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# Women in Athletic Leadership

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Despite significant increased participation opportunities for girls and women in sports following the passage of Title IX, women remain underrepresented in secondary athletic leadership roles. Thirty-eight female and 158 male high school athletic directors responded to a 19-item Athletic Director Survey (ADS) designed to elicit information on the following: position attainment factors, attainment and retention barriers, perceptions of similar or different barriers for women and men, leadership and management skills, personal sacrifices, and strengthening female candidacy for athletic directorships. Results indicate the importance of mentoring and networking in providing women with equal access to athletic leadership positions.

Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act of 1972 prohibits sex discrimination in educational programs receiving federal funds. Title IX's applicability to athletics was clarified further when the Civil Rights Restoration Act was passed in 1978. Since these two important pieces of legislation were enacted, athletic participation opportunities for girls and women have increased significantly. The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) reported that the number of girls participating in interscholastic athletics increased almost tenfold, from 294,015 in 1972 to 2,856,358 in 2003 (NFHS, 2003). The number of women participating at the collegiate level doubled in less than 20 years, from 74,239 in 1982 to 150,916 in 2001 (Bray, 2002).

In contrast, the number of women in athletic administrative positions has declined since the passage of Title IX. In 1972, the governing body for women in intercollegiate athletics was the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW). During the early years of AIAW, more than 90% of women's athletic programs were administered by female athletic directors (Acosta & Carpenter, 2004). In 2004, only 18.5% of college athletic programs were administered by females (Acosta & Carpenter, 2004). An analysis of the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association

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(NIAAA) membership indicated that significantly more men (87%), than women (13%), hold interscholastic athletic director positions (Whisenant, 2003).

The underrepresentation of women in athletic administration is well documented (Acosta & Carpenter, 2004; Hart, Hasbrook, & Mathes, 1986; Hasbrook, 1988; Hasbrook, Hart, Mathes, & True, 1990; Heishman, Bunker, & Tutwiler, 1990; Holman & Parkhouse, 1981; Knoppers, 1987; Lovett &

Lowry, 1988, 1994; Pastore & Whiddon, 1983; Stangl & Kane, 1991; Whisenant, 2003; Whisenant, Pedersen, & Obenour, 2002). Much of the early research on women in athletic leadership focused on coaches who attributed women's underrepresentation in the profession to such factors as burnout, role conflict, job dissatisfaction, lack of role models, discrimination, and the existence of an "old boys" system (Caccese & Mayerberg, 1984; Hart et al., 1986; Hasbrook et al., 1990; Knoppers, 1987, 1989, 1992; Locke & Massengale, 1978; Lovett & Lowry, 1988; Parkhouse & Williams, 1986; Stangle & Kane, 1991).

A few studies have focused on collegiate women athletic directors. Williams and Miller (1983) identified in-service/internship training in athletic administration, leadership experience in professional organizations, and prior work experience as an assistant athletic director as beneficial in securing athletic administrative positions. This finding is consistent with Danylchuk, Pastore, and Inglis (1996), who found that athletic administrators rated personal traits, previous work experience, and educational qualifications as the most important factors in attaining administrative positions.

Whisenant and Pedersen (2004a) examined communications, traditional management activities, human resource management, and networking and found that only networking had a significant impact on the success of intercollegiate athletic directors. Work balance and conditions, recognition and collegial support, and inclusivity (e.g., no sexual or racial harassment or discrimination) were also important retention factors for women in athletic leadership positions (Inglis, Danylchuk, & Pastore, 1996; Pastore, Inglis, & Danylchuk, 1996).

Whisenant and Pedersen (2004b) examined the traditional managerial skills necessary for success in interscholastic athletic management. They found that high school athletic directors spent the majority of their time in the traditional management activities of planning, coordinating and monitoring the athletic program, problem solving, and decision making. High school athletic directors spent the least amount of time in formal or informal networking. Other managerial activities included communication management (paperwork and meetings) and human resource management (staffing, mentoring, managing conflict, and motivating employees).

The female interscholastic athletic director's leadership role has not been investigated. The study built on previous research focusing on female high school athletic directors through the lens of equal access to leadership positions. Specifically, we addressed the following questions that underpin the participation of women in athletic leadership:

1. *Attainment factors:* How do athletic directors think they attained their present positions?
2. *Attainment and retention barriers:* What are the perceived barriers that women athletic directors faced in attaining and retaining their positions? Do women perceive barriers to be similar to those faced by men?
3. *Mentoring:* How important are formal and informal mentors to athletic directors in attaining and retaining positions?
4. *Leadership and management skills:* What leadership and management skills are important in order for athletic directors to be effective in their positions?
5. *Personal sacrifices:* What personal sacrifices are made to become a successful athletic director?
6. *Strengthening female candidacy:* What skills do women need to strengthen and enhance their candidacy for athletic director positions?

## Method

### Participants

Surveys were mailed to 705 athletic directors selected randomly from a database provided by the New York State Department of Education. A total of 189 surveys were returned initially (response rate 27%). Eight additional surveys were obtained on follow-up, making the overall response rate 28%. A number of follow-up interviews provided additional qualitative information.

Thirty-eight female and 158 male athletic directors returned completed surveys. One respondent did not indicate her/his gender and was excluded from further analysis. The overwhelming majority of respondents were in the 51-60 (36.7%) and 41-50 (35.7%) year age range. The largest percent of women (42.1%) were in the 51-60 age bracket followed by 36.8% who were between 41 and 50. The men were evenly distributed between the 41-50 and 51-60 brackets (35.4% in each bracket).

A total of 107 respondents (54.6%) indicated that they were in "athletic director only" positions; the remainder held positions that included additional responsibilities such as teaching, coaching, and other administrative duties. Fifty-six percent of the men and 50% of the women reported full-time athletic director positions. The mean full-time equivalent (FTE) was .69 for men and .66 for women.

A significant proportion of respondents (69% of the men and 76.3% of the women) reported that they were in their first athletic director position.

Men reported an average of 7.2 years in their current position although the mean for women was 5.8 years. In addition, men reported an average age of 37 when first becoming an athletic director and the mean for women was 39 years.

### **Athletic Director Survey (ADS)**

The Athletic Director Survey (ADS), a 19-item questionnaire, was designed to answer the identified research questions. Focus questions were field tested in personal interviews with several women athletic directors. Input was solicited from members of the New York State High School Athletic Association (NYSHSAA) and the New York State Association for Women in Administration (NYSAWA). The ADS solicited demographic information (gender and age). Respondents also were asked to provide information about their current position, number of years in the current position, FTE attributed to current position, age at which they first attained an athletic director position, and whether or not this was their first athletic director position.

### **Data Analysis**

Members of the research team analyzed the qualitative responses and categorized them into general themes. Data were further analyzed using *SPSS for Windows, Version 11.5*.

## **Results**

Findings are organized by the following themes: attaining the athletic director position; barriers for females becoming, sustaining, and retaining athletic director positions, as well as female perceptions of these barriers being similar or different from those experienced by males; mentoring; leadership and management skills; personal sacrifices; and strengthening female candidacy for the athletic directorship.

### **Attainment Factors**

Participants' responses are provided in Table 1. For both males and females, contacts within the system and circumstances and opportunity (e.g., "right place, right time") were two of the most common factors in helping them attain their athletic director positions. For males, teaching and coaching experience were also important; females ranked educational qualifications higher than experience.

Table 1  
*Attaining an AD Position: Response Percentages by Sex and Factors*

Factor	Males (n = 158)	Females (n = 38)
Contacts Within System	32.3% (51)	39.5% (15)
Circumstances/Opportunity	24.1% (38)	44.7% (17)
Teaching/Coaching Experience	24.7% (39)	15.8% (6)
Educational Qualifications	19.0% (30)	23.7% (9)
Contacts Outside System	12.7% (20)	13.2% (5)
Personal Skills	7.6% (12)	21.1% (8)
Teacher/Coach in System	9.5% (15)	10.5% (4)
Ambition/Personal Goals	6.3% (10)	2.6% (1)
Lack of Qualified Applicants	5.1% (8)	5.3% (2)

*Note.* Because participants could indicate more than one factor, percentages do not sum to 100%.

### **Attainment and Retention Barriers (female participants only)**

“No barriers” was the most common response to perceived barriers to attaining athletic leadership positions, followed closely by its apparent opposite: an “old boys” network. Other responses reflected the belief that women have to prove themselves capable in a male-dominated profession. The results are reported in Table 2. Similar concerns were cited for sustaining and retaining the athletic director position (see Table 3).

Responses to perceived similarities or differences in barriers experienced are summarized in Table 4. Women’s responses reflected the belief that they are viewed by others as less competent and capable than their male counterparts.

### **Mentoring**

When asked if they had had any formal or informal mentors, a resounding 79.6%, or nearly 4 in 5 current athletic directors, indicated that they had been mentored. Mentoring was experienced almost equally with 79.1% of the males and 81.6% of the females responding affirmatively. Survey respondents indicated a variety of types or vehicles they experienced for

Table 2  
*Female Response Percentages by Barriers to Becoming an AD*

Barrier	Percentage (n = 38)
None	34.2% (13)
"Old Boys" Network	28.9% (11)
Stereotypes of Women in Athletics	23.7% (9)
Needed to Earn Male Trust/Acceptance	21.1% (8)
Males Wouldn't Accept Female Authority	18.4% (7)
It's a Male Profession	15.8% (6)
Not Treated Equally with Males	10.5% (4)
Had to Convince Community	10.5% (4)
Overlooked for Less Experienced Male	5.3% (2)

*Note.* Because participants could list more than one barrier, percentages do not sum to 100%.

Table 3  
*Female Response Percentages by Barriers to Sustaining and Retaining AD Position*

Barrier	Percentage (n = 38)
None	28.9% (11)
Had to Earn Respect of Males	26.3% (10)
More Expected of Women ADs	21.1% (8)
"Old Boys" Dominate Profession	18.4% (7)
Male ADs Don't Have to Prove Themselves	15.8% (6)
Men Not Judged Based on Gender	15.8% (6)
Lack of Support (Including Time)	10.5% (4)
Lack of Adequate Budgets	7.9% (3)
Second Guessing Decisions of Female ADs	5.3% (2)
Balancing Career, Family, Graduate Work	2.6% (1)

*Note.* Because participants could indicate more than one barrier, percentages do not sum to 100%.



**Table 4**  
*Female Response Percentages by Perceptions of Similar or Different Barriers as Men*

Barrier	Percentage (n = 38)
Male ADs Do Not Have to Prove Themselves	34.2% (13)
Less Expected of Men and More of Women	26.3% (10)
There are Similar Barriers	18.4% (7)
Took Longer to Be Accepted as a Woman in Role	13.2% (5)
Men Assertive: Women Aggressive and Unfeminine	10.5% (4)
Women Need to Seek More Roles (Mentors, Networking)	7.9% (3)
I Need More Support	5.3% (2)
Men Not Primary Caregivers for Family	2.6% (1)
Men Get Extra Support and Time	2.6% (1)

*Note.* Because participants could list more than one barrier, percentages do not sum to 100%.

mentoring (see Table 5) and mentoring activities (Table 6). As an additional note, when asked if any of the male athletic directors had mentored a female, 126 (64.3%) indicated that they had not.

### **Leadership and Management Skills**

Female athletic directors were asked to list leadership and management skills necessary for success in their current positions. Women cited organizational, interpersonal, and communication skills, as well as personal traits among the most important skills needed for both leadership and management. The results are summarized in Tables 7 and 8.

### **Personal Sacrifices**

Time, both personal and the long hours demanded of the profession and by the job, came up as the leading personal sacrifice experienced by both male and female athletic directors. Women listed this more frequently than men (53.8% or 85 men and 73.7% or 28 women). Family and home life were listed by 105 respondents (86 men and 19 women) as having been sacrificed (see Table 9).

Table 5  
*Response Percentages by Sex and Formal/Informal Mentors*

Mentors	Males (n = 158)	Females (n = 38)
Have Had Mentor	79.1% (125)	81.6% (31)
Former AD/Retiring AD	27.8% (44)	28.9% (11)
Current ADs in Other Schools	24.1% (38)	26.3% (10)
Principals (Former/Current)	19.6% (31)	10.5% (4)
Superintendent or Assistant Superintendent	12.0% (19)	18.4% (7)
Higher Education Programs	5.7% (9)	7.9% (3)
Formalized Mentoring Program	5.7% (9)	2.6% (1)
Current AD at Same School	5.1% (8)	0.0% (0)
Professional Development and Organizational Affiliations	4.4% (7)	2.6% (1)
Other (No response, Family, Teacher/Coach)	13.9% (22)	15.8% (6)

*Note.* Because participants could identify more than one form of mentoring, percentages do not sum to 100%.

Table 6  
*Male Response Percentages by Mentoring Activity*

Activity	Percentage (n = 158)
Good Listener and Answered Questions	15.8% (25)
Confer Regularly	15.8% (25)
Encouragement	15.2% (24)
Scheduling and Budgeting Help	14.6% (23)
Communication	14.6% (23)
Help in Supervising Practices	12.0% (19)
Philosophy and Politics	9.5% (15)
Internship	5.7% (9)

*Note.* Because participants could list more than one mentoring activity, percentages do not sum to 100%.

Table 7

*Female Response Percentages by Leadership Skills Needed for AD Position*

Leadership Skill	Percentage (n = 38)
Interpersonal and Communication Skills	71.1% (27)
Personal Traits	63.2% (24)
Organizational Skills	42.1% (16)
Team Building	26.3% (10)
Goals, Objectives, Evaluation	15.8% (6)
Presence, Visibility	13.2% (5)
Knowledge, Experience	13.2% (5)
Problem Solving/Decision Making	13.2% (5)
Visionary	10.5% (4)
Political Astuteness	7.9% (3)
Role Model/Mentor	7.9% (3)

*Note.* Because participants could list more than one leadership skill, percentages do not sum to 100%.

Table 8

*Female Response Percentages by Management Skills Needed for AD Position*

Management Skill	Percentage (n = 38)
Organization	71.1% (27)
Interpersonal/Communication Skills	34.2% (13)
Time Management	34.2% (13)
Personal Traits	21.1% (8)
Strategic Planning	15.8% (6)
Problem Solving/Decision Making	15.8% (6)
Computer Skills	7.9% (3)

*Note.* Because participants could list more than one management skill, percentages do not sum to 100%.

Table 9  
*Personal Sacrifices for an AD Position: Response Percentages by Sex and Sacrifice*

Sacrifice	Male (n = 158)	Female (n = 38)
Time: Personal/Long Hours	53.8% (85)	73.7% (28)
Family/Home Life	54.4% (86)	50.0% (19)
Teaching/Coaching Experience Student Relationships	12.7% (20)	7.9% (3)
Money	5.1% (8)	10.5% (4)
Physical and Emotional Issues	3.8% (6)	10.5% (4)
Friendships/Marriage	3.8% (6)	5.3% (2)
None	1.9% (3)	2.6% (1)
Moving/Relocating	1.3% (2)	2.6% (1)
Too Many to List	1.3% (2)	0.0% (0)

*Note.* Because participants could indicate more than one personal sacrifice, percentages do not sum to 100%.

### **Strengthening Female Candidacy (male participants only)**

Participant responses are summarized in Table 10. Although a third of the respondents reported that the skills and knowledge necessary for success as an athletic director are the same for men and women, other responses indicated a perception that women do not have the necessary experience and are “too defensive” about being a female athletic director in a male-dominated profession.

## **Discussion**

Title IX legislation, enacted in 1972, has had a positive impact on women’s participation in sport, but appears to have had a detrimental effect on the number of women in athletic administration. The results of the study indicate that the “old boys” system still exists and women are not navigating it well. Although approximately one-third of the women said that there were “no barriers” to attaining and retaining their athletic director positions, the majority of respondents indicated that the barriers women encounter are real. Women report that more is expected of them, and that they have to prove themselves competent and capable in ways that their male counterparts do

not. Additionally, they noted that they have to work harder than do men to gain the acceptance, authority, trust, and respect necessary to lead.

Table 10

*Male Response Percentages by Skills Women Need to Strengthen Candidacy for AD Position*

Skill	Percentage (n = 158)
Same as Males	34.8% (55)
Don't Be So Defensive—Get Over It Being About Gender	16.5% (26)
More Communication Skills/Networking	15.8% (25)
More Experience Seeing the Bigger Picture	15.2% (24)
Be Self/Work Hard/Have Confidence	13.3% (21)
Organizational and Leadership Skills	12.7% (20)
More and Broader Coaching Experience	11.4% (18)
Be More Firm	7.6% (7)
Apply For More Positions in Larger Geographic Area	4.4% (7)

*Note.* Because participants could list more than one skill, percentages do not sum to 100%.

It is also clear from these results that mentoring is an important component of an athletic director's success, with 80% of current athletic directors indicating that they have had a mentor. However, 64% of the men reported that they have never mentored a female for an athletic director position. Mentoring can be a valuable tool in obtaining an athletic directorship. Mentoring enhances access, providing an introduction into important professional networks. The results illustrate that successful leaders often have mentors and also serve as mentors for future leaders. Men, as well as women, need to be involved in mentoring women for athletic director positions. Mentoring others, which helps ensure the success of one, also enhances the success of the larger group.

Networking appears to be an important factor in job attainment. The male athletic directors listed "contacts within the system" as the most important factor in securing their present position, and female athletic directors identified contacts as second to "being in the right place at the right time" as a job attainment factor. This finding is in contrast to Danylchuk et al. (1996), who found that for college level administrators, education and prior work experience were more important than contacts. Because searches for high school level athletic administrators tend to be more localized,

networking becomes a crucial component in job attainment, providing an informal source of knowledge of job opportunities. Consistent with Whisenant and Pedersen's (2004a) findings, networking contributes to career advancement and success. Because current networks consist primarily of men, women should be encouraged to start their own networks, or to find men who are willing to mentor them into existing networks.

Successful female athletic directors are those who are able to attain and retain their positions, participate in key decision-making dialogues with other colleagues in the region or state, and know how to navigate the "old boys" network. Mentoring and networking appear to be important tools in providing women equal access to athletic leadership positions.

### **Implications**

Women perceive barriers to attaining and retaining athletic leadership positions and believe those barriers to be different from those experienced by men. Further study of this issue is warranted if we are to fully understand the difficulties that women face in accessing athletic directorships. Identifying systematic barriers that impair women's access to these positions has implications for administrators responsible for recruiting, hiring, and retaining qualified athletic directors. In addition, the Athletic Director Survey (ADS) does not distinguish those holding positions at large or small schools, or schools in rural or urban settings. It would be interesting to determine if the barriers women face are different or similar in accessing more competitive jobs with higher prestige and more power, and if the women who have obtained athletic director positions are segregated into less esteemed positions.

The findings of this study emphasize the importance of mentoring in accessing leadership positions and being successful in those positions. Further study should examine how mentoring relationships are established, why men are not mentoring women for athletic leadership positions, and whether women are mentoring other women. Women need to be encouraged to seek out and establish mentoring relationships.

The existence of the "old boy's network" excludes women from important opportunities for career advancement. Membership in professional organizations provides channels to job information and leadership experiences. Women need to focus on building professional networks with other female athletic directors. Professional development activities should focus on creating an awareness of the need for establishing networks and developing mentoring strategies.

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