the Study**

The results of this study provide valuable information to stakeholders, particularly in the higher education and/or intercollegiate athletics or sporting industries. First, women seeking to obtain leadership roles in collegiate athletics or in the sports industry in general may gain a greater insight into ways they might accomplish that goal. The results of this study can help determine the educational paths that might be best suited for women wishing to pursue a career in athletics administration, while the practicality of this study provides perspectives on the professional experiences, career progression, and personal growth and experiences of each woman as it pertains to advancing her career.

Second, the study provides information for universities and organizations seeking to increase the number of women in leadership roles, particularly those interested in increasing the number of women leaders in athletics. Specifically, organizations like the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), National Federation of State High

School Associations (NFHS), and the National Association of Collegiate Women Athletic Administrators (NACWAA) may benefit from a study of this nature.

Finally, the study exposes issues facing women leaders in intercollegiate athletics like gender discrimination, gender stereotyping, and role congruity for example. Sport organizations provide some of the most notable examples of the persistent nature of discrimination (Massengale, 2009). Because of this, the varied issues facing women working in athletic administration today need to be explored in-depth and appropriately and continually addressed. In conclusion, this in-depth examination of the history, personal experiences and professional paths of NCAA Division I female athletic directors provides significant research in all of the aforementioned areas.

### **1.7 Assumptions**

Several assumptions were present for this study. The researcher assumed that the chosen sample would be representative of the current population of Division I female athletic directors. The glass ceiling was assumed to still exist for women working in the field of intercollegiate athletics. The researcher assumed that the interview data would provide answers to the posed research questions; a pilot study was performed and proved this assumption likely. It was also assumed that the sample would provide honest and in-depth feedback to all interview questions. Finally, the researcher assumed that participants would be able to recall specific examples from their experiences moving towards their current role that relate to the questions from the interview.

### **1.8 Limitations**

This study used a sample drawn from a minute population of participants. The results of the study were limited to the highly personal experiences and opinions of each

woman in the sample. The study was also limited to the organized units of NCAA Division I athletics, which is a unique business climate and therefore results cannot be generalized across college athletics as a whole (Division II, Division III, NAIA, etc.). This limits the transferability of the results as well. All of the participant interviews were conducted during the spring semester of 2016, so the thoughts and opinions shared by each participant are limited to this specific timeframe.

### **1.9 Delimitations**

With only 10% of NCAA Division I athletic directors being female, there is a limited amount of research documenting the career paths of women in this role. This study focused on NCAA Division I athletic directors as Division I is the highest level of competition in intercollegiate athletics in the United States, and is also the division with the fewest number of female athletic directors (Acosta and Carpenter, 2014). The study did not include Division II or Division III athletic directors. Other athletic administrator roles, such as that of an associate athletic director or senior woman administrator, were not included in this study because neither is the *highest* level of administration within an athletic department. In order to gain greater insight into the career paths and experiences of current NCAA DI female athletic directors, the study was qualitative in nature, using semi-structured open-ended interviews to seek highly descriptive, in-depth feedback from participants.

### **1.10 Definitions**

*Athletic Director (AD)*: The head administrator within an institution's athletic department.

*National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA):* The NCAA is a membership-driven organization dedicated to safeguarding the well-being of student-athletes and equipping them with the skills to succeed on the playing field, in the classroom and throughout life. The NCAA and its constituents work to help more than 460,000 student-athletes develop and grow through their participating in college sports. (NCAA, 2015).

*National Association of Collegiate Women Athletics Administrators (NACWAA):* NACWAA is the premier leadership organization that empowers, develops, assists, celebrates, affirms, involves and honors women working in college sports and beyond. NACWAA takes a pro-active role in advancing women into positions of influence and powerfully shapes the landscape of women leaders. (NACWAA, 2015)

*Division I (DI):* The highest level of intercollegiate athletics sanctioned by the NCAA in the United States. Division I (DI) schools are generally those with larger student bodies, larger budgets, and award more athletic scholarships than Division II and III. The most recent statistics reported by the NCAA show that 345 of the NCAA's 1,066 member institutions are DI. Division I is further divided for the sport of football only, with the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS, typically larger schools) and Football Championship Subdivision (FCS, typically smaller schools). These subdivisions only apply to the sport of football; all other sports are simply DI (NCAA, 2015).

*Critical Feminist Theory (CFT):* A combination of critical theory and feminist theory (Kies, 2014). CFT perspective is typically used to study gender inequities in society and sport, viewed through the lens of feminism (Yiamouyiannis and Osborne, 2012).

*Leadership*: A process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2007).

*Title IX*: A comprehensive federal law, which is a portion of the United States Education Amendments Act of 1972, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in any federally funded education program or activity (NCWGE, 2012; Parnter, Deranek and Michel, 2014).

*Obstacles*: Anything that prevents or hinders progress towards a goal or goals. Obstacles can be material or nonmaterial.

Note: The terms *women* and *female* will be used interchangeably throughout this study.

### **1.11 Outline of the Study**

What follows is an outline of the qualitative study regarding the paths to leadership of NCAA Division I female athletic directors. The literature review explores basic information related to the history of women in intercollegiate athletics, characteristics of women leaders, obstacles to women leaders, and the importance of mentoring and networking for career-minded women in athletics. Chapter 3 details the methodology guiding this case study, while Chapter 4 offers a detailed explanation of the data and research findings. Chapter 5 expands upon the results of the study as they relate to existing literature and seeks to illuminate areas for future related research.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

#### **2.1 History of Females in Intercollegiate Athletics**

##### **2.1.1 Prior to Title IX**

Prior to 1870, women's physical activities were strictly recreational rather than competitive (Daulton, 2013). In fact, women were discouraged from participating in any activities that involved mental and physical endurance because it was believed that these activities would cause harm to women and negatively affect their ability to bear children; the woman's role was to be in and tend to the home (Daulton, 2013; Parnter et al., 2014). However, as higher education became more accessible to women after 1870, women became more competitive and began to form informal athletic clubs (Bell, 2008; Daulton, 2013).

Early participation for women in college sports was primarily educational and competition was solely intramural (Bell, 2008). In fact, the first intercollegiate competition for women did not occur until 1896, and that competition was a basketball game between University of California Berkley and Stanford (Bell, 2008; Parnter et al., 2014). And while the interest in men's intercollegiate sports continued to grow at a rapid pace, the interest in and acceptance of women's participation in intercollegiate athletics was slower moving (Parnter et al., 2014).

In 1920, the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment granting women the right to vote was considered the first feminist movement, and resulted in a small spur of momentum for women in sports; however, the depression followed shortly thereafter and stalled any forward progress in the quest for equal rights for women (Bell, 2008). But, the pendulum swung back in the way of progress towards equal rights for women as a consequence of war striking the United States in the 1940s (Daulton, 2013). Many women joined the military or entered the workforce during this time, which resulted in great gains for equal rights for women. Feminism began to surge across America, which included a heightened interest in women's sports (Daulton, 2013). This wave of feminism coupled with a separate but similar push for equal rights for all eventually led to the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; a major piece of legislation which prohibited discrimination based on race, color, national origin or religion in all federally assisted programs, but did not [originally] include sex discrimination (Parnther et al., 2014).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the events leading up to its passing continued to propel a wave of feminism in the debate for equal rights for all. Feminist conversations in the United States continued for the next six years, and ultimately led to the first hearings on sex discrimination in higher education which resulted in the passing of Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972 (Bell, 2008; Parnther et al., 2014).

### 2.1.2 Post Title IX

Title IX states the following, "no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance" (NCWGE, 2012). Following the feminist movement of the 1960s and early

1970s, the passing of Title IX acknowledged that blatant inequalities existed within government funded programs, especially collegiate athletics (Parnther et al., 2014).

In addition, Title IX has had a huge impact on women's participation in collegiate athletics. In 1972, fewer than 30,000 women participated in college sports (NCWGE, 2012). In 2014, the number of women participating in collegiate sports had grown to over 200,000 (Acosta and Carpenter, 2014). However, Title IX has seemingly had a reverse effect on women coaches and administrators. Prior to the passing on Title IX, most athletic departments were segregated by gender, and female athletic directors led 90 percent of women's athletic programs (Parnther et al., 2014). The passing of Title IX led most colleges to merge their men's and women's athletic departments, granting the now singular athletic director position to males in most cases (Daulton, 2013). The number of women in leadership positions within athletic departments dropped drastically in the years to follow, and the ways in which women obtained these positions changed dramatically (Bower and Hums, 2013; Parnther et al., 2014). Male athletic directors began hiring more males than females to assume new coaching roles (for new women's teams, created to meet the requirements of Title IX), resulting in women systematically being pushed out of athletic administration (Daulton, 2013; Parnther et al., 2014). Although this process began at the onset of enforcing Title IX in the 1970s, even today there is a positive correlation between the sex/gender of the athletic director and the sex/gender of coaches for women's teams; female-led athletic departments have a higher percentage of female coaches (Acosta and Carpenter, 2014).

Today, approximately 22.3 percent of NCAA athletic directors are females, up slightly from 20.3 percent in 2012 (Acosta and Carpenter, 2014). However, less than 10

percent of Division I athletic directors are female, and 11.3% of NCAA athletic departments have no females at all employed within their administration (Acosta and Carpenter, 2014).

## **2.2 Feminism in Intercollegiate Athletics**

Particularly since the passing of Title IX in 1972 as it relates to NCAA Division I athletics, feminism has helped shape the history and experiences of women athletes and administrators. Critical feminist theory is used as a framework for this study because it values the experiences of women, recognizes women's behavior in the context of social settings (Jarrat, 1990), and acknowledges the importance of feminism as it relates to the changing landscape of intercollegiate athletics. Viewing this research through a feminist lens looks to history to help increase understanding of the development of subordinating structures and societal institutions that perpetuate hierarchies and inequities in administration, like those that seemingly exist in NCAA Division I athletics (Buzuvis, 2014). According to Nicholson and Pasque:

Feminism is a complex notion that has vast differences in meaning and connotation for people spanning generations, ethnic identities, sexual orientations, social classes, nationality, and myriad identities. Feminism is not a static notion rather, it evolves with us throughout our lives and is shaped by the various lenses we use to view the world at large, most importantly, ourselves (2011, p. 3).

Feminism has attributed to the evolution of intercollegiate athletics in the United States, as feminism itself continues to evolve. The earlier feminist movement of the 1960s and early 1970s that led to the passing of Title IX was heavily focused on equal treatment for women and men, and feminist leaders emphasized similarities of genders in order to gain equality (Jarratt, 1990). This wave of feminism was known as liberal feminism, which blamed female subordination as the root cause of social injustices

against women, and thereby argued likeness as a means to overcome female subordination (Nicholson and Pasque, 2011). This feminist perspective recognized the societal belief that women were by nature less physically capable than men and sought to equalize society's view of men and women.

While the initial feminist movement did result in increased participation for women specifically in intercollegiate athletics (with the passing of Title IX and continued push for equality for women), it did not necessarily equalize the value of that participation to the experience of male student-athletes (Brake, 2003). As Brake described, "Although conventional notions of difference in male and female bodies are no longer used to justify the exclusion of women from sports entirely, they still form the subtext for [Title IX's] receptivity to market preferences as a justification for the status quo" (2003, p. 480). NCAA Student-athletes (males) who participate in higher grossing revenue sports like football and men's basketball often receive more attention and play in better facilities than their female counterparts, and female athletes receive fewer scholarship dollars while female athletic department employees receive lower salaries than their male counterparts (Buzuvis, 2014). Social feminists' research continues to show that women working in higher education are plagued by unequal pay, obstacles to achieving tenure or advancing in certain fields, and a frequent lack of family-friendly policies and procedures at many higher education institutions (Nicholson and Pasque, 2011). These persistent problems for women working in higher education are true of those working in athletic departments as well, which are a major part of said higher education institutions (Busuzis, 2014). Feminist research may help illustrate why there is such an underrepresentation of women in NCAA Division I athletic director roles.

Brake tells us that, “The social constructionist understanding of sex inequality in sports has not yet infiltrated to the level necessary to challenge the deepest structures of bias in sports” (2003, p. 482). Statistics like this have social justice feminists demanding a broader focus on reform that tackles an NCAA system giving rise to inequality (Buzuvis, 2014).

### **2.3 Characteristics of Female Leaders**

“It is known that traditionally, men and women have differences with leadership styles; yet, the qualities women have can be as valuable to organizations as that of men” (Parnter et al., 2014, p.52).

#### **2.3.1 Females as transformational leaders**

Research shows that women tend to be more transformational than men when it comes to leadership (Northouse, 2007; Nowack, 2009; Chandler, 2011; Kies, 2014). Interestingly, surveys have shown women to rate themselves as having characteristics associated with transformational leadership, while men more often described their leadership style as transactional (Rosener, 1990; Belasun and Frank, 2012). Transactional leadership is similar to transformational leadership in that its description focuses on the exchange between leaders and followers; however, the exchange is based on contingent reward and not personal development or organizational growth (Rosener, 1990; Northouse, 2007).

Transformational leadership takes the leader/follower exchange one step further. Just as its name implies, transformational leadership is a type of leadership whereby leaders and followers are transformed through their interactions with one another (Northouse, 2007; Belasun and Frank, 2012). This type of leadership requires the leader

to be connected to the needs and motives of followers (Northouse, 2007). When describing their own leadership styles, women attributed their power to interpersonal skills, charisma, and their ability to transform followers' self-interests into the interest of the group, all of which are reflections of a transformational leadership style (Rosener, 1990). Belsun and Frank eloquently describe this form of leadership by writing that, "Transformational leadership offers an emotional bond that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower" (2012, p. 193).

There is a substantial amount of research that illustrates transformational leadership as an effective, if not one of the most effective forms of leadership (Kolp and Rea, 2006; Northouse, 2007). Hundreds of studies have shown that transformational leaders are better at leading organizations to change and getting desired results (Kolp and Rea, 2006). One study even found there to be a significant relationship between transformational leadership behaviors of athletic directors and coaches' job satisfaction at NCAA Division I institutions (Yusof, A., 1999).

In the book *How Remarkable Women Lead: The Breakthrough Model for Work and Life*, Barsh and Cranston attribute successful women leaders to the preconditions of talent and knowledge, desire to lead, and capacity for change (2009, p.12). The capacity and/or tolerance for change characteristic is congruent with the research that suggests that women leaders are transformational, and can effectively manage and create changes when needed. Furthermore, Barsh and Cranston demonstrate a leadership model that emerged from interviews with successful women executives, giving credit to their theories on what makes women effective leaders.

Transformational leadership is especially advantageous for women because women quite naturally embody many of the behaviors traditionally associated with transformational leadership, and can use their feminine strengths like encouraging and inspiring to excel as leaders (Eagly and Carli, 2003).

### 2.3.2 Females as participative leaders

Numerous studies have suggested that women leaders are more participative and/or democratic leaders than men (Northouse, 2007; Nowack, 2009; Chandler, 2011). A participative leader is one who would consult with subordinates often and share in the decision making process, likewise, sharing responsibility and leadership power (Rosener, 1990; Northouse, 2007).

Women exhibit a participative leadership style in a variety of ways, including encouragement, inclusion, shared power and socialization (Rosener, 1990; Nowack, 2009; Chandler, 2011). Studies suggest that women are more likely to try to expand everyone's power, rather than focus on their own, because they conceptualize power differently than men (Grogan and Shakeshaft, 2011). In the book *Enlightened Power: How women are transforming the practice of leadership*, Helen Fisher writes, "Men tend to cast themselves within hierarchies and view power as rank and status; women, on the other hand, form cliques and regard power as an egalitarian network of supportive connections" (2013, p. 138). This quote is the perfect reflection of women as participative leaders.

Like transformational leadership, participative and/or democratic leadership styles have also been associated with, "...contemporary notions of effective leadership" (Northouse, 2007, p. 268). Participative leadership trends can also be seen in Barsh and

Cranston's successful leadership model, where "connecting" is referenced as one of the five characteristics of centered leadership (2009, p. 12). Connecting, as they define it, involves reciprocity, network and community, and sponsorship. Women leaders are said to be more apt to make meaningful connections with followers and sponsors, which can be very advantageous in the world of leadership (Barsh and Cranston, 2011). Especially in the world of intercollegiate athletics, where networking has been revealed to be one of the key factors in advancing to a Division I level athletic director position (Swift, 2011), participative leadership would prove a positive attribute for women (or men) seeking athletic director positions.

If women are indeed more participative leaders than men, it would explain why more women leaders have begun to emerge in corporate America, given the increasing desire for teamwork, alliance and partnerships in business (Chandler, 2011). Bolman and Deal write, "Teams have become the rage but are often thrown together with little attention to what ensures success" (2008, p. 112). If women are better equipped for participative leadership, then they can solve this problem. A woman's participative leadership style would be the perfect attribute needed to manage a team setting, like one in an athletic department, and would prove to be an advantage when compared to male counterparts.

## **2.4 Obstacles to Female Leaders**

### **2.4.1 Gender stereotyping**

Stereotypes are, "cognitive shortcuts that influence the way people process information regarding groups and group members" (Northouse, 2007, p. 276).

Specifically, gender stereotypes describe stereotypical beliefs about male and female attributes and behavioral expectations (Northouse, 2007).

According to Schein, both men and women tend to connect leadership characteristics to men more than to women (as cited in Bolman and Deal, 2008, p. 353), and stereotypes about men and women are systematic and easily activated (Eagly and Carli, 2003). This means that women are automatically being ruled out as effective leaders, simply based on their gender. Eagly and Carli write, "Because of the doubts about women's leadership ability, they are generally held to a higher standard of competence than men are" (2003, p. 819). Basically the research shows that women are actually having to work harder and demonstrate significantly greater ability than their male counterparts to be considered equally effective leaders (Eagly and Carlie, 2003).

Research also suggests that women may experience slight disadvantages in leadership in roles traditionally associated as masculine in the workforce, like those in the military or in sports. However, women were shown to be more effective than men in traditionally female job positions, like education and social service (Northouse, 2007). Similarly, further research revealed that female leaders received less favorable evaluations than their male counterparts when in male-dominated leader roles, but were equally evaluated when the roles were not male-dominated (Eagly and Carli, 2003). This prejudice could be contributed to the idea that women in leadership roles are expected to be tough, as leaders, yet still nurturing, as women.

Because gender stereotyping is so prevalent in the sports industry, women leaders constantly feel the need to prove themselves in order to be respected as leaders (Bower, 2009). This is true not only because the overwhelming majority of leadership positions in

athletics are held by men, but also because the overwhelming majority of donors and supporters of athletic departments are also men (Swaton, 2010). Perpetuating the problem even further is the fact that having fewer female coaches and administrators in athletics means fewer role models for female student-athletes. The lack of role models may actually deter many female student-athletes from pursuing a career in athletic administration or sports leadership in general (Swaton, 2010).

Women leaders are also penalized for being “too masculine.” Eagly and Carli (2003) state that “Women encounter more dislike and rejection than men do for showing dominance, expressing disagreement, or being highly assertive” (p. 820), yet these same characteristics are positively associated with effective male leaders. As a result of this stereotype, women find themselves “feminizing” their behavior in order to be well-liked. This could be where the tendency of women leaders to be more collaborative and participative stems from. Oppositely, when women choose to adapt to more traditionally male and agentic styles of leadership, they are negatively characterized as being too masculine (Eagly and Carli, 2003; Northouse, 2007).

A study conducted by Catalyst (2005), a nonprofit research and advisory organization focused on women’s career advancement, cleverly referred to this stereotypical expectation in a study titled, “Women take care, men take charge.” Peter Northouse also noted this stereotype as a common prejudice in *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (2007), stating that “One prominent explanation for the glass ceiling is gender bias stemming from stereotyped expectations that women take care and men take charge” (p.275). And while women are beginning to push the boundaries of said stereotypes and break through the glass ceiling, research shows that these stereotypical expectations of

and beliefs about men and women still exist today (Catalyst, 2005; Northouse, 2007; Belsun and Frank, 2012).

Perhaps gender stereotyping today is best illustrated through a quote from Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook and author of the best-selling book *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* (2013). Sandberg cites a body of research that indicates, “Success and likability are positively correlated for men and negatively correlated for women” (p. 40). Some researchers have argued this point, but if factual, it obviously presents a conflict of interest for women leaders.

Very simply put, gender stereotyping poses a threat to women as leaders, because it reinforces the belief that women are not equal to men, lacking effective leadership qualities and characteristics. Not only is this type of stereotyping very discouraging for women leaders, but it’s discouraging for organizations as well (Catalyst, 2005).

#### 2.4.2 High personal costs

As advanced as women in the workplace have become over the last century, they are often still mothers, wives and the main caretakers of their families. Work/home conflicts have proven to be a workplace barrier for women time and time again (Yiamouyiannis and Osborne, 2012; Northouse, 2007; Bolman and Deal, 2008). Northouse writes, “These domestic and child-rearing expectations impose an added burden on women climbing the leadership ladder” (2007, p. 272). Finding the perfect balance between family and work lives has proven to be a struggle for women leaders in the twenty-first century (Grogan and Shakeshaft, 2011). In fact, “Almost seventy percent of women in one study named personal and family responsibilities as by far the biggest barrier to their career success” (Bolman and Deal, 2008, p.354). While women are clearly

advancing in today's workplace and educational setting, they are still doing the majority of housework and child-rearing in today's family setting (Bolman and Deal, 2008; Grogan and Shakeshaft, 2011).

Institutional structures have not evolved to support women who want to, "have it all." Women observe the long hours and increased expectations associated with leadership positions, and often choose to opt-out (Ward and Eddy, 2013; Sandberg, 2013). Many women go so far as to forgo career advancement for a family life that doesn't even exist yet, fearing that that family life won't fit in with an advanced career (Sandberg, 2013). This is particularly true in the business of intercollegiate athletics. In the study titled, "Understanding the Career Paths and Experiences of Division I-A Athletic Directors: A Phenomenological Study" author Harold Swift interviewed 10 Division I male athletic directors who all cited the challenges of balancing family life with working the typically over-extended hours associated with the job. Participants also noted how important having a supportive family system was to their career success (Swift, 2011).

Also significant to note, women who voluntarily leave the workforce for personal or family reasons often have a very difficult time rejoining the workforce, even though most of them have a strong desire to do so (Nowack, 2009). Those who do reenter the workforce often enter at a lower level than they left, making the road to leadership even longer (Northouse, 2007).

In the book *Enlightened Power*, author Helen Fisher quotes Albert Einstein as saying, "The significant problems we face today cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them" (2013, p. 140). Women leaders are a direct reflection of that

quote. Women think differently, and can change their way of thinking or acting more readily than men (Fisher, 2013). The fact that women can so easily adapt to changing needs of the business environment, family life and leadership styles has proven to be beneficial for them (Fisher, 2013). And if women continue to adapt and grow as leaders, when faced with challenges like stereotyping, and organizations begin to prioritize greater gender diversity in the ranks of leadership, the sky is the limit for how far women will go (Northouse, 2007).

## **2.5 Career Experiences of NCAA Athletic Directors**

Although college sporting programs have grown into major business enterprises in recent years, little is known about the overall educational backgrounds, career paths and experiences of NCAA athletic administrators, exclusive of athletic directors (Lumpkin, Achen and Hyland, 2015). Athletic directors are studied much more than the administrators who work below them, but those studies often do not include females at all (since their presence is rare amongst athletic administration). This section will examine a few studies which have been conducted on the career paths and experiences of NCAA Division I athletic directors, expanding upon the limited amount of research available on this specific subject.

Seeking to understand the career progression, challenges, and experiences of female Division I athletic directors, Taylor and Hardin (2016) interviewed 10 female Division I athletic directors. Four emergent themes were revealed through their research, including a) a lack of female role models, b) females are not qualified to manage football programs, c) scrutiny about (lack of) ability and experience, and d) benefits of intercollegiate coaching experience. Participants in the study suggested that women

wishing to advance a career in athletic administration must have a mentor to help them navigate the industry and should try to gain experience in as many areas of the athletic department as possible (Taylor and Hardin, 2016).

As a result, Taylor and Hardin (2016) extended their research with a supplemental study that, in addition to the 10 Division I female athletic directors, included 10 women working in other roles (not athletic director) in athletic administration and 12 female graduate assistants. This qualitative study, titled, “Experiences and Challenges of Women Working in NCAA Division I Athletic Departments” revealed three emergent themes from the interviews: a) lack of (female) mentorship, b) work/life (im)balance, and c) a woman in a man’s world.

The discovery that a lack of female mentors played a role in the continued underrepresentation of women in NCAA athletic administration reaffirmed the results of the previous study which revealed that a lack of female role models was significant to the experiences of Division I female athletic directors. Additionally, women from all levels in this study agreed that working in intercollegiate athletics is time consuming and demanding of oneself, and requires living a lifestyle where work consistently extends beyond the normal workday, which may contribute to the lack of women working in the field. And finally, the participants in this study discussed the difficulties related to their experiences trying to advance a career in a traditionally male-dominated industry, noting the strength of the “good ole boys” network that continues to rule college athletics (Taylor et al., 2016).

Changing the focus to male athletic directors, Harold Swift (2011) conducted a phenomenological study examining the career paths and experiences of Division I

athletic directors using the social cognitive career theory and critical race theory as the theoretical frameworks for the research. Swift discovered three significant professional prerequisites attributed to becoming an athletic director which were business acumen, the ability to network, and volunteering. Additionally, Swift revealed that participants' emphasized the impact [that being an athletic director has] on family, the importance of selecting an athletic director position that fits, and dealing with the negative criticism that sometimes comes with the position of athletic director (2011, p. 115).

The path to the athletic director chair is not the same for everyone, but through his research Glenn Wong (2014) revealed both demographic and statistical evidence that provided information on the most common career tracks for Division I athletic directors. At the time of this research, 9.4 percent of Division I athletic directors were female.

First, Wong discovered that every current Division I athletic director (in June, 2014) had earned a bachelor's degree, while 80 percent had earned a graduate degree. Of those graduate degrees, the most common master's degrees obtained by athletic directors were in sports administration and education. Wong also revealed that 20 percent of current Division I athletic directors had held a head coaching position at some point during their career and worked their way up through the athletic department after coaching. While working in athletic administration, 82 percent of Division I athletic directors had a background working specifically in the business or revenue side of the athletic department, with the most common experiences being that of a fundraiser or development officer (20 percent). And lastly, though some may not consider this experience part of a career path but it is of importance to note, 55 percent of Division I athletic directors were collegiate student-athletes (Wong, 2014). When coupled with the

results of this research, these statistics may provide greater insight into the specific experiences and qualities needed to become an NCAA Division I athletic director, and whether or not gender-specific qualifications exist.

## **2.6 Mentoring and Networking for Females in Sport**

### **2.6.1 Mentoring**

Researchers have consistently demonstrated that mentoring relationships provide substantial benefits for women in leadership positions within sport (Bower, 2009; Nicholson and Pasque, 2011; Swift, 2011). As it pertains to career advancement, mentoring has been shown to be a critical tool for aiding both women and minorities (McClain, Bridges, and Bridges, 2014). In one study titled, “Effective Mentoring Relationships with Women in Sport: Results of a Meta-Ethnography,” Dr. Glenna Bower (2009) synthesized 15 qualitative studies about mentoring women within sports. Through the analysis Bower explains:

While the mentoring relationship is important in career development for both genders, it is particularly critical for women, especially those in male dominated professions such as the sport industry. Mentors may buffer the female manager from overt and covert discrimination, and help their female protégé circumvent structural, social and cultural barriers to advancement in their organization (p. 2).

But mentors can be hard to come by in NCAA Division I athletics. Although mentoring does not have to be gender specific to be effective, female to female mentoring has proven to be especially beneficial in settings where women are the overwhelming minority (Bower, 2009; McClain, Bridges and Bridges, 2014). Mentors provide needed support and social interaction which helps reduce stress for women who do not have large peer groups within their organization, like the organization of intercollegiate athletics (Bower, 2009; Chandler, 1996). Furthermore, women with mentors report greater job

satisfaction and successes than those who have no mentor (Chandler, 1996), enhancing the theory that women actually need mentoring in order to advance their careers (Numann, 2011).

Researchers also continue to provide evidence demonstrating how women tend to value psychosocial mentoring more than men. Psychosocial mentoring involves mentor roles such as counselor or friend (peer) as opposed to more career oriented mentoring like that of a coach or sponsor (Chandler, 1996). As in friendship, acceptance and confirmation are key elements of psychosocial mentoring, and proven elements of successful mentoring relationships for women (Bower, 2009). These findings support additional research that shows that women tend to be more participative leaders than men and value social learning as opposed to transactional learning and/or leadership (Northouse, 2007).

#### 2.6.2 Networking

The field of athletic administration is driven by networking (Swift, 2011). Similar to mentoring, networking is a way in which colleagues develop mutually beneficial relationships as they pertain to their working environment. As networking relates to mentoring, Bower and Grappendorf (2014) suggest that women should consider a mentor who provides them with the opportunity to build a network, noting that women often lack the ability to develop informal networks in intercollegiate athletic administration.

Networking in athletic administration is an important aspect of identifying and exploring opportunities for advancement. In the study titled, "Understanding the Career Paths and Experiences of Division I-A Athletic Directors: A phenomenological study" author Harold Swift (2011) examined the career paths of 10 Division I male athletic

directors. All 10 athletic directors attributed successful networking to their professional advancement (Swift, 2011). But athletic career opportunities for women are rare and difficult to obtain (Kies, 2014), in part because of networking limitations for women in the industry. Whisenant, Pederson and Obenour (2002) describe this perpetuating phenomenon in their research, concluding:

The presence of cathexis within the structure of intercollegiate athletics is evident by the networking web established by those who control intercollegiate athletics. The web, or “good-ole boy network,” allows men to retain their grip on athletics and to eliminate or minimize systematically the intrusion of women into their inner circle (p. 489).

Some researchers suggest that women should actually seek out male mentors (in addition to female mentors), because male mentors may be better equipped or more apt to introduce female protégés to leaders in the industry (Bower, 2009; Bower and Hums, 2014).

While networking barriers clearly still exist for women working in athletic administration, today there are organizations in place to help break down those barriers, like NACWAA. NACWAA offers educational programming, networking and mentoring experiences, as well as professional development opportunities designed to empower, develop and advance women in sport (NACWAA, 2015). It is evident that both mentoring and networking are important, interconnected aspects of career advancement for women athletic administrators and should be something that aspiring female athletic directors find ways to incorporate into their professional development.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODS**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In order to gain greater insight into the career paths of NCAA Division I female athletic directors, an exploratory case study was conducted. A case study may be used when the research is descriptive or exploratory in nature and is a process by which detailed consideration is given to the development of a particular person, group, situation or phenomenon over time (Creswell, 2007; Creswell, 2013). Critical Feminist Theory was used as a framework for this case study, which allowed the researcher to examine the data with an emphasis on the experiences of a members of the female gender with a focus on how being female had affected their experience as a Division I athletic director. Given the unique and specific nature of each participant's educational background, career path and personal experiences, this method of study allowed the participants to provide greater details and specific examples of personal experiences, which may prove helpful to others who are currently working or aspiring to work at the top of intercollegiate athletics.

### 3.2 Population and Sample

The population for this study was current NCAA Division I female athletic directors. Although an ever changing population, at the time this study was conducted, according to the NCAA website, of the 351 NCAA Division I member institutions only 25 institutions had a female occupying the athletic director position (NCAA, 2015). That's a mere 7% of the total number of NCAA Division I athletic directors. Due to the highly descriptive and in-depth nature of the study, convenience sampling was utilized to obtain participants for this study. While there is no concrete number affixed to data saturation in qualitative research, Creswell (2007) recommends that 3-5 participants be used for case study research with sample sizes ranging from 6-10 with respect to phenomenological studies. Therefore, the sample size originally sought after was 10-12 Division I female athletic directors. Knowing those numbers were ambitious and acknowledging the time constraints of this research, as well as the extremely busy schedules of Division I athletic directors, data saturation was achieved after completing 8 interviews. Also noteworthy, due to the high level of demand and increased workload placed on Division I athletic directors, interviewing and analyzing a larger sample would be impractical.

To gain further insight about each participant, demographic information was collected during the interview process. The average age of the participants was  $\bar{X}=56.875$ . The average number of years participants had been an athletic director was  $\bar{X}=14.5$ , ranging from 3-26 years. All participants had only served as the athletic director at one (their current) institution.

### **3.3 Instrumentation**

Semi-structured open-ended interviews were utilized during one-on-one interviews with each participant. Participants were asked identical questions (see Appendix A), but the nature of semi-structured and open-ended interviews allowed the researcher to follow-up with additional questions when needed (Turner, 2010). This interview method supports the exploratory design of this research and aided the researcher in eliciting more in-depth, descriptive responses from participants.

When developing the interview questions, the researcher utilized two different dissertations as a guide: 1) “Understanding the Career Paths and Experiences of Division I-A Athletic Directors: A Phenomenological Study (Smith, 2011), and 2) “Division I Collegiate Women Athletic Directors’ Perceptions of Sexism and Career Experiences” (Kies, 2014). Critical feminist theory also guided the development of the interview questions, which were designed to elicit answers to the main research question and sub-research questions posed by the researcher (see Appendix A).

The researcher conducted a pilot study interview with a participant who is a senior woman administrator at a nearby NCAA Division I institution. The participant was asked to discuss her thoughts about each question as she was asked the question, and then to answer the question as normal. The pilot interview resulted in the addition of one question about mentors along with a few minor changes to the wording of the interview questions, which led to the finalized questions presented in Appendix A.

### **3.4 Procedure**

The researcher identified 25 potential participants by using the NCAA website (NCAA.org, 2015). The website lists NCAA members by Division, and includes links to

each university's athletic department website. By visiting each of the Division I institutions' websites, the researcher was able to find their athletic director's name, contact information and biographical information, which often included a photograph of the athletic director. This examination resulted in finding a total of 25 Division I female athletic directors (as of December, 2015).

The researcher sent an email to all 25 of the known NCAA Division I female athletic directors inviting them to participate in the study. The email included a detailed description of the study, expectations of participants, and a deadline to respond within two weeks (see Appendix B). After one week had passed, a follow-up email was sent to all those who had not yet responded (see Appendix C). Participants were chosen based on their responsiveness, availability, and willingness to participate. The researcher conducted interviews until the point of data saturation, which resulted in 8 total interviews, equaling 32% of the total population. As participants confirmed their willingness to participate in the study, the researcher requested a signed consent form to be sent back via email or fax, and then set up the interviews based on participants' availability and schedule.

A copy of the interview questions was sent to each participant before the actual interview took place, in order to allow the participant sufficient time to prepare for the interview. Due to the long and often unexpected hours that most athletic directors work, all interviews were scheduled according to the participants' preference and convenience. The participants were interviewed via speaker phone and recorded using the Rev app for iPhone (a service component of Rev.com transcription services). To maintain confidentiality, the Rev app required the researcher to log in to access recordings and is

password protected. The researcher's iPhone was also password protected. At the end of each interview, participants were asked to choose a pseudonym to replace their name and their place of employment, in order to protect their identity. If the participants had no preferred pseudonym, the researcher chose one for them.

The researcher used Rev.com transcription services to transcribe all of the interviews in a timely manner. Rev.com transcription service was provided with the MP3 audio file from the interview and then translated verbal data into typed transcripts for analysis. A copy of the transcription was emailed to each participant for review and approval before the data analysis phase began. ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software was used to assist in analyzing and coding the data.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

The researcher analyzed the data using thematic coding. Thematic coding is a qualitative analysis technique which involves recording or identifying passages of text, or in this case interview responses, that are linked by a common theme or idea (Gibbs, 2007). There are basically three levels of thematic analysis: coding, categorizing and conceptualizing (Lichtman, 2013).

In the first phase of thematic coding, the researcher read and reviewed the transcriptions carefully, coding the participants' responses into various themes or topics that emerged throughout the data. Each code was defined within the ATLAS.ti software and subsequently attached to corresponding paragraphs, single lines or individual words within the transcripts. Bryman (2008) describes this process as linking chunks of data (text) as representative of the same phenomenon. As the coding process came to a close,

the researcher reviewed the codes and began to eliminate and/or combine repetitious codes, initiating the next phase of thematic coding: categorizing.

Categorizing codes starts with the researcher identifying interconnections between codes and analyzing the relation of codes to the research questions and literature (Bryman, 2008). Categories were developed based on code frequency, examination of overlapping coded passages, and interpreted significance of codes as they related to the research questions and existing literature. Creswell (2007) suggests to, “Find the most descriptive wording for your topics and turn them into categories” (p. 198). Throughout the process, reflective memoing was also used to help turn descriptive wording and codes into categories. Reflective memos are written notations about the data that help organize, clarify and integrate qualitative data (Fingeld-Connett, 2014).

Continuous evaluation and comparison of the relationships between categories allowed the researcher to group the categories into overarching concepts as they related to the overall meaning of the research. This process, known as conceptualizing, revealed key concepts or themes that emerged from the data and reflected the overall meaning of the research (Lichtman, 2013).

The thematic coding method of data analysis allowed the researcher to conduct an organized, in-depth examination of the data, resulting in an established framework of thematic ideas about the participants’ experiences and career paths. Furthermore, this method gave the researcher the ability to emphasize rich description of the data set and focus on the human experience subjectively (Guest and MacQueen, 2012).

The researcher utilized ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software to analyze the data, creating a Hermeneutic unit where the researcher was able to store, explore and

quantify interview data. A hybrid form of coding was used, starting with pre-set codes that were developed based on the conceptual framework and primary research questions driving this study, and then ending with a form of open coding driven completely from the interview content. The ATLAS.ti software allowed the researcher to apply those codes to specific passages of text and make notes, or reflective memos, throughout the coding process. Creating, storing and analyzing those codes then led to the creation of categories and the development of core concepts as they began to emerge from the data.

### **3.6 Statement of Positionality**

Research represents a shared perspective, shaped by both the researcher(s) and participants. Therefore, the identities of both researcher(s) and participants may have a resulting impact on the research process (Bourke, 2014). For this reason, it is important for me, as the researcher, to share the context of my positionality.

I grew up in Pearland, Texas (outside of Houston) and graduated high school from a large 5A school in Waco, Texas. My father has had a very successful career as a sports journalist and broadcaster, and is currently the vice president of public relations and communication for the NHRA (National Hot Rod Association). As a result, I lived a life that was shaped around sports and competition.

I started taking gymnastics when I was just 3 years old and only quit when I outgrew the sport around the age of 13. Upon quitting, I immediately took up track and field and volleyball. In high school, I became the first female powerlifter at my school, started the first girls' powerlifting team, and became the first female pole vaulter at my school as well. I was also a member of the first class of girls that was allowed (and qualified) to compete in the pole vault at the Texas State High School Championships in

2002 (prior to that, pole vaulting was not an event that girls were allowed to compete in). Being the first female to compete in so many traditionally male-only sports, I experienced a great deal of gender stereotyping and prejudice at an early age; yet I was always able to overcome the barriers set before me and push the boundaries of the glass ceiling as it existed in sports.

My pole-vaulting abilities and academic achievements earned me a track and field scholarship to Northwestern State University (NSU), a Division I institution located in Natchitoches, Louisiana, where I graduated magna cum laude in 2006 with a degree in exercise science; in 2007 I earned a master's degree in sport administration from NSU.

Fast forward to today, I am the assistant athletic director for marketing and development at my alma mater NSU (since September 1, 2014). I am the first female to have obtained an assistant athletic director title at this institution, and I do have aspirations to be an athletic director one day. My research interests are a direct reflection of my personal career experiences, both in and out of athletics. Over the years as I have strived to advance my career in higher education, I have met obstacles along the way, which I believe are related to both my gender and my youth (comparatively speaking). Enrolling in graduate school and beginning my doctoral work at Louisiana Tech was actually a decision I made as the result of having been turned down for a couple of jobs which I felt I was highly qualified for, yet was not given, due to what I know are some of the barriers [especially young] women face in corporate America today. I hope the results of this study will shed light on the problems that exist in both higher education and in intercollegiate athletics with respect to the consideration of women as leaders.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESULTS**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine the paths to leadership of NCAA Division I female athletic directors in order to gain greater insight into ways women can successfully navigate their way through a traditionally male-dominated business. A case study was conducted using one-on-one phone interviews in order to adequately examine the unique and specific nature of each participant's educational background, career path and personal experiences. Through analyzing participants' interview responses, three core concepts emerged from the data. The three core concepts were: Relative Experience, Leadership and Support, and Overcoming Obstacles. This chapter will present the findings of the study including definitions and dimensions of the three core concepts as well as substantive evidence presented through quotations from the participants along with some demographic data.

#### **4.2 Analysis**

##### **4.2.1 Coding**

In the initial phase of coding, open codes were assigned to various sections of the interview transcripts. The researcher used a hybrid form of coding, starting with a set of pre-set codes that were developed based on the conceptual framework and primary research questions driving this study, and then ending with a form of open coding, or

emergent coding driven completely from the interview content. A total of 32 codes were identified during the initial phase of coding, at which point the process of refining these codes began. As discussed in Chapter 3, the codes were reviewed for repetition and relevance and then combined or eliminated before moving on to the next step of analysis: Categorizing.

#### 4.2.2 Categorizing

As the coding process was completed, categories were developed based on code frequency and the relationship between codes. The researcher began to identify categories by clustering together similar topics that proved to be common themes amongst all or most of the interviews. Subsequently, 12 categories emerged from this phase of data analysis: 1) Student-Athlete(s), 2) Coach/Coaching, 3) Fundraising, 4) Business, 5) Mentors/Mentoring, 6) Presidents/Chancellors, 7) Family, 8) Leadership/Vision, 9) Football, 10) Search Firms, 11) Opportunity, and 12) Networking. Appendix D provides a definition of each of these categories. An examination of the relationship between these categories as they relate to the entire data set and the research questions being explored revealed three core concepts: Relative Experience, Leadership and Support, and Overcoming Obstacles. Table 1 depicts the categories as they fit within the context of each concept.

**Table 1:***Core Concepts*

<b>Relative Experience</b>	<i>Frequency</i>	<b>Leadership and Support</b>	<i>Frequency</i>	<b>Overcoming Obstacles</b>	<i>Frequency</i>
Student-Athlete	30	Mentors	32	Football	22
Coach/Coaching	46	Presidents/Chancellors	34	Search Firms	11
Fundraising	17	Family	27	Opportunity	28
Business	15	Leadership/Vision	26	Networking	23
<i>Total</i>	<b>108</b>	<i>Total</i>	<b>119</b>	<i>Total</i>	<b>84</b>

*Note: ATLAS.ti software was used to create a Hermeneutic unit where the researcher was able to manage, store, and quantify content within interview data*

#### 4.2.3 Conceptualizing

The three core concepts were developed based on participants' interview responses as they recounted professionally defining moments and personal experiences throughout their careers. The participants not only spent time recollecting on their personal and professional experiences, but were free to speculate and interject personal opinions related to specific interview questions about their perceptions of the careers of Division I female athletics. During review of those responses, the categories began to take shape and revealed commonality throughout the coding process, resulting in the development of the three aforementioned core concepts. These core concepts will now be addressed and explained with specific references and quotes from the interview data.

##### 4.2.3.1 Relative Experience

Throughout the interview process and again during the coding process, it became apparent that many of the participants' credited certain past experiences to their career success today, specifically, their ability to become an NCAA Division I athletic director.

The core concept of Relative Experience reflects any experiences prior to becoming an athletic director that the participants felt contributed to their ability to obtain an NCAA Division I athletic director position. Relative experience for this population sample most commonly included having been a student-athlete, having been a collegiate coach, having fundraising experience/abilities, and learning/understanding the general business of intercollegiate athletics. These four categories represent the most common experiences amongst participants that were denoted as having significantly contributed to their career path to becoming an NCAA Division I athletic director.

Seven out of the eight women (87.5%) who were interviewed were student-athletes, meaning they participated in sports at the collegiate level, and five out of the eight women (62.5%) spent time coaching at the collegiate level. All of the women who coached started out as a student-athlete and progressed into coaching thereafter. When asked to describe any experiences they had that they felt led them to the athletic director position they hold today, many of them recalled their experience(s) both as a student-athlete and/or as a coach and how that positively influenced their career path.

(Buttons) I think being a student-athlete and a coach have made me a better athletic director. I have a total understanding of what our student-athletes go through every day, I get it, I've been one. From a coaching perspective, I also know what the coach has been through and what their day is like and what their week is like, and it's 24/7 all the time. It's 24/7 as the athletic director, too. I think it totally prepared me: time management, competitive behavior, passive-aggressive behavior, all of it...and the mood swings. I think I just had a little of been there and done that and now I'm overseeing people and helping to guide and direct them; and at least they know I've done it, been in their shoes."

Similarly, Mary recalls how her experience as a student-athlete and a coach taught her about time management and also how to deal with mood swings, as Buttons called them.

(Mary) I think all people in athletic administration should have a student-athlete experience, even if it's just a comp program or an intramural program, or the manager, because you just have to understand the highs and lows, and the time management, and the disappointments, and the work ethic. I think it's critical, although I think my time as a coach was even more important just understanding that student-athlete relationship. I think that's in a university setting, and I don't mean to take away from the academic world, but I think what goes on between a coach and a student-athlete is one of the most powerful teaching moments that could happen.

When asked about what she perceived to be her leadership strength(s), Mary again connected her career success to having been a coach, stating that, "I think the greatest help for me has been that I was a coach, and I truly cherish the coach/athlete relationship. Everything I do is about making sure that the relationship is strong and that there's opportunity for the coach to interact with the student-athlete."

Lou also attributes her experience as a student-athlete and as a coach to being able to relate to the coaches and student-athletes that she oversees now as the athletic director.

(Lou) I would definitely say that coaching myself, that I can relate to [our coaches], because coaching in itself is an asset that I could bring to the table when talking to our student-athletes, but also talking to our coaches. Even when coaches meet with recruits, they talk about the fact that I was a coach at one time. I would say that was, in my day, much more of a benefit for me than any other part of that [experience].

Another participant, Betty, describes her relative experience both as a student-athlete and as a coach and how she uses that experience to guide her decision-making processes as an athletic director today.

(Betty) I'm just so grateful that I can relate to the student-athletes that I'm working with. When I meet with them at the beginning of the year to talk about what our expectations are, it's really familiar for me because I was in those roles. [Particularly when] we've had coaches that have left, coaches that have gotten fired, and we're looking for new coaches and how the student-athletes react to change, I think it's helpful that I can look back and kind of know I went through some of that myself, and this is, I think, the best way for us to move forward. Let me give you a perspective on it that you may not have heard before. It's very helpful.

It is evident from these specific examples that all of these women have been able to use their past experiences both as student-athletes and/or as coaches to personally relate to their clientele and, in their eyes, successfully manage their businesses as a result of that experience. Through these responses, that relational aspect has revealed itself to be very important to these Division I female athletic directors; they clearly value their past experiences and continue to utilize them relative to their business operations today.

Some of the women described their specific experiences in coaching or administration from the perspective of actually learning the business while doing those jobs, and how learning those skills led them to becoming an NCAA Division I athletic director. Jill, for example, specifically notes some of the hands-on experiences (as opposed to relational experiences) that she had while coaching that helped her learn the business of being an athletic director.

(Jill) Back in the day... when you're a women's college basketball coach or volleyball coach, you did everything. You didn't just do the X's and O's. You did marketing, fundraising, scheduling, budgeting, all of those kinds of things in order for your program to be successful. You know, hiring your staff and everything. As I was spending those years coaching, I was also learning and getting opportunities to do a lot of administrative things, whether we were hosting a golf tournament or partnering with [the] men's basketball coach to do things, or the AD (athletic director). I was getting some of the hands on [experience].

Lou and Betty also both talk about having done “just about everything in the department,” (Lou), from marketing to fundraising to coaching. Betty recalls, “I think I'm very lucky and blessed to have been able to have a load of different experiences and different opportunities that kind of grounded the path that I took, and also gave me direction.”

The business of being an athletic director, whether male or female, is something that constantly came up throughout the interviews. Many of the participants specifically

mentioned the importance of fundraising as it relates to the business of NCAA Division I athletics. Here, Betty describes what she believes are the qualities needed in order to be a successful NCAA Division I athletic director:

(Betty) Whether you're male or female, I think you need to know your business. I think you have to understand how the community, whatever community you're in, works, and how it relates to the business of higher education on your campus. I think you need to be an excellent fundraiser in this day and age, for those of us that don't have Power Five money, and aren't in the elite group of what's happened around the country in Power Five institutions.

In her interview, Buttons also talked about the business of intercollegiate athletics and described what she thought might help increase the number of NCAA Division I female athletic directors:

(Buttons) It's truly viewed as a business, which it is, and they're going to take people that are more qualified in the overall total aspect of becoming an athletic director. You better be able to fundraise; a lot of women don't want to do that, for whatever reason. We serve on boards, we serve on NCAA committees, you serve in your community, you go to athletic events, you're speaking at things, you're raising money, you're going to cocktail parties... all for business purposes.

While she touches on a lot of different areas and activities required of NCAA Division I athletic directors, Buttons describes the importance of understanding the business aspect of running a Division I athletic program and being able to fundraise support for your program.

It is clear through the descriptive references from the interview participants that they attribute their paths to leadership in NCAA Division I athletics to the relative experiences they had either as student-athletes and/or coaches, and learning the business through those roles and other administrative roles along the way. Fundraising was also mentioned a number of times as one of the athletic business practices that women needed

to have experience in, in order to move up the administrative ladder and become an NCAA Division I athletic director.

The experiences that participants had both as student-athletes and as coaches played an integral role in the career paths of all of these women. Not only are they able to relate to the student-athletes and the coaches that they manage on a personal level, but the skills they learned, particularly while coaching, prepared them to move up the administrative ladder and eventually obtain (and maintain) a position as a Division I NCAA athletic director.

#### 4.2.3.2 *Leadership and Support*

As evidenced by the data density shown in Table 1, the four categories making up the core concept of Leadership and Support proved to be the most referenced attributes to the paths to leadership of these NCAA Division I female athletic directors. The core concept of Leadership and Support is defined as any person or persons acknowledged as having contributed to the professional development and career advancement of the participants. The four categories that make up this core concept are mentors, presidents/chancellors, family, and leadership/vision. Mentor is a term used to describe someone who became a trusted advisor or teacher to the participant.

Presidents/Chancellors describes the person leading the university that employed or employs the participant. Family is defined as blood relatives of the participants. And, leadership/vision is what attributes/skills/philosophies participants believed were needed in order to effectively lead their athletic departments.

When addressing the ability to advance, participants often referenced a mentor or mentors who had a profoundly positive impact on their career. Mentor roles mentioned

by the participants included parents, supervisors, colleagues, and even mentees, and the ways in which those mentors influenced the participants' career paths varied widely.

Buttons recalled her experience with one particular mentor, a supervisor, who gave her, "[my] first break."

(Buttons) I would have to say that [Julie], who was my women's athletics director at [University A], also my basketball coach; she was incredibly and influential because she allowed me to see the administrative part of athletics. She made me a student rep on the athletics council. She really gave me my first break. I was a sophomore in college when that happened. What a break into a ready-made job experience. I owe [Julie] a lot. I still keep in touch with her; every time I go back to [University A] for something I see her. She was really one of the prominent women's athletics administrators in the conference.

Here Buttons described the ways in which her mentor positively influenced her career path by giving her hands-on experience on the administrative side of the athletic department. Similarly, Betty described how her mentor, "Did everything," consequently giving her the opportunity to have, "a load of different experiences and different opportunities that kind of grounded the path that I took, and also gave me direction."

When asked what leadership qualities are needed in order to be an athletic director, Polly directly associated both mentors and presidents with the core concept of Leadership and Support.

(Polly) I think leadership has a lot of definitions. I think back again to talking about first mentors. To learn what really matters. I think leaders just do the right thing. They do it when no one's watching, they do it innately. They don't do it for attention even, it's just establishing a leadership vision and a vision for the organization. Not being afraid of putting the very best people around you, including a lot of people who are smarter than I am and we are. You have to make fearless decisions in that regard and not be intimidated by putting someone around you that you really want to have authority. You try to follow the vision of your president for the university, [because] athletics is just a very visible part of universities.

Jill generalized the value and qualities of a good mentor, stating that, “Mentors tell you what you need to hear, not what you want to hear, and I think that’s really important. Finding somebody who is your direct supervisor, boss (or whatever you want to call them), that you can really work with is, I think, one of the keys to being successful, particularly if you’re a female athletic director.”

Polly recalled how her mentors, collectively, emphasized specific areas of focus that she later adopted and incorporated into her style of leadership as an NCAA Division I athletic director.

(Polly) They challenged me in every way to get out of my comfort zone, do something that was beyond maybe even the scope that I thought I could do. To just, in general, work hard. But also, just the things they taught me about how to be good to people. You can be a great employee and a great leader, but you’ve got to be good to your people. They only focused on the student-athlete piece of athletics, even though all of them were supreme business people who knew about marketing and media and television and fundraising... But central to their focus was the student-athlete experience. Again, when you’re around people that live that way are that way in their work, and they never forget it, you, I mean, by osmosis, you’re going to come out in that direction.

Instead of describing mentor influence in the form of hands-on experience doing day-to-day administrative work like Buttons, Polly described her observation of her mentors’ work ethic and their attitudes towards others, and how being around those mentors allowed her to adopt some of those same leadership qualities and grow into her career as an NCAA Division I athletic director.

Some of the participants credited their parent(s) as having been their first mentor(s). Polly, after giving a detailed description of her parents’ background and her upbringing, concluded with, “I look at both of them, and they emphasized education, they emphasized spirituality, and they emphasized just being and doing the right thing. I always tell people my parents were really my first mentors.” Kristy also recognized her

parents as influential mentors in her life, saying, “My parents, they didn’t go to college. They influenced me in many ways in terms of work ethic and the core values that are important to me: loyalty, trust, love, integrity, honesty, personal responsibility; those types of things.”

Participants not only discussed their relationship with mentors in their own lives, but also placed great emphasis on the importance of continuing to mentor other women [in the future] as a means to increase the number of Division I female athletic directors. Buttons expressed her opinion very plainly, saying, “I think we need to do a better job of mentoring young women to be athletic directors and trying to help those that have an interest in it and be mentors to them.” Buttons even mentioned a program that the NCAA has for mentoring young women who want to be athletics directors. Misty also described the importance of mentoring young women that may be interested in a career as an athletic director.

(Misty) Well, I think that the earlier you present the idea to young women, the better able they would be to get the experience early in a career to build. Then I think women that are in the profession, I guess, demystifying a little bit that being an athletic director isn’t some magical job. It’s a lot of hard work and being able to put together a skill set and experiences that prepare you. I think that’s part of it, too, that the desire to pursue leadership positions in athletics, there might be an opt-out there that exists because of perception that I think we could change. Then just continue to be inclusive and encourage young women to keep their options open and aspire for whatever level they want to attain.

In addition to stressing the importance of mentoring young women who aspire to have a career as an NCAA Division I athletic director, Lou gave credit to the women’s association NACWAA for doing a great job promoting the females that are out there and for letting women know about job openings that may be right for them. Lou said, “The success of what we see, women have to support women, from the aspect.” Lou also gave

a personal example of ways in which she mentors young women, saying, “My big part is to make sure our female student-athletes understand you can do this in your career, and for our men to understand the same thing. Women can do this too, that’s part of what they see in the leadership role I take here.”

It is evident that mentors have played a significant role in the lives and careers of these NCAA Division I female athletic directors, and the value of mentoring for females in NCAA Division I athletics is essential for career advancement. The need for mentoring support was stressed by all eight of the participants, as evidenced by the descriptive data shared by all.

Adding to the core concept of Leadership and Support related to mentors, the leadership and support of university presidents and chancellors was a phenomenon that kept resurfacing during the interview process. While some participants credited presidents/chancellors as a primary accelerant on the path to becoming an NCAA Division I female athletic director, others overemphasized the important role that presidents/chancellors play in the hiring process for NCAA Division I athletic directors. When asked why she feels there are so few NCAA Division I female athletic directors, Lou talked about the hiring process saying, “Many times it’s who’s making the hire... Is the president the only one making the hire? They have to be willing to look at the fact that being a woman does not mean that she cannot lead a program with Division I-A football.”

Also in reference to the hiring process, Buttons described the great leadership and support she received from her Chancellor during a time when she was hired as one of only three NCAA Division I female athletic directors in the country.

(Buttons) I was given opportunities; I had great leaders at this university that obviously saw my potential to provide me the opportunity, but they helped me grow and learn. I mentioned that Chancellor that I had for sixteen years; he was the one that made me the AD (athletic director) and he was both wise and smart and I don't think there are too many people that have both those qualities. I learned so much from him, and I'm very grateful to him for not just the opportunity, but for helping me be better at this job and helping me grow with this job with the advice and support that he gave me.

Here, the categorical data of mentors and presidents/chancellors is beginning to cross. Mary also talks about the hiring process related to her university president, who was also a female, and how crucial it is for females to support other females in the business.

(Mary) You see a female president and you say, "Alright. Now here's our chance." But in reality, there's so few female presidents that hire women. I did. I got hired by a female, and she was a wonderful mentor, but it doesn't happen very often.

Again, the leadership and support of a president/chancellor is connected with mentorship. Furthermore, the phenomenological importance of females hiring other females is referenced. Betty also talked about the power that presidents/chancellors have in the hiring process, and how important it is for women to support other women.

(Betty) It's just going to take presidents and chancellors to open the doors. You can do all the networking you want, but I think our women's groups need to be stronger. I know there are some mentor programs across the country trying to do some things. I like to hire women. It's amazing, though, in fact, how many men apply for women's jobs in coaching today. We're not doing ourselves any favors. We need to promote women in our programs- those of us that have those opportunities.

Yet again the importance of leadership and support both amongst women colleagues and coming from leadership positions like those of a president/chancellor is emphasized. Jill described this phenomenon in detail as it related to her experience becoming an NCAA Division athletic director in the state where she lives.

(Jill) I'm not saying this is a director factor, but I think this could be a factor, and there's no research on it, but Buttons was the basketball coach at [University A]. She has stayed there all these years and her chancellor, at some point in time, whoever was her boss, said, "Okay, I'm going to hire an AD. I'm going to hire Buttons." And once you hire one [female], because we're a state system, other chancellors probably said, "Wow, they hired Buttons... she's done a pretty good job. Maybe I'll hire a female at my school..." I think whenever somebody allows that opportunity and it turns out in a really good way, you become a huge Buttons fan. I think she's one of the best ADs in the country, but I think also that opened the door to other universities in the state system whether it's [University B], or [University C], or [University D], Buttons somewhat was a trailblazer. The others that have come after that, obviously, it's given us more opportunities because somebody wasn't the first; then you know somebody did go first and now it's made a little easier for another state school to say, "Yeah, it worked out pretty good for [University A]. It'll probably work out pretty good for us."

It is clear from the data saturation that presidents/chancellors play a very important role in the consideration and hiring of NCAA Division I female athletic directors. And while most of the discussion surrounding the leadership and support of presidents/chancellors was positive, presidents/chancellors were also attributed as part of the problem as to why there are so few NCAA Division I female athletic directors.

(Mary) I just have always been disappointed that presidents haven't taken a more active role in selecting an athletic director and having a diverse pool. They turn it over to head-hunting search firms who are indebted to athletics directors that look like them, talk like them... [Then] if we can't get [women] into coaching, you can't get that role-modeling happening, and then presidents don't see enough women being successful so why would they think women could be athletic directors? We've tried to put presidents in a room, and I think that, to me it is the key. You've got the presidents in a room, and [then] you've got to help them understand that they can be real society changers here. We also have to get these search firms, and I'm not a fan of search firms, but they are controlling these searches; and I just don't believe that they're being truly inclusive and as good as they could be.

Mary's statement was a general one, not particular to her own situation like the comments from the other participants discussed previously. However, her response provides reflection on the role that presidents/chancellors *don't* play in the hiring process

and how that negatively affects the hiring of NCAA Division I female athletics directors. Mary also echoes the sentiment voiced from the other participants regarding the importance of women mentoring and supporting other women, sharing in the belief that the more women who are given leadership roles in the athletic department, the more other women will be given those same opportunities.

The evidence shows the leadership and support of presidents/chancellors to be one of the key factors in the hiring and perceived successes of NCAA Division I female athletic directors. In fact, the category of presidents/chancellors was more saturated with data than all but two of the twelve categories revealed by the response data. Clearly the participants in this study recognized the impact that president/chancellors have on their personal paths to leadership.

Family is another category included in the core concept of Leadership and Support. Throughout the interview process, participants often referenced the value of family support in both their personal lives and in professional settings. Family most often surfaced as an answer to two of the interview questions: 1) Did you have a mentor or mentors and if so, how did that person or persons influence your past and 2) Statistics show that less than 10% of Division I athletic directors are female. To what do you attribute this status? Since the mentoring aspect of family has already been discussed, this part of the data reflection will focus on family and how the importance of family affects the low numbers of Division I female athletic directors.

When asked why there are so few Division I female athletic directors, Buttons said, "Women have a tendency to not want to move around a lot for family reasons, whether it be to a husband or partner, they are more considerate of not just themselves

but of their partners' or husbands' jobs and it plays a key factor." In other words, because women are not willing to move around a lot (for family reasons) and make major job changes, they are not putting themselves in a position to obtain an athletic director role. Jill also talked about women's unwillingness to move noting that we're part of our own problem.

(Jill) I think some of it's on us, as women, too. I talk about this a lot. Somebody told me this a long time ago: You've got to have your suitcase packed. You've got to go where the opportunity is and sometimes, I think we kind of hem-haw around and kind of say, "Well, you know, I don't know if I really want to move across the country." Sometimes you've got to make one or two moves before you can get to the place where you really want to be, and I think we [women] maybe hesitate a little bit.

Although Jill didn't specifically mention family as a reason women might not be willing to move, she still expressed a similar opinion to Buttons on the subject of why there are so few NCAA Division I female athletic directors. Similarly, Lou's response lent even more credit to this theory (that women are unwilling to move across the country because of family), when she said, "I mean, my choice has been to be here at [University A] for a lifetime. One of the reasons I've stayed here is because I do have a son, and we love it here. My husband and I, we've made it our social life and our family. It's where we wanted to be." Lou's response shows that she attributes her family support to her career path and her decision to stay put in her role as an NCAA Division I athletic director (and not pursue other opportunities).

This phenomenon or theory that women are unwilling to move because of family reasons that was described by the aforementioned participants goes hand in hand with the networking category which will be discussed within the core concept of Overcoming Obstacles.

Betty also talked about the importance of family as it related to her career path and how family life is often a major consideration for those interested in the position of athletic director.

(Betty) This business has changed so much, whether you're male or female, but there's not many of us in this position, and I see why. I was a single mom [when I started working in collegiate athletic administration]. Now my son's thirty-two years old. I don't know if I could have done what I needed to do, as a mom and raising my family, as an athletic director (back then).

As evidenced by the data, the family aspect of the core concept of Leadership and Support is one that plays a pivotal role in the career paths of NCAA Division I female athletic directors. Whether the impact of family is one of love and support to pursue your career goals and dreams, or whether that family causes women to think twice about making that next career move, family is something that has been proven to be important and valuable to NCAA Division I female athletic directors and/or those considering such positions.

The final category of the core concept of Leadership and Support is leadership/vision. While leadership has a variety of definitions, this aspect of leadership/vision pertains to the qualities and characteristics that the participants deemed necessary in order to be an NCAA Division I athletic director. The importance of quality leadership from mentors, presidents/chancellors and family has already been discussed, but here the participants reflect on their own leadership skills, particularly: vision. Vision was a word that was consistently mentioned throughout the interviews, with participants linking leadership and vision hand in hand. Polly linked the president/chancellor category to the leadership/vision category of the core concept of Leadership and Support.

(Polly) I think leaders just do the right thing. They do it when no one's watching; they do it innately. They don't do it for attention even, it's just establishing a leadership vision and a vision for the organization... I like to let people hear what the expectations are for our university, because it's not my vision. You try to follow the vision of your president for the university. Athletics is just a very visible part of universities, and you set the scope. I think what people want from leaders is again, vision, communication fairness, sensitivity, passion, consistency. I learned that a lot, frankly, from coaches.

Mary also talked about the importance of having a vision as an NCAA Division I athletic director, and communicating that vision to your constituents.

(Mary) I think equally important is to know what you want, know your vision; understand what you think the tenant of your athletic department needs to be. Carry that message and deliver that message in a consistent fashion so that everybody gets on board. You've got to get by, and it's no different than being a coach: Here's what we're going to do and here's how I think we're going to get there. Just remind people of what your philosophy is and what your vision is. Keep true to it. Don't vacillate.

It's interesting that in both Polly and Mary's responses, leadership and vision were also linked back to coaching. Even as Jill elaborated on what it takes to execute your vision as a good leader, she referenced her experience as a coach as well.

(Jill) I think the other thing that's really important is you can't just have a vision. This is the old coach in me. I think vision is great, thinking you want to win championships, but you better have some strategies and some tactics [to make it happen]. People can make things happen, but they don't know where they're going. Or people that have great dreams and the plans look good on paper, but they just can't implement them. I think you've got to have that.

These participants learned how to lead and how to establish and execute their vision either from their previous coaching experience or from observing the coaches they manage. All three of the participants' responses demonstrate how the categories and core concepts are beginning to overlap as the interview process moves along and the data becomes more saturated. The experiences they've had are now showing how they built

upon those experiences and used them to further themselves along in their career, and continue to use them now as leaders in NCAA Division I athletics.

#### 4.2.3.3 Overcoming Obstacles

The final core concept that was revealed through the interview data was Overcoming Obstacles. Participants not only shared their personal experiences overcoming obstacles on their path to becoming an NCAA Division I athletic director, but also reflected on the obstacles that still exist for women wishing to become NCAA Division I athletic directors and the process by which said obstacles may be overcome. This core concept builds upon the previously described core concepts of Relative Experience and Leadership and Support. The four categories that make up this core concept are football, search firms, opportunity and networking.

The first category in the core concept of Overcoming Obstacles for NCAA Division I female athletics directors is football. With NCAA football being a male sport, and one of the primary economic drivers of intercollegiate athletics, many of the participants reflected on the prevailing thought that not having played or coached football was a major deterrent for women wanting to become NCAA Division I athletic directors.

(Mary) There's this prevailing view that you had to have had a football helmet on to know something about athletic administration. I have no idea what the football helmet brings to the table, but there's just this American love affair with football, so nobody, unless they played football, can lead... which is just a misunderstanding of what it takes to be a good athletic director.

(Lou) There certainly were people that were fans, or boosters, or individuals that were like, "What's a woman know about football?" and, "Why should she be doing this? What does she know about coaching the football team,"... Which I don't do. I hire people to do that.... They have to be willing to look at the fact that being a woman does not mean that she cannot lead a program with a Division I-A football program.

Both of these women reference the fact that not having played football does not equate to not being able to be a good athletic director, which would prove true whether the athletic director (or potential athletic director) is male or female.

Betty also talked about the perception that, "...we haven't played the game, we haven't put on a jockstrap, we haven't done some of those things that the guys have done, and therefore, we don't know what we're doing." She offered advice on how one might overcome this obstacle.

(Betty) I think Division I football differentiates itself because it's such a big monster in the landscape of college athletics. It's been the game-changer across the country. Conferences and the monies... you have to understand that. I think that's the bigger point [that differentiates men and women athletic directors] is those of us who have football and those of us who don't... When you win, and when you have teams that have successful programs, and you do things the right way, I think [the perception] slowly changes.

While it is evident from the responses that the lack of experience playing or coaching football is viewed as an obstacle for women wishing to become NCAA Division I athletic directors, the participants of this study clearly view that theory as a misconception. Some of the participants voiced their desire to correct that misconception and have shown that they were able to find their own ways to overcome that obstacle.

The second category related to the core concept of Overcoming Obstacles is search firms. Participants indicated that search firms are often used to assist in the hiring process of NCAA Division I athletic directors. Five of the eight participants (62.5%) actually described how the process of using executive search firms adversely affects women looking to obtain NCAA Division I athletic director positions.

When asked what reasoning she could attribute to the low numbers of NCAA Division I female athletic directors, Betty said, "I think it's an old boys' network. I think

it's a search firm [problem]. They just recycle the same guys time and time again.”

Similarly, Buttons plainly stated, “I’m not sure that the executive search firms make placing women a priority.” Several other participants had strong opinions about search firms and their lack of consideration for women as NCAA Division I athletic directors.

(Mary) We also have to get [control of] these search firms. I’m not a fan of search firms, but they are controlling these searches, and I just don’t believe that they’re being as truly inclusive and as good as they could be. It’s sad because I hate to just bring the problem up without a solution, but you keep trying to have a solution. Early on when I was a young athletic director (I’ve been here now 22 years), so 5-10 years into it I thought, ‘Okay, I’ve proven I can do this, now can I do another job? Can I be hired?’ I’m [then] told by a principal in the search firm that, ‘You need to come to my city and get me out and wine and dine me, because I need to like you.’ [I thought] what? They told me that and there are people that will do that. It’s so against so much of the ethics and integrity that I think a lot of women have. We won’t do that.

According to Mary’s response, search firms are using bribery to attract clients and place them in NCAA Division I athletic director positions. Mary also implies that women exhibit more integrity than men, and therefore won’t fall for the search firm tactics, thereby excluding themselves from the pool of candidates recommended by the firm(s). Mary went on to say, “[Presidents] turn [the hiring] over to head-hunting search firms who are indebted to athletic directors that look like them, talk like them. I know so many token women, and, my gosh, black women, who are in their [candidate] pool just to make it look good, but there’s no seriousness about it.”

Buttons also elaborated on the theory of search firms and athletic directors being indebted to on another, perpetuating the “good ole boys’ network.

(Buttons) And executive search firms... are a little bit of a racket. If they place me as an AD somewhere, what I’m seeing in the industry is, ‘Oh boy, since they got me the job I’m going to hire them every time to help me get coaches.’ There’s this continuation and follow-up and continued business that they get. I don’t use executive search firms.

Not only do the interview responses indicate search firms to be an obstacle for women wishing to obtain a position as an NCAA Division I athletic director, but the findings present an even broader problem related to the ethical conduct of search firms and how it is negatively affecting the business of intercollegiate athletics. These findings will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

The third category included in the core concept of Overcoming Obstacles is opportunity. While opportunity in general is often discussed in a positive light as it relates to career paths, some of the participants of this study also reflected on opportunity as a challenge to their career success. Misty said, “Women in sports, we’re still evolving, I think; especially in leadership roles... Just probably like men, although, I’m guessing they get more opportunities.” Her statement suggests that women are being overlooked for leadership roles in sports related industries, though she offers advice for overcoming this obstacle. (Misty) “I think the earlier you present the idea to young women, the better able they would be to get the experience early in a career to build... just continue to be inclusive and encouraging young women to keep their options open and aspire for whatever level they want to attain.”

Similarly, Jill recounts how being a female may limit career growth opportunities for women wishing to advance to the athletic director position, and how those limitations are evolving in order to enhance those opportunities for women.

(Jill) I was fortunate that men didn’t hold me back, they encouraged me. But many women don’t get a chance to do fundraising or don’t get a chance to work with football. When it comes time to be a Division I athletic director, if you’re trying to get to a school that has football or somewhere [that] the number one question is, ‘Have you handled finance or can you raise money?’ A lot of women never had those opportunities. Now, I think that’s changing because...everybody’s realizing that, and the women are realizing it too...you need to get into those parts of athletics where you’re going to get that opportunity

and not pigeonhole yourself in a certain area, especially if you want to be an athletic director.

Jill also discussed, as quoted earlier in Chapter 4 when discussing the data related to the importance of family, how sometimes the opportunity is there but women, more often than their male counterparts, women won't take it. (Jill) "...you've got to have your suitcase packed. You've got to go where the opportunity is and sometimes, I think, we kind of hem-haw around... maybe we hesitate a little bit."

Many of the participants credited mentors, bosses, colleagues and family for the opportunities that they were given to learn what it takes to become an NCAA Division I athletic director. Most of those instances have already been discussed in other parts of the data analysis. However, as it pertains to overcoming obstacles, Buttons said, "... I was given opportunities; I had great leaders at this university that obviously saw my potential to provide me the opportunity, but they helped me grown and learn... because everybody that I was sitting around the table with were male athletic directors, not [even any] female assistant or associate athletic directors [at that time].

Buttons said she was able to connect with her male colleagues by simply inserting herself into their groups, and described a personal strategy that she adopted where she found a way to relate to her male colleagues by doing her research on them and finding various commonalities between them like hobbies they had in common or family member/close friends that they both knew well. It worked for her and helped her gain respect, which opened the door for more opportunities for her in the world of athletic administration. (Buttons) "You've got to earn their respect; it doesn't just come with the comma behind your name and the title of athletic director. They had to respect me as

being a crony and that's the only way I was going to get into their group versus being a female on the outside."

All of the aforementioned participants described various scenarios related to opportunity. To sum it up, either opportunity was there and the participants seized it, or opportunity was lacking and the participants created it. Either way, the participants found a way to advance, despite lack of opportunity or consideration for women as NCAA Division I athletic directors.

The final category comprising the core concept of Overcoming Obstacles is networking. Networking was described by the participants as being a hugely important part of career advancement for those working in NCAA athletic administration. Being a female trying to advance in the male-dominated industry of intercollegiate athletics proved to be challenging at times, because (according to participant responses) networking is seemingly easier for the men in this business realm.

(Buttons) I would say it's critical for people that want to be in this business to learn the value and the need to broaden their network. What I'm getting ready to say, I don't like, but it's the truth. A lot of hires today are based on getting in the door, are based on who you know instead of what you know. I don't particularly like that, but I think it's a reality. Name dropping goes an awful long way in our industry and that can be good and bad... I think women aren't often times as aggressive as men are in networking and networking with the executive search firms... There are some very qualified people that just don't have that network but men network far better than women do. That is a business, they really do and that's how the good ole boy network has sustained itself.

The "good ole boys" network was something that Betty mentioned as being an obstacle to women as well. (Betty) "Oh, I think it's an old boys' network... They just recycle the same guys time and time again. [Part of the problem] is the network, it's part of the boys' club. That's not going to change until the presidents and chancellors change [the way they hire athletic directors]..."

Aside from the obstacles that the “good ole boys” network presents for females, some participants felt that career advancement of NCAA Division I female athletic directors relied heavily on the importance of networking in the business.

(Polly) “...getting women learning to network and expressing their goals about wanting to be in the room, to utilize the skills, even if it means they have to work beyond their own job description to get that done. I think that’s the key to all of it.”

Similarly, Kelly noted the value of networking in her career now, saying, “That networking of, particularly female colleagues, I wish I had done [that] earlier, but I didn’t have that network like some women did.”

The networking aspect of career advancement also presented itself to some of the participants in a compromising way, which became another obstacle to be overcome. Buttons described an incident in particular where she felt as though she was being taken advantage of, as a woman, instead of being given an opportunity to network.

(Buttons) He was kind of a smart aleck and he said, ‘Why don’t we meet for breakfast,’ almost in a suggestive way, but I know him, [and] I know what kind of school he was at and I knew he was married, okay. So I said, ‘What’s your home phone number,’ and he gave it to me, and I said, ‘How about I call your wife and see what she thought about that?’ And he [just] looked at me, and I said, ‘Don’t ever ask me that again.’ He never did and it stopped.

This is a specific example of how networking (with whom are primarily male colleagues) can open the door for unethical behavior. Consequently, networking or the idea of networking can be perceived negatively by women in the business of intercollegiate athletics. Kelly shared a similar sentiment when she said, “I think that when I was single and not married [there was] a double standard of having to work [with primarily men]...of having to be very careful about behavior. I couldn’t go out to a bar on Friday night and have some beers or whatever, like my male colleagues might do,

without there being a [negative] perception... those are just real things you have to be mindful of.

The data show that while networking is important, particularly for female NCAA Division I athletic directors, it can also prove challenging to navigate successfully. Networking is certainly something that the participants in this study have managed to do well, despite the challenges, and is something that NCAA Division I female athletic directors (or aspiring athletic directors) must learn to use to their advantage. The advice offered by participants will be helpful in learning to overcome the obstacles that may present themselves through networking for females in the profession of NCAA Division I athletic administration.

#### 4.2.4 Conclusion

The interview questions were designed to elicit responses that would describe perceived avenues of success from women who have obtained a position as an NCAA Division I athletic director. The data collected via one-on-one interviews revealed three core concepts: Relative Experience, Leadership and Support, and Overcoming Obstacles. These core concepts were developed based on prevailing commonality in participants' responses to the interview questions. The categories comprising each core concept reflect the actual experiences described and opinions expressed by the participants, as depicted with quotes and specific examples from the interview data. In CHAPTER 5, these findings will be further examined in order to provide implications for various stakeholders working in and around NCAA Division I athletics, as well as those wanting to pursue employment in this arena.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **5.1 Overview**

With less than 10 percent of NCAA Division I athletic directors today being female (Acosta and Carpenter, 2014), there is much to be discovered related to reasoning behind such an inequitable underrepresentation of women in athletic administration (Parther et al., 2014). Especially when compared to the number of female student-athletes increasingly participating in NCAA Division I athletics, the number of female athletic directors becomes despairingly smaller (Acosta and Carpenter, 2014). The purpose of this study was to examine the paths to leadership of current NCAA Division I female athletic directors in order to gain greater insight into ways in which women can successfully navigate their way through the traditionally male-dominated world of NCAA Division I athletics. This qualitative case study was designed to elicit in-depth responses from participants via one-on-one interviews, while paying particular attention to the following areas of emphasis: 1) obstacles encountered in pursuit of a career in athletic administration, 2) perceived reasoning behind the low numbers of women in NCAA Division I athletic director roles, 3) ways in which opportunities for women athletic directors may be increased or enhanced, and 4) perceived leadership qualities of NCAA Division I athletic directors. Data were analyzed by the researcher and then

conceptualized using thematic coding. Participant recollection of personal experiences, as well as participant perceptions and opinions were used in Chapter 4 as a means to offer an explanation for the categories representing each of the three core concepts presented in the data analysis.

The three core concepts of Relative Experience, Leadership and Support, and Overcoming Obstacles were developed via critical analysis of commonalities which were found amongst participants' interview responses, giving careful consideration to the research questions which were to be answered by this study. Chapter 5 will include an interpretation of findings, implications for practice as they relate to each core concept, and recommendations for future study.

## **5.2 Interpretation of Findings**

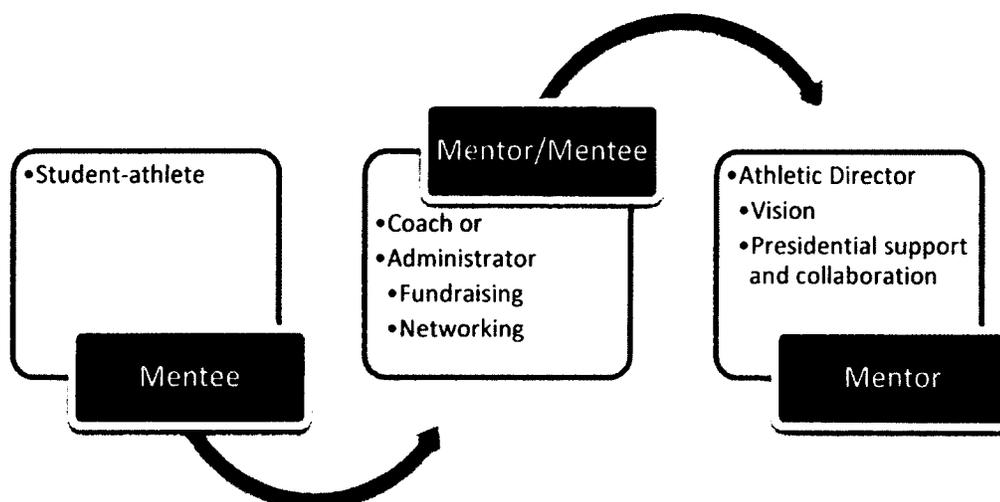
The findings in this study not only enhanced existing theories on women in leadership, but revealed new phenomena to be explored, particularly as it relates to career paths and experiences of NCAA Division I female athletic directors. The following sections will examine the results based on the original research questions to be explored, using Critical Feminist Theory as a guideline for interpretation.

### **5.2.1 Career Paths of NCAA Division I Female Athletic Directors**

The main research question to be explored in this study was, "What do female NCAA Division I athletic directors perceive as career paths to leadership for NCAA Division I female athletic directors?" The most significant findings related directly to career paths of Division I female athletic directors were revealed through the core concepts of Relative Experience and Leadership and Support. Seven out of the eight (87.5%) Division I female athletic directors that were interviewed in this study were

collegiate student-athletes, and five of those seven women progressed on to collegiate coaching after their experience as a student-athlete. These results provide further evidence supporting the data revealed by Wong (2014) on most common career paths of NCAA Division I athletic directors, which included prior coaching and/or student-athlete experience. Not only did the participants in this study acknowledge their previous positions held either as a student-athlete or a coach, but all of the women recognized the significance of their experiences as student-athletes and/or coaches and attributed those experiences to their chosen career paths and successful attainment of a position as a Division I athletic director.

When coupled with the data from the core concept of Leadership and Support, particularly on the importance of mentoring in each of the participants' lives as it relates to their career paths, these results becomes even more significant. If most of the women who become Division I athletic directors attribute their career paths to their experiences as a student-athlete and/or coach, as well as the mentors they had along the way, then mentoring current female student-athletes could provide a possible launching pad for future Division I female athletic directors. While not a new discovery that women benefit from having mentors in their career, recognizing this progression from student-athlete, to coach, to mentee, to athletic director, to mentor could be the first step in developing more NCAA Division I female athletic directors. Table 2 depicts the mentor/mentee relationship as it relates to career progression for NCAA Division I female athletic directors.



**Figure 1:**

*Mentor Roles Pertaining to Career Paths of NCAA Division I Female Athletic Directors*

As Misty quoted, “I think the earlier you present the idea to young women, the better able they would be to get the experience early in a career to build... just continue to be inclusive and encouraging young women to keep their options open and aspire for whatever level they want to attain.” Misty’s quote is not only representative of a feminist perspective, but a direct reflection of a participative leadership style, as discussed in Chapter 2, mentioning encouragement and inclusion as important aspects of career progression and growth.

As aforementioned, the findings within the core concept of Leadership and Support are reflective of research (described in Chapter 2) that suggests that women who do not have large peer groups within their organization benefit greatly from having mentors (Chandler, 1996; Nicholson and Pasque, 2011). The results also confirm the findings which revealed that women working in NCAA athletic administration need mentors and female role models in order to advance their careers (Taylor et al., 2016).

Mentoring and support came in a variety of packages for the women interviewed in this study, including parents, presidents/chancellors, colleagues and bosses, but all of those mentors provided needed leadership and support for women who were the overwhelming minority in their working environment. As we'll discuss later in Chapter 5, there are significant implications for future practice that, based on these findings, have the potential to increase the number of and enhance the quality of Division I female athletic directors.

### 5.2.2 Obstacles to Overcome for NCAA Division I Female Athletic Directors

The first sub-research question to be explored was: In pursuit of a career in athletic administration, what, if any, obstacles have female athletic directors had to overcome, and how did they overcome them? The obstacles most referenced by the women in this study were football, search firms, lack of opportunity, and networking. Most notably, networking and opportunity (or lack thereof) were described as having been significant obstacles for women, both as they rose to the ranks of DI athletic director and even still in their day to day operations. Secondary but related to those two main obstacles were [lack of experience in] football and the use of search firms in the hiring process of DI athletic directors.

#### 5.2.2.1 Opportunity and Networking

The lack of opportunities given to women wishing to become NCAA Division I athletic directors seems to directly correlate with the networking difficulties these women experienced. While networking was described by participants as a vital part of career growth in NCAA Division I athletics (male or female), it was also perceived as an obstacle for many women who felt excluded from the "good ole boys network" because

of their gender. Under the assumption of CFT, the participants are expressing conditions from which dominant gender relations have emerged. Two of the participants even depicted specific instances where networking had turned into an ethically compromising situation or one that could be perceived by others as such. When most of a woman's colleagues in NCAA athletics are male, this limits a woman's ability to network as comfortably and/or effectively as her male counterparts in the business. The inability to network with men in the business thereby limits the opportunities that may arise for career growth. Buttons said that, "Men network far better than women do," and Polly reiterated the fact that women need to "work on their networking skills, especially with other women."

Critical researchers often look for evidence in data that might encourage people to interact and form networks, with the purpose of transforming the underlying order of social life (Creswell, 2013). CFT in this instance serves as a way to challenge the existing distributions of power in the "good ole boys" network and promote equality between the sexes (Rhode, 1990). Today, with organizations like NACWAA in place, while the opportunities for women to network with male counterparts still might prove to be a challenge, there are increasing opportunities for women to network with other women in the business and begin to grow their worth and their skills amongst like colleagues. Also important to note, some women actively choose to disengage in networking or do not accept job opportunities presented to them because of family and other responsibilities that they fear may be diminished as a result of the high level demands of being a NCAA Division I athletic director. They're choosing to opt-out.

### 5.2.2.2 Football and Search Firms

Football and search firms were also mentioned as hindering progress for women wishing to be given the opportunity to become an NCAA Division I athletic director. Half (50%) of the participants specifically noted football as being a major obstacle for women wishing to obtain a position as an NCAA Division I athletic director, while five of the eight women (62.5%) noted search firms as an obstacle to be overcome. I've linked these two obstacles together because both obstacles are systematically connected in the world of NCAA Division I athletics. The stark differences between the number of female ADs in Division III and Division II versus Division I helps illustrate the theory that football and search firms are a major deterrent for women wishing to become ADs at the DI level, as DII and DIII institutions are less likely to have football and/or less likely to have major stakeholders and millions of dollars tied to their football programs than DI institutions. One study found that administrators at Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) institutions engaged search firms over twice as many times as those from Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) and non-football institutions (Lutz, 2012). As Betty stated, "I think Division I football differentiates itself because it's such a big monster in the landscape of college athletics. It's been the game-changer across the country. Conferences and the monies... you have to understand that." In other words, it's not necessarily the football experience that's driving the wedge between women and DI college athletics, it's the money.

The information in this study has shown that in order for women to overcome the obstacles of football and search firms, being a successful fundraiser is a key component. This concept is perfectly illustrated with this quote from Jill, "When it comes time to be a

Division I athletic director, if you're trying to get to a school that has football or somewhere [that] the number one question is, 'Have you handled finance or can you raise money?' A lot of women never had those opportunities. Now, I think that's changing because...everybody's realizing that, and the women are realizing it too...you need to get into those parts of athletics where you're going to get that opportunity and not pigeonhole yourself in a certain area, especially if you want to be an athletic director." However, all the fundraising experience in the world won't change the discriminatory practices that search firms are allegedly engaging in, as described by participants in this study.

One of the aims of CFT is to, "reconstitute legal practices that have excluded, devalued, or undermined women's concerns" (Rhodes, 1990, p. 619). In this case, CFT may provide positive influence on the practices of search firms to make them more inclusive of women. Previous research has also identified issues related to the hiring process as a barriers to women's progress in the workplace (Yiamouyiannis and Osborne, 2012). This concept will be discussed in more detail in the Implications for Future Practice section further on in Chapter 5.

### 5.2.3 Reasons for Low Numbers of NCAA Division I Female Athletic Directors

The second sub research question to be considered by this study was: What do NCAA Division I female athletic directors perceive as reasons for the low numbers of women in NCAA Division I athletic director roles? The interview data revealed a number of potential explanations for the low numbers of NCAA Division I female athletic directors, many of which were based on an internal locus of control. However, it's by focusing on those external factors that the results of this study can effectively address the reasons why so few NCAA Division I athletic directors are female and elicit positive

change in this area. All of the obstacles mentioned in the previous section are also some of the reasons why there are so few NCAA Division I female athletic directors: lack of opportunity, networking barriers, perceived lack of football experience/knowledge, and the use of search firms in the hiring process. Additionally, a general lack of support can be attributed to the low numbers of NCAA Division I female athletic directors. It is evident from the data described in Chapter 4 that women rely on the support of many in order to obtain and maintain a position as a DI NCAA athletic director, so a lack of support from presidents and chancellors, family, colleagues and others would prove detrimental to their career growth. These results show that eliminating the obstacles and increasing the amount of mentoring and support for women in intercollegiate athletics are two key components to increasing the number of NCAA DI female athletic directors.

#### 5.2.4 Ways to Increase Opportunities for Women in NCAA Division I Athletics

The next sub-research question to be explored was: What do NCAA Division I female athletic directors perceive as ways to increase opportunities for women wishing to attain NCAA Division I athletic director positions? When the three core concepts of Relative Experience, Leadership and Support and Overcoming Obstacles are combined, the overarching theme or answer to this question becomes inclusion. As evidenced quite simply by Misty's response when asked what could be done to increase the number of DI female athletic directors, "...just continue to be inclusive and encourage young women to keep their options open and aspire for whatever level they want to attain."

CFT frequently examines gender and power with the theme of inclusion in mind. Being more inclusive, however, is not a simple solution. In order to increase opportunities for women to become NCAA Division I athletic directors, all members of

the supporting cast must work together to include women in every aspect of Division I athletics. Particularly, women must not be excluded from any of the aforementioned areas of exclusion like football related activities, networking, and fundraising. Presidents and chancellors must be committed to diversity and inclusion of women in areas generally thought to be male-oriented and male-dominated like NCAA DI athletic administration, and if search firms are to be used, they must also look more closely at female candidates. When Mary was asked what she thought could be done in order to increase the number of NCAA DI female athletic directors, her answer directly supported this finding.

(Mary) That, to me, is the key. You've got the presidents in a room, and you've got help them understand that they can be the real society changers here. We also have to get these search firms. I'm not a fan of search firms, but they are controlling these searches, and I just don't believe that they're being as truly inclusive and as good as they could be.

Despite the seemingly simplistic concept of presidents, search firms, and all stakeholders involved in NCAA DI athletics becoming more inclusive, the ways in which inclusion can be enacted are not as easily defined. Passed over 40 years ago, Title XI was designed to support inclusion of women in this area. Spurred on by the feminist movement of the 1960's and early 1970's, the passing of the amendment successfully increased the number of women participating in intercollegiate athletics by lawfully forcing female students to be treated as equals. And while the NCAA can regulate inclusion of student-athletes by doling out specific numbers of scholarships to each gendered sport, the hiring of women in NCAA Division I athletics cannot be or has not been specifically regulated. Based on the evidence presented in this research, governing authorities need to take a closer look at the factors influencing exclusion of women in

NCAA Division I athletic director roles and consider more specific ways in which a more inclusive environment can be fostered and regulated.

#### 5.2.5 Leadership Qualities of NCAA Division I Female Athletic Directors

The final sub-research question that this study sought to answer was: What leadership qualities do NCAA Division I female athletic directors value and/or possess? To answer this question, participants were asked to describe the qualities and characteristics they felt were needed in order to be an NCAA Division I athletic director, as well as to describe what they perceived to be their own personal leadership strengths. While a number of leadership qualities and characteristics surfaced during the interview process, the one word that consistently linked those qualities together was vision. As described in Chapter 4, the importance of having a vision, communicating that vision and executing that vision each and every day was something that participants referenced as one of the key aspects of leadership for NCAA Division I female athletic directors. As Mary explained, “I think equally important is to know what you want, know your vision; understand what you think the tenant of your athletic department needs to be. Carry that message and deliver that message in a consistent fashion so that everybody gets on board.” Furthermore, when discussing the importance of having and executing a vision, some of the participants stressed the need for that vision to be congruent with the overall university mission and vision and particularly the university president or chancellor’s vision.

(Polly) I like to let people hear what the expectations are for our university, because it’s not my vision. You try to follow the vision of your president for the university. Athletics is just a very visible part of universities, and you set the scope. I think what people want from leaders is again, vision, communication fairness, sensitivity, passion, consistency.

The emphasis on keeping the vision alive via constant communication and collaboration demonstrates both the transformational and participative leadership styles that studies have so often shown to be primarily exhibited by women. The very definition of vision, as it relates to a vision statement for an organization, describes a transformation that will take place. A vision statement indicates both what the organization wants to become and guides transformational initiatives by setting a defined direction for the organization's growth (Lipton, 1996). And with the women verbalizing the need for an inclusive, collaborative vision, participative leadership is also displayed. Participative leaders consult with subordinates often and share in the decision making process, likewise, sharing responsibility and leadership power (Rosener, 1990; Northouse, 2007). Thus, the previous research indicating that successful women leaders are both transformational and participative is no different in the world in NCAA Division I athletics. Women aspiring to attain a position as an NCAA Division I athletic director should know the mission and vision of the university they seek to lead, and execute that vision by utilizing transformational and/or participative leadership styles.

### **5.3 Implications for Future Practice**

This research provides important information relative to a number of NCAA and higher education stakeholders, including university presidents/chancellors, athletic directors, search firms, aspiring female athletic directors, student-athletes, mentors and even sports fans. When evaluating the broader impact of this research using Critical Feminist Theory as a guide, there are two major takeaway points that these varying stakeholders should consider for future practice: Career progression and hiring considerations.

### 5.3.1 Career Progression

As evidenced by the data, there are specific career steps that lead females down the path to becoming an athletic director. This progression often begins with the student-athlete experience, followed by a coaching or administrative role in collegiate athletics, which then leads to the opportunity to become an athletic director. It's important for both men and women to recognize this progression and begin encouraging or mentoring women while they are student-athletes. Young student-athletes and/or administrators should be presented the idea early on, that it's possible, given the right experiences, to become an NCAA Division I athletic director (if so desired). And then administrators must be willing to provide the tools and training necessary to develop female administrators into athletic directors. More consideration must be given to females for traditionally male-dominated roles in athletic departments, like those of fundraisers or business managers, since those two categories of work experience were significant findings.

The support of mentors, as noted in the data, is an equally important key ingredient to career progression for NCAA Division I female athletic directors. Without mentors, there may be little or stalled career advancement for women in collegiate athletics. Athletic directors should adopt protégés, particularly females, and female administrators should equally seek out mentors. The key is providing women with the opportunity to be mentored by someone that has the necessary skill set and nurturing behavior to help the protégé along (Bower, 2009).

### 5.3.2 Hiring Considerations

The use of search firms to hire athletic directors at the NCAA Division I level was presented as problematic for women. None of the women in this study were hired as first time athletic directors through the use of a search firm. As the leading authority in the hiring process, presidents and chancellors should take note of this information when considering the use of search firms for the hiring of an athletic director to be sure that qualified candidates are not being excluded on the basis of gender.

There is very little research that has been done to investigate the claim that search firms processes are flawed and discriminatory. If true, not only would this be considered problematic for women, but would prove to be a contradiction to the NCAA's commitment to inclusion and diversity.

In 2006, representatives from the NCAA, NACWAA and BCA (Black Coaches Association) created a manual titled, "Best Hiring Practices," aimed at providing guided steps to increase diversity amongst administrative and coaching staffs in NCAA athletic departments. In the foreword, former NACWA Executive Director Jennifer Alley wrote, "It has become apparent that although the NCAA has funded many programs to train women and people of color for coaching and administrative positions, hiring practices are not resulting in increases in those individuals being hired." Alley went on to explain that the hiring process was the reasoning behind the failed initiatives (2006, p. 1). The manual provides clear suggestions for the use of search firms in the hiring process, suggesting that hirer's investigate each firm's commitment to diversity by looking at its demographics and track record of past hires. But this manual and its teachings are not

enough to change the way search firms operate, nor has it proven to positively impact the number of female athletic directors in NCAA Division I.

A thorough investigation into search firm practices would help shed light on the exclusion and discrimination issues described by the women in this study. Researchers should pay particular attention to how search firms identify and recommend qualified candidates and compare the way male and female candidates are treated during the search process. Furthermore, the NCAA should consider adopting more definitive policies as it relates to including women in athletic administration. For example, in 2003 the National Football League's (NFL) established the "Rooney Rule" requiring league teams to interview minority candidates for head coaching and senior football operation jobs. Just three years later, the overall percentage of African American coaches in the NFL had jumped from 6 percent to 22 percent (Proxmire, 2008). The fundamental benefit of the rule is that it forces consideration and evaluation of candidates who otherwise might have been overlooked for advancement, thereby combatting unconscious bias and increasing the chances of selecting the best person for the job. A similar rule or policy might prove beneficial for NCAA Division I member institutions and the NCAA's female constituents.

#### **5.4 Research Recommendations**

As previously mentioned, the findings in this study may provide important information relative to a number of NCAA and higher education stakeholders, and may be especially useful to any female wishing to pursue a career in NCAA Division I athletic administration. To further expand the research on paths to leadership of NCAA Division I female athletic directors, the following recommendations are suggested for future study:

1. Examine the career paths of NCAA Division II and Division III female athletics directors and compare the results to those of this research.
2. Compare and contrast perceived leadership qualities of NCAA Division I male and female athletic directors.
3. Examine the use of search firms in NCAA Division I athletics and the effect of search firm hiring practices on women.
4. Examine the relationship between presidents/chancellors and NCAA Division I athletic directors.

### **5.5 Conclusion**

Nearly fifty years after the passing of Title IX, the participation of female student-athletes has dramatically increased while the number of female athletic directors in NCAA Division I athletics remains stagnantly low. This study sought to examine the career paths of the few female athletic directors that have risen to the top of Division I and expose the reasons for such underrepresentation. Conducting this research through the lens of critical feminist theory provided a framework which valued the historical significance of feminism as it relates to NCAA athletics and focused on women's experiences and how those experiences might inspire social transformation necessary in order for equal opportunities to be achieved between sexes. In doing so, it was discovered that female athletic directors can obtain a position as a Division I athletic director by gaining relative experiences, having quality leadership and support, and overcoming some specific gender-related obstacles along the way.

**APPENDIX A**  
**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Describe your educational background and experiences.
2. What experiences did you have either while obtaining your education or during previous jobs that you held that led you to the position you hold today?
3. Did you have a mentor(s) and if so, how did that person or persons influence your career path?
4. Were you a student-athlete? And if so, how did your experience as student-athlete influence your career today?
5. Current statistics show that less than 10% of all Division I athletic directors are female. To what do you attribute this status?
6. What [do you think] can be done to increase the number of female athletic directors?
7. What barriers, if any, have you had to overcome on your path to becoming an athletic director? Describe the process by which you overcame those barriers.
8. What are the leadership qualities that you believe are needed in order to be an athletic director?
9. What do you perceive to be your leadership strengths?
10. In your opinion, what, if anything, differentiates male and female athletic directors?
11. Is there anything else you'd like to add that will help others understand more about yourself or your perception(s) of NCAA Division I female athletic directors?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **EMAIL INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY**



# THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION@

LOUISIANA TECH UNIVERSITY

[Date]

Dear [First Name],

The purpose of this email is to invite you to participate in a qualitative research study entitled: *The paths to leadership of NCAA Division I female athletic directors*. Invitations to participate in the study are being sent to all current NCAA Division I female athletic directors. Should you choose to take part in the study, you will be asked to participate in a phone interview that should last approximately 30-45 minutes. Interviews will be scheduled immediately and at your convenience, and interview questions will be sent to you prior to the actual interview.

This study is being conducted by Haley Blount, a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at Louisiana Tech University in Ruston, Louisiana. If you agree to take part in this study, please confirm your willingness to participate by responding to this email to [blounth@nsula.edu](mailto:blounth@nsula.edu) or call (318) 332-7770. Responses are requested by [insert date].

Thank you for your consideration.

Regards,

Haley Blount

**APPENDIX C**

**FOLLOW UP EMAIL INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN THE  
STUDY**



# THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION@

LOUISIANA TECH UNIVERSITY

[Date]

Dear [First Name],

Last week you should have received an email asking you to participate in a qualitative research study entitled: *The paths to leadership of NCAA Division I female athletic directors*. This is a follow-up to that request.

Invitations to participate in the study are being sent to all current NCAA Division I female athletic directors. Should you choose to take part in the study, you will be asked to participate in a phone interview that should last approximately 30-45 minutes. Interviews will be scheduled immediately and at your convenience, and interview questions will be sent to you prior to the actual interview. Participants' identities and place of employment will remain confidential.

This study is being conducted by Haley Blount, a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at Louisiana Tech University in Ruston, Louisiana. If you agree to take part in this study, please confirm your willingness to participate by responding to this email to [blounth@nsula.edu](mailto:blounth@nsula.edu) or call (318) 332-7770. Responses are requested by [insert date].

Thank you for your consideration.

Regards,

Haley Blount

**APPENDIX D**  
**IRB APPROVAL**



LOUISIANA TECH  
UNIVERSITY  
MEMORANDUM

OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY RESEARCH

TO: Dr. John Harrison and Ms. Haley Blount  
FROM: Dr. Stan Napper, Vice President Research & Development  
SUBJECT: HUMAN USE COMMITTEE REVIEW *Stan Napper*  
DATE: February 2, 2016

In order to facilitate your project, an EXPEDITED REVIEW has been done for your proposed study entitled:

**"Paths to Leadership of NCAA Division 1  
Female Athletic Directors"**

HUC 1390

The proposed study's revised procedures were found to provide reasonable and adequate safeguards against possible risks involving human subjects. The information to be collected may be personal in nature or implication. Therefore, diligent care needs to be taken to protect the privacy of the participants and to assure that the data are kept confidential. Informed consent is a critical part of the research process. The subjects must be informed that their participation is voluntary. It is important that consent materials be presented in a language understandable to every participant. If you have participants in your study whose first language is not English, be sure that informed consent materials are adequately explained or translated. Since your reviewed project appears to do no damage to the participants, the Human Use Committee grants approval of the involvement of human subjects as outlined.

Projects should be renewed annually. *This approval was finalized on February 2, 2016 and this project will need to receive a continuation review by the IRB if the project, including data analysis, continues beyond February 2, 2017.* Any discrepancies in procedure or changes that have been made including approved changes should be noted in the review application. Projects involving NIH funds require annual education training to be documented. For more information regarding this, contact the Office of University Research.

You are requested to maintain written records of your procedures, data collected, and subjects involved. These records will need to be available upon request during the conduct of the study and retained by the university for three years after the conclusion of the study. If changes occur in recruiting of subjects, informed consent process or in your research protocol, or if unanticipated problems should arise it is the Researchers responsibility to notify the Office of Research or IRB in writing. The project should be discontinued until modifications can be reviewed and approved.

If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Dr. Mary Livingston at 257-2292 or 257-5066.

A MEMBER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF LOUISIANA SYSTEM

P.O. BOX 3092 • RUSTON, LA 71272 • TEL: (318) 257-5075 • FAX: (318) 257-5079

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