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Robin Hardin

Coyte G. Cooper

Landon T. Huffman

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Moving on Up

Division I Athletic Directors' Career Progression and Involvement

Robin Hardin
Coyte G. Cooper
Landon T. Huffman

Abstract

Collegiate athletic directors (ADs) are the chief executive officers within the athletic department of the colleges and universities they serve. While they are certainly high-profile, influential professionals, there are a limited number of research studies that focus in-depth on the career experiences of these athletic administrators. The purpose of this research was to examine the career experiences of athletic directors. The results showed a shift in the need for athletic directors to understand business and development and obtain a graduate degree. More than 80% held a master's degree with previous areas of employment in development and marketing. Such skills were also shown in involvement as ADs indicated they were heavily involved in budget oversight and development. Other areas of involvement included policy-making and community relations. There was limited involvement in actual sport operations.

Keywords: *Athletic directors, college athletics, career experiences, responsibilities, NCAA*

Dr. Robin Hardin is an associate professor in the Department of Kinesiology, Recreation, and Sport Studies at the University of Tennessee.

Dr. Coyte Cooper is an assistant professor in the Department of Exercise and Sport Science at the University of North Carolina.

Landon Huffman is a doctoral student in the Department of Kinesiology, Recreation, and Sport Studies at the University of Tennessee.

Please send correspondence regarding this article to Dr. Robin Hardin, phone: 865-974-1281, fax: 865-974-8981, robh@utk.edu

Collegiate athletics are certainly at the forefront of sports in the United States. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) men's basketball tournament added "March Madness" to the lexicon in reference to the 67 basketball games played over three weeks during the spring culminating with a national champion. The madness could also refer to the nearly \$11 billion television rights fee paid to the NCAA over a 14-year period to broadcast the games (O'Toole, 2010). The NCAA does not control the television rights to postseason competition for members of the NCAA Division I-Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS). A reason for this may be the unwillingness of member institutions to allow the NCAA to control the distribution of revenue. The members that comprise the conferences in the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) control the \$400 million generated through the BCS Bowl games (NCAA, 2011).

Television ratings for collegiate sporting events are at an all-time high as well. The 2012 BCS National Championship game televised by ESPN pitting the University of Alabama against Louisiana State University garnered the second highest rating in cable television history (Seidman, 2012). The 2012 men's basketball championship broadcast drew more than 20 million viewers. A 30-second commercial during the broadcast cost upwards to \$1.5 million (Crupi, 2012). Nearly 37 million fans attended college football games contested by FBS members during the 2011 season (NCAAb, 2012). Division I men's basketball attendance was just more than 25 million for the 2010-2011 season (NCAAA, 2012). The aforementioned data certainly show the business nature of collegiate athletics and its standing in American culture.

The NCAA is more than just football bowl games and basketball tournaments as nearly 400,000 student-athletes compete for championships in 23 sports across three divisions for a total of 89 championships. There are more than 1,000 colleges and universities that comprise the NCAA (Who We Are, 2011). These student-athletes are supported by nearly 35,000 employees in addition to more than 18,000 head coaches and nearly 40,000 assistant coaches. Leading this massive contingent of student-athletes and employees and managing multimillion-dollar budgets are the respective athletic directors for each institution, more commonly known as ADs. This is certainly a desirable position in the sports industry but little is known of the career experiences or path of the people who currently hold those positions and the nature of their daily involvement regarding the activities of the athletic department.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this research was to examine the career progression of NCAA Division I ADs and in which activities they devote their time. Specifically the study examined the educational background, career length, and career background of the respondents on the way to becoming an AD. The study also examined the involvement in activities within the athletic department and what functions ADs

spend their managing or overseeing. There has been some research on the career progression of ADs but it is dated in relation to this study, and data will also provide a clear description of who an AD is and what he or she does in this era of collegiate athletics.

This study has implications for educators, students, and professionals in collegiate athletic administration. For educators, it enables them to provide a clear description of what students need to be doing if they have aspirations to be an AD. The finding will enable educators to provide direction of what areas of collegiate athletics may best prepare someone who wants to be an AD at the Division I level. The same is true for students as they will be able to make choices for internships and other work experiences as to what will best prepare them if they want to be an AD.

Athletic Directors

Coaches are the most visible employees of the athletic department but academic counselors, athletic trainers, media professionals, and business managers are also part of the staff that assists in the operation of the athletic department. Those staffs can range in size from as few as 20 at Division III institutions to more than 250 for Division I members (Irick, 2011). The increasing staff sizes and the importance of the business aspects of sport have placed more demands on ADs and increased media attention has placed their decisions under more scrutiny (Copeland & Kirsch, 1995; Ryska, 2002). Some ADs are no longer able to interact directly with student-athletes or staff members on a regular basis because of increasing CEO and business-oriented functions and concerns, such as budgeting, fundraising, department policy, personnel, compliance, and public relations. ADs are often forced to take on the roles they feel are most important or essential and delegate additional tasks to others (Cunningham & Ashley, 2001).

ADs are certainly in the public eye, by the nature of their position, much like any other top-level executive and maybe more so due to the passionate fan base that follows collegiate sport. College football games are in the spotlight on Saturdays in the fall with collegiate basketball taking center stage during the winter months, capped off with March Madness in the spring. There are millions of devoted college sport fans who spend millions of dollars on their fandom so decisions made by ADs not only have an impact on student-athletes and athletic department staff, but millions of collegiate fans as well. This certainly provides ADs unique perspectives and experiences and their insight into issues have been the topic of academic research during the past several decades.

The profession of athletic director deserves to be researched because of the high-profile role it serves within higher education. There has been no shortage of research in which ADs were the respondents. Topics have included AD perceptions of public relations (Ruihley & Fall, 2009), job satisfaction, (Davis, 2002; Hoch, 2003; Robinson, et al., 2003), career progression (Fitzgerald, Sagaria, & Nelson,

1994), job stress (Copeland & Kirsch, 1995), managerial behavior (Davis, 2002; Hoch, 2003; Ryska, 2002; Seidler, Gerdy, & Cardinal, 1998), and demographic characteristics (Sander, 2011; Lapchick, Hoff, & Kaiser, 2011; Quarterman, 1992).

This research will add to the body of knowledge of career progression regarding the experiences ADs have had during their professional development. The current study also investigates what activities ADs are most involved in doing. The results will aid someone aspiring to become an AD as well as someone who may have input into hiring an AD. This research focused specifically on Division I ADs because they are often considered the pinnacle of the collegiate administration profession, and their daily functions have shifted during the past 25 years to resemble that of a CEO (Acosta & Carpenter, 2010; Burton, Barr, Fink, Bruening, 2009; Wright, Eagleman, & Pedersen, 2011). ADs at Division II and Division III are certainly accomplished professionals but their duties may include responsibilities other than just being an AD. They may also serve on the faculty, have coaching responsibilities, or focus on other administrative duties. ADs at Division I institutions manage a larger number of coaches and employees as well as larger budgets. They are also in the media spotlight more as their decisions often involve millions of dollars and the careers of high-profile coaches (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007).

Literature Review

There are limited studies that exist focusing in-depth on the career progression and of NCAA ADs (Fitzgerald, Sagaria, & Nelson 1994; Hatfield, 1994; Wrenn, & Bretting, 1987). However, it makes sense to examine the literature available on the AD experiences and preferences at all levels (Pedersen & Whisenant, 2005; Sagas & Cunningham, 2004; Schneider & Stier, 2001). This will provide a transition which highlights the specialized nature of NCAA Division I ADs of the current research.

Profile of Collegiate ADs

When focusing on the collegiate level, researchers have demonstrated the unique backgrounds of ADs at the Division I level (Fitzgerald et al., 1994; Hatfield et al., 1987; Quarterman, 1992). In a pioneer study in this area, Hatfield et al. (1987) demonstrated that the following experiences were most common for ADs prior to obtaining their current position: head coach (70.7%), assistant AD (48.3%), professor (36.8%), associate AD (29.3%), and business manager (19%). Prior to these positions, it was education that helped prepare them for their position of AD. Of the individuals who responded to the survey, 100% received their undergraduate degree and 71.9% received their graduate degree. In these educational experiences, the most common degree sought by ADs at both the undergraduate (36.4%) and graduate (37.5%) level was physical education. At both the undergraduate and master levels, education-based majors were in the top three of degrees obtained. Based on their career experiences, these ADs felt that adminis-

tration, financial management, and marketing were all critical educational areas for future administrators (Hatfield et al., 1987).

In a follow-up study at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Quarterman (1992) examined similar AD background information to evaluate how it compared to traditionally white institutions. When focusing on the individuals in the sample, the data showed that the average age of respondents was 46.1 years old with an initial appointment average of 36.1 years of age. In addition, similar to the previous study, nearly all of the subjects (89%) had experience in coaching at either the secondary or collegiate levels. Of these individuals, 79.9% were formerly coaches in either basketball or football. Further, the data illustrated that the most common degree sought at both the undergraduate (35.5%) and graduate (44.0%) level was physical education. However, at the undergraduate level, the health, physical education, and recreation (HPER) degree (29.1%) came in a close second in academic training background (Quarterman, 1992).

In another AD profiling study, Fitzgerald et al. (1994) focused on determining the normative career pattern of ADs at the NCAA Division I, II, and III levels. Building on the previous two studies, the findings showed that a large majority of the respondents were white (92.5%) and male (71.5%) with an average age of 48.7 years old. Also, in similar nature to the previous studies, the data supported the notion that most of the ADs were former athletes who had earned a varsity letter (80%) and progressed into a collegiate coaching position (65%) following their competitive career. The findings also revealed that associate and assistant AD positions were not necessarily the normal experiences to becoming a head AD (Fitzgerald et al., 1994).

Influential Changes in College Landscape

While the previous research is extremely useful as a foundation for AD career experiences, it is likely that the data is out of date given the drastic changes in the college athletics landscape during the past 25 years. Given the trend of increased athletics spending, commonly referred to as the “arms race,” in collegiate athletics (Knight Commission, 2010), athletic departments have embraced a model where profit maximization is a major emphasis within “big time” sport programs such as men’s basketball and football (Kahn, 2007; Zimbalist, 2003). With this in mind, there have been some recent shifts in the background of ADs hired to lead NCAA Division I athletic departments.

Wong (2009) provided a profile breakdown of the ADs residing within two FBS conferences. His examination showed that 62% of ADs serving in the Big 10 and Pac 10 (now the Pac 12) athletic conferences had played sports at the collegiate level. When focusing on education background, the data demonstrated that ADs had an extremely broad range of undergraduate and graduate degrees. However, the results demonstrated that six of the 21 (28.6%) received an undergraduate degree in physical education. In contrast to past studies, the findings showed

that sport management was the most common graduate program with five of 17 (29.4%) ADs earning degrees in this area. In addition, the profiles also showed that four of the ADs came from a business background prior to landing their current position. Thus, the data supports the notion that since 2008 there has been a small shift from a physical education/coaching background to a sport management and business background in the career experiences of Division I ADs. However, the study focused on only two of the conferences housed at the Division I level.

Career Progression

When examining the profiles and responsibilities of NCAA Division I ADs, it is critical to have a conceptual framework to guide the discussion of (a) the necessary credentials and experiences to become a NCAA Division I AD and (b) the roles and responsibilities of a NCAA Division I AD. Arthur, Hall, and Lawrence (1989) defined career as “the unfolding sequence of a person’s work experiences over time” (p. 178). Through this lens, the concept of career is focused on the collective experiences over the course of time and does not take into consideration any other objective or subjective measures. However, more recent research has proposed the concept of career progression, particularly objective career progression and subjective career progression, to explain career choices.

Career progression has been defined as the “accomplishment of desirable work-related outcomes at any point in a person’s work experiences over time” (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005, p. 179). Consequently, career progression may be perceived differently by various people depending on their personal ambitions, values, and life circumstances (Arthur et al., 2005; Gunz & Heslin, 2005; Heslin, 2005; Orser & Leck, 2010). For example, American society as a whole often views career experiences or progression by objective standards, such as earning a raise in income, job title promotions, upward mobility, and increased supervisory responsibilities. However, career experiences can also be judged by subjective criteria which hinges on ideals of self-fulfillment, including aspects of job satisfaction, uncompromised personal values, balanced family time, favorable work hours, and desired job responsibilities (Arthur et al., 2005; Gunz & Heslin, 2005; Heslin, 2005). Additionally, there are professional factors such as educational level, type of degree, diversity of experience(s), and length of experience(s) that contribute to individuals’ career progression (Moran, Duffield, Donoghue, Stasa, & Blay, 2011). Moreover, research suggests that experiences gained through education and training result in positive investments to one’s human capital, which subsequently leads to successful career progression (Cunningham & Sagas, 2004; Wright, Eagleman, & Pedersen, 2011). Therefore, results from this study will illustrate the duality and interdependence of objective and subjective factors as they relate to current NCAA Division I ADs’ profiles and career experiences.

An additional element of the career experiences conceptual framework involves types of career planning. The two types of planning for career progression

include structured advancement and flexible advancement. An individual engages in structured advancement when he or she performs self-evaluations and intentionally develops the necessary knowledge, skills, abilities, and competencies required to meet his or her desirable work-related outcomes (Broscio & McLennan, 2000; McGillis-Hall, Waddell, Donner, & Wheeler, 2004; Shermont, Krepcio, & Murphy, 2009). Conversely, flexible advancement occurs when “individuals [take] advantage of opportunities as they present themselves” (Moran et al., p. 47; Pringle & Gold, 1989). Participants’ responses provide insight relating to patterns of career experiences that will assist individuals who aspire to be NCAA Division I ADs with their short-term and long-term planning.

Methodology

Instrumentation

An online questionnaire consisting of three sections in addition to demographic information was used.

Educational information. Questions addressing education information were derived from Bedeian, Cavazos, Hunt, and Jauch’s (2010) study concerning the effect on higher educational degrees, specifically doctorate degrees, on the person’s job placement. The current study’s electronic survey questionnaire attempted to collect the major(s) and concentration(s) of each degree earned. This is in part to attempt to identify if there are any similarities in degree fields and to determine what undergraduate and, more importantly, graduate degrees were obtained by current NCAA Division I ADs.

Career progression. These questions were generated to identify the career progression of current NCAA Division I ADs and adapted from Yamaguchi’s (2010) previous study within career placement and mobility of college graduates in comparison to people with a high school diploma as their highest reached degree and determined substantial returns to career-specific experience. The current study provided open-ended questions related to career development and identified the career progression by the participants identifying their prior positions held and years at the position in order to identify the most common positions, athletic administrative department of position, and years held at the position. The study also evaluated the job and position title held directly prior to assuming the participant’s current position of AD.

Professional experience. Questions were adapted from Feldt and Woelfel (2009), who surveyed individuals’ self-efficacy ratings in response to educational requirements, getting a job, job success, and advancement. The information collected served to determine which positions and departments within collegiate athletic administration provided the best opportunity for promotion, along with attempting to identify career progression.

Involvement. The Scale of Athletic Priorities (Chelladurai, Inglis, & Danylchuk, 1983) was used to generate a series of questions referencing the prioritiza-

tion and involvement of the duties and responsibilities of Division I ADs. The questions within this section of the study identified a series of 16 core priorities and weekly involvement Division I ADs allocate to the activities within their athletic department. Respondents used the following to scale in reference to their involvement in the priorities: slightly involved = once/week, involved = 2-3 times/week, heavily involved = 3 or more times/week to daily.

Rewarding/challenging. Two open-ended questions were used to determine the most rewarding and the most challenging aspects of the position. The questions were “What do you find the most rewarding as athletic director?” and “What do you find as the most challenging part of your job as athletic director?” These responses were then categorized to develop a typology. Thematic analysis was used for the open-ended questions to precisely examine the words and sentences used by the participants in describing the most rewarding and challenging aspects of being an AD. Thematic analysis centers on “identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79), “minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail” (p. 79), and assists in the interpretation of the research topic. The open-ended questions were coded line-by-line for common themes to the individual questions; subsequently, the common themes were then placed into categories based on similarity.

Data Collection

E-mail addresses of NCAA ADs were obtained through the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics (NACDA). The NCAA consisted of 1,062 member institutions in 2010-11 with 337 of those being Division I institutions. The response rate was 29.4% as 99 Division I ADs completed the online questionnaire. The response rate was higher than the 19.1% response rate of Wilson et al. (2009) in their survey of collegiate ADs on the perceptions of sport psychology consulting. The number of respondents was also higher than Stoldt, Miller, and Comfort (2001) who had 133 respondents in their study of ADs’ perceptions of sports information directors. Respondent numbers were in line with Robinson, Peterson, Tedrick, and Carpenter (2003) number of 215 in their research involving Division III ADs.

Results

The mean number of varsity sports reported by the ADs participating in this study was 19 which is consistent with the findings of Fulks (2011) in his report on NCAA revenues and expenses in regards to all Division I institutions (see Table 1). The AD had held the current position for approximately seven years at the current institution and had most likely worked there prior to becoming the AD (see Table 2). More than 80% of the respondents held a master’s degree with primary areas of study being sport management (35.5%) or education (25.4%; see Table 3). The primary areas for bachelor’s degree major were health and physical education (25.3%) arts and sciences (23.5%), and business (21.6%; see Table 4).

Table 1*Institutional Profile*

Characteristic	Mean	Median
Men's Varsity Sports	9.20	8
Women's Varsity Sports	10.02	10
Total Student-Athletes	407.21	400
Student-Athlete Scholarships	175.82	193
Full-Time Employees	84.44	65
Part-Time Employees	37.53	20

Table 2*Respondent Profile*

Experience	Mean	Median
At Current Institution	10.68	8
AD at Current Institution	7.22	6
Years as AD at Any Institution	10.44	8

Education	N	Percent
Master's		
Yes	82	82.8
No	17	17.2
Doctorate		
Yes	18	18.2
No	81	81.8

Table 3*Master's Degree Area of Study*

Area	Percent
Business	13.2
Education	25.4
Physical Education	12.2
Sport Management	35.5
Other	13.7

Table 4*Bachelor's Degree Area of Study*

Area	Percent
Business	21.6
Communications	7.4
Education	9.3
Health/Physical Education	25.3
Sport Management	3.1
Political Science	8.0
Arts & Sciences	23.5
Other	1.9

The most common positions held prior to becoming AD are shown in Table 5. Having the role of an assistant or associate athletic director seems imperative as 66.7% had been in this position. Many (42.4%) had been a college coach in some capacity, with development (25.3%) and marketing (22.2%) being the most common areas of experience in collegiate athletics. An interesting observation is that the ADs seemed to have worked their way to the top of the profession as 25.3% of them had been a graduate assistant at one point in their career experiences.

The overwhelming majority of the respondents (more than 80%) cited student-athlete success and development as the most rewarding aspect of being an AD. Comments included “seeing student-athletes find their passion while growing intellectually, socially and competitively,” “having a positive influence on the lives of student-athletes,” “seeing dreams come true,” “a great medium to shape young adults’ lives,” and student-athletes “recognizing the value of hard work and seeing positive results.” The second most mentioned aspect of what was most rewarding was the overall success of the athletic program and competing for championships as approximately 20% mentioned this. Comments included “building and advancing successful athletic programs,” “enjoy the teams winning championships,” “graduating our student-athletes and winning championships,” and “working in a competitive environment.”

Table 6 provides an examination of what activities ADs devote their time and energy to during their day-to-day interaction. Budgeting issues and policy-making comprise the majority of involvement in the AD’s weekly activities. Daily activities include these items in addition to campus and community relations. Responses to the open-ended questions include “answering a million emails,” serving on vari-

Table 5*Experience: Percentage Who Help Position During Career*

Position	Percentage
High School Teacher	20.2
High School Coach	30.3
High School Administrator	4.0
High School Athletic Director	7.1
Administration/Community Sport/Rec	2.0
Administration/College Campus Rec	2.0
Graduate Assistant	25.3
College Professor	10.1
ICA – Clerical	3.0
Athletic Training	2.0
ICA – Sport Operations	13.1
College Coach	42.4
Community/JC AD	2.0
Collegiate Conference Administration	6.1
ICA – Business Management	19.2
ICA – Communications	4.0
ICA – Compliance	16.2
ICA – Development	25.3
ICA – Event Management	13.1
ICA – Facilities	7.1
ICA – Marketing	22.2
Professional Athletics – Administration	3.0
ICA – Assistant/Associate AD	66.7

ous campus committees including the university executive council and committee responsibility within the conference.

Three items emerged as the most challenging aspects of being an AD: budget, lack of understanding, and expectations. More than half of the respondents commented in regards to the challenge of providing adequate resources and the challenges of development/fundraising. A synopsis of the comments were the escalating costs associated with facilities and coaches' salaries, and the resources that are needed to enable student-athletes to compete at a high level. The ADs also found challenging the lack of understanding of what athletic departments actually do and the unrealistic expectations of fans and the media. Comments included "helping understand the benefits of collegiate athletics beyond winning teams," "unrealistic expectations of the media and fans placed on coaches and student-athletes," and "misconceptions and stereotypes of problems in college athletics that are erroneously perpetuated by the Internet media."

Discussion

The results of the current study show a dramatic shift during the past 25 years. It provides a clearer picture regarding the objective credentials of current Division I ADs, which is critically important information to disseminate to individuals who aspire to be an AD. ADs are preparing for their profession by earning degrees in business, education, and sport management and are developing management skills working their way up through collegiate athletic administration. The shift in ADs having business-oriented backgrounds makes sense because of the increasing business nature of collegiate athletics. Anecdotally, the rise in ADs obtaining a degree(s) in sport management may be explained due to a rise in popularity and demand to offer the major at universities. The curriculum and accreditation process has evolved to be more inclusive of business management competencies rather than the physical education approach as well. It appears gone are the days of coaches retiring from the sidelines and becoming ADs. People are now making distinctive, structured, intentional career decisions in their ascension to the role of AD.

This study revealed the qualifications and steps to becoming an AD. The career path to becoming an AD requires a master's degree. Aspiring athletic directors should also be prepared to serve in entry-level positions and then mid-level positions prior to becoming an AD (i.e., director of marketing, director of compliance, development associate, and assistant AD). A person is mostly likely to be promoted from within an institution after serving as a senior staff member. The fields most likely to produce athletic directors are from business, development, and marketing. So, it is imperative that those wishing to pursue careers as athletic directors gain experience in those areas. Collegiate sports at the Division I-FBS level are no doubt big business. Median generated revenues for the members of the classification were nearly \$38 million with total median revenue, which includes

Table 6*Weekly Activity Involvement*

Involvement Activity*	1	2	3	4	Mean
Financials/Budgetary Oversight	0	2.0	19.2	78.8	3.77
Policy Making (Internal)	0	2.0	20.2	77.8	3.76
Development/Fundraising	0	1.0	28.3	70.7	3.70
Community Relations	0	3	26.3	70.7	3.68
Policy Making (External)	0	12.1	19.2	68.7	3.57
Campus Relations	0	5.1	38.4	56.6	3.52
Business Management	0	8.1	43.4	48.5	3.40
Employment/HR	2.0	19.2	29.3	49.5	3.26
Sport Operations	1.0	14.1	49.5	35.4	3.19
Communications	0	15.2	51.5	33.3	3.18
Marketing	0	16.2	51.5	32.3	3.16
Compliance/Risk Management	0	20.2	54.5	25.3	3.05
Facilities/Equipment	1.0	29.3	51.5	18.2	2.87
Recruiting	15.2	50.5	29.3	5.1	2.24
Teaching	63.6	30.3	6.1	0	1.42
Coaching	80.8	8.1	6.1	5.1	1.35

* 1 = uninvolved, 2 = slightly involved (once a week), 3 = involved (2 to 3 times per week), and 4 = heavily involved (more than 3 times a week). Reported numbers are percentages of respondents.

institutional support, at \$52.7 million. It is important to emphasize that figures are for all members of the classification. Those numbers increase significantly when the members are split into the quartiles. The top quartile had generated median revenue of \$88.1 million with total revenue at \$89.7 million. The second quartile had generated median revenues of \$8.2 million and total revenue which includes institutional support of \$60.7 million. So, half the members of NCAA Division I-FBS are operating on budgets of nearly \$60 million or more (Fulks, 2012). These numbers illustrate the need for the background in the business and athletic development. ADs are managing organizations with budgets upwards to \$100 million in some cases. There is also the need for the athletic development background as approximately 30% of revenue is derived from donations (Fulks, 2012).

It is also imperative that people who choose to be an AD understand there are steps in the experiences to the position. Starting out as a graduate assistant and eventually working up to assistant or associate AD is the common path to the position. Aspiring ADs need to understand they are professional sport administrators and not necessarily linked to a particular university or department. ADs are often promoted to the position within the same university but there is going to be movement from school to school in the climb from entry level to middle management to senior staff.

Very few if any people begin their careers in senior-level management positions but there are opportunities for those who are motivated and patient. Florida's Jeremy Foley began with an internship in the university's athletic ticket office in 1976 and was named athletic director 16 years later in 1992 (Athletics Director Jeremy Foley, n.d.). Tennessee's Dave Hart began his career as a high school teacher and coach following his college graduation. He accepted a position at East Carolina in 1983 and eventually became athletic director there in 1987. He followed that with a stint as athletic director at Florida State, three years as executive director of athletics at Alabama and was named director of athletics at Tennessee in 2011 (Dave Hart, n.d.).

One of the main criteria is to gain entry in the profession is gaining experience early and as much as possible (Foster & Dollar, 2010). Volunteering is the key factor here in that allows someone the opportunity to gain experience with little or no knowledge. The time commitment can be a little as two to four hours but the opportunity gain experience is invaluable. Organizations or events often require minimal experience as well so this is a tremendous opportunity. Research has shown there are a myriad of reasons as to why people volunteer from altruistic reasons to social reasons but career development is also part of the equation (Hardin, Koo, King, & Zdroik, 2007). This career development aspect can allow people to learn about event management, marketing, administration, or sales. This can lead to more stable professional opportunities in terms of part-time work experiences or internships (Foster & Dollar, 2010). Opportunities abound on college campuses for students to volunteer for sporting events and in the local community. Involvement in student organizations can be a beneficial way to learn about these opportunities and to become involved. The reputation of the organization is usually what allows for these opportunities so again students need minimal or no experience to start gaining professional experience in a volunteer capacity (Hardin, Pate, & Bemiller, in press). A person has to have experience to gain entry into the profession and experience is most likely going to be gained by volunteering and through internships.

Networking is also critical in career success. This can be accomplished by several means but aspiring sport management professionals must get beyond campus or their current positions to make this happen. Attending professional conferences, joining professional organizations, volunteering, and starting a network

of professional contacts are all ways to make this happen (Foster & Dollar, 2010). Joining LinkedIn and the groups in which a person has an interest is also a positive way someone can build network and build a brand as LinkedIn has more than 100 million members (Adams, n.d). LinkedIn members can immediately join groups that represent professions, including athletic administration, they have an interest in pursuing. Students and young professionals need to start building their brand as soon as possible. This can be done by the way they interact with other aspiring professionals and current senior level professions. Sending follow-up thank you cards after meetings is an excellent way to leave an impression on someone (Bregman, 2012). Professional business cards, promptness, professional appearance are all ways to build a brand (Stathos, 2012). It is also important to be well read about what is occurring in the industry and sport management profession so young professionals can engage in conversations with senior-level administrators concerning the issues they are facing. This shows an awareness of the industry and enables young professionals to engage in an actual conversation rather than just “small talk.”

Four distinct activities seem to take precedence from the rest of the weekly activities, and those are financial/budgetary oversight, policy making, development/fundraising, and community relations. Therefore, this affirms the aforementioned evidence that if an individual has intentions of progressing to assume an AD position, he or she will likely be a good fit if he or she is comfortable with and has experience cultivating relationships with donors, raising money, managing money, and developing department-wide policies, all of which affect, on average, more than 80 full-time employees. Respondents indicated that it is important to remember the business aspects of college athletics, and athletic directors must always be aware of this. The position is rewarding especially in terms in seeing student-athletes and coaches succeed but athletic directors are accountable to many stakeholders including university administrators, coaches, fans, donors, and student-athletes.

It is important to note the career aspiration of collegiate athletic administrators is not necessarily to be an AD. Many people aspire to be at the top of their profession in a specialized area such as sports information, compliance, or academic advising in college athletic administration. Furthermore, results from this study illustrate that, on average, the length of time serving as AD at an institution and total length of time serving as an AD are similar, suggesting there is very little turnover once obtaining the position. Therefore, individuals who aspire to be an AD must realize these jobs are limited and competitive and must intentionally prepare, as well as take opportunities that are presented to them. For example, given the fact that 66.7% of ADs held an assistant AD position, individuals must be willing to take an assistant AD position when the opportunity arises, as this is a natural progression to become an AD. Career decisions and transitions can be made that can better situate a person for the ascent to AD.

Another interesting finding comes in terms of what the ADs deem most rewarding and that is working with student-athletes and seeing them succeed. But, an AD at a Division I school probably has little or no daily interactions with student-athletes. Much has been written about the commodification of student-athletes and how they are used to helping others profit (Branch, 2011). The findings from this study shed some insight into the issue of commodification. ADs may be concerned with winning and student-athletes but it may be more for the good of the administration and university and not for the good of the student-athlete. Bonuses, as reflected in employment contracts of ADs and negotiated in employment contracts between ADs and coaches, for winning championships are much higher than bonuses for academic success, which raises the question of where is the emphasis placed. The ADs indicated their background is mostly in development, marketing, and business, careers that have no strong interaction with students or athletes.

Results from this study indicate that the career experiences of an AD typically involves daily engagement with fiscal and human resource management, marketing, and fundraising. ADs may be obtaining degrees in sport management so they can be exposed to the inner-workings of the culture of sport organizations. More specifically, a degree in sport management would benefit individuals who aspire to be an AD because they would be challenged to think critically about the social issues at stake when dealing with students and operating within an institution of higher education. Furthermore, it appears that university presidents and chancellors appreciate a candidate who has a background in formally studying education given the fact that 25% of ADs in this study reported having a graduate degree in education.

This provides more evidence in the switch to the business profession of ADs at the Division I level rather than someone who is passionate about student-athletes' personal development and collegiate athletics. Division I ADs are focused on budgets, financials, marketing, and fundraising. All of these are important to the success of the student-athlete in that resources need to be available to help them succeed but it appears that the success of the athletic programs is more for the administration and athletic department rather than the student-athlete. Anyone wishing to have daily interaction with student-athletes and have a direct impact on them needs to be aware they will not be doing this in a senior-level position. They may be contributing to the success of the student-athlete by raising money or developing strategic plans for the athletic department but there will not be day-to-day interaction. Future research should explore the profiles and career experiences of Division II and Division III ADs where the mission is much more focused on the student-athlete and not so much the experience of the general public, alumni, and fans.

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Management Whitepaper

Moving on Up

Division I Athletic Directors' Career Progression and Involvement

Robin Hardin, Coyte G. Cooper, Landon T. Huffman

I. Research Problem

Collegiate athletic directors (ADs) are the chief executive officers within the athletic department of the colleges and universities they serve, but there are a limited number of research studies that focus in-depth on the career progression of these athletic administrators. The purpose of this research was to examine the career progression of these individuals and what activities they are most involved at the Division I level. This study has implications for educators, students, and professionals in collegiate athletic administration. It enables educators to provide a more clear description of what students need to be doing if they have aspirations to be an AD. The same is true for students as they will be able to make choices for internships and other work experiences as to what will best prepare them if they want to be an AD, and professionals can also know what career steps to take if they are interested in becoming an athletic director.

II. Issues

Coaches are the most visible employees of the athletic department but academic counselors, athletic trainers, media professionals, and business managers are also part of the staff that assists in the operation of the athletic department. Those staffs can range in size from as few as 20 at Division III institutions to more than 250 for Division I members. The increasing staff sizes and the importance of the business aspects of sport have placed more demands on ADs and increased media attention has placed their decisions under more scrutiny. Some ADs are no longer able to interact directly with student-athletes or staff members on a regular basis because of increasing CEO and business-oriented functions and concerns, such as budgeting, fundraising, department policy, personnel, compliance and public relations. ADs are often forced to take on the roles they feel are most important or essential and delegate additional tasks to others.

ADs are certainly in the public eye, by the nature of their position, much like any other top-level executive and maybe more so due to the passionate fan base that follows collegiate sport. College football games move the needle on Saturdays in the fall with collegiate basketball taking center stage during the winter months;

capped off with March Madness in the spring. Decisions made by ADs not only have an impact on student-athletes and athletic department staff, but the millions of collegiate fans. This certainly provides ADs unique perspectives and experiences and their insight into issues have been the topic of academic research during the past several decades.

The profession of AD deserves to be researched because of the high-profile role it serves within higher education. There has certainly been no shortage of research in which ADs were the respondents. Topics have included: AD perceptions of public relations, job satisfaction, career progression, job stress, managerial behavior, and demographic characteristics.

This research though added to the body of knowledge of career progression regarding the experiences ADs have had during their professional development. The current study also investigates what activities ADs are most involved in doing. The results will aid someone aspiring to become an AD as well as someone who may have input into hiring an AD. This research focused specifically on Division I ADs because they are often considered the pinnacle of the collegiate administration profession. ADs at Division II and Division III are certainly accomplished professionals but their duties may include responsibilities other than just being an AD. They may also serve on the faculty, have coaching responsibilities, or other administrative duties. ADs at Division I intuitions manage a higher number of coaches, employees and larger budgets. They are also in the media spotlight more as well as their decisions often involve millions of dollars and the careers of high-profile coaches.

III. Summary

The AD had held the current position for approximately seven years at the current institution and had most likely worked there prior to becoming the AD. More than 80% of the respondents held a master's degree with primary areas of study being sport management (35.5%) or education. The primary areas for bachelor's degree major were health and physical education (25.3%), arts and sciences (23.5%), and business (21.6%). See Table 1 for positions held during career and Table 2 for weekly activity involvement.

IV. Analysis

The results of the current study show a dramatic shift during the past 25 years, providing a clearer picture regarding the objective credentials of current Division I ADs, which is critically important information to disseminate to individuals who aspire to be an AD. ADs are now preparing for their profession by earning degrees in business, education, and sport management and are developing management skills working their way up through collegiate athletic administration. The shift in ADs having business-oriented backgrounds makes sense even though athletic departments are nonprofit organizations. Although an athletic department's goal is not profit maximization, an athletic department must function according to a

Table 1*Institutional Profile*

Characteristic	Mean	Median
Men's Varsity Sports	9.20	8
Women's Varsity Sports	10.02	10
Total Student-Athletes	407.21	400
Student-Athlete Scholarships	175.82	193
Full-Time Employees	84.44	65
Part-Time Employees	37.53	20

Table 2*Respondent Profile*

Experience	Mean	Median
At Current Institution	10.68	8
AD at Current Institution	7.22	6
Years as AD at Any Institution	10.44	8

Education	N	Percent
Master's		
Yes	82	82.8
No	17	17.2
Doctorate		
Yes	18	18.2
No	81	81.8

business model to be sustainable. Anecdotally speaking, the rise in ADs obtaining a degree(s) in sport management may be explained due to a rise in popularity and demand to offer the major at universities as well as the curriculum and accreditation process has evolved to be more inclusive of business management competencies rather than the physical education approach which seemed to focus training on kinesiology and pedagogical techniques. It appears gone are the days of coaches retiring from the sidelines and becoming ADs. People are now making distinctive, structured, intentional career decisions in their ascension to the role of AD.

V. Discussion/Implications

This study has implications for educators, students, and professionals in collegiate athletic administration. For educators, it enables them to provide a more clear description of what students need to be doing if they have aspirations to be an AD. Educators can use the data reported in this study to provide direction of what areas of intercollegiate athletics may best prepare someone who wants to be an AD at the Division I level. The same is true for students as they will be able to make choices for internships and other work experiences as to what will best prepare them if they want to be an AD. For example, upon examining the results of time devoted to weekly activities by ADs in this study, there is a natural break that occurs which separates four distinct activities from the rest of the weekly activities, which are financial/budgetary oversight, policy making, development/fundraising, and community relations. Therefore, this affirms the aforementioned evidence that if an individual has intentions of progressing to assume an AD position, he or she will likely be a good fit if he or she is comfortable with and has experience cultivating relationships with donors, raising money, managing money, and developing department-wide policies, all of which affect, on average, more than 80 full-time employees.

It is important to note the career aspiration of collegiate athletic administrators is not necessarily to be an AD. Many people aspire to be at the top of their profession in a specialized area such as sports information, compliance, or academic advising in college athletic administration. Furthermore, results from this study illustrated that, on average, the length of time serving as AD at their current institution and total length of time serving as an AD are similar, suggesting there is a trend of very little turnover. Therefore, individuals who aspire to be an AD must realize these jobs are limited and competitive and must intentionally prepare, as well as take opportunities that are presented to them. For example, given the fact that 66.7% of ADs held an assistant AD position, individuals must be willing to take an assistant AD position when the opportunity arises, as this is a natural progression to become an AD. Career decisions and transitions can be made that can better situate a person for the ascent to AD.

Another interesting finding comes in terms of what the ADs find most rewarding and that is working with student-athletes and seeing them succeed. But, an AD at a Division I school probably has little or no daily interactions with student-athletes. Much has been written about the commodification of student-athletes and how they are used to help others profit. The findings from this study shed some insight into this issue. ADs may be concerned with winning and student-athletes but it may be more for the good of the administration and university and not for the good of the student-athlete. Bonuses, as reflected in employment contracts of ADs and negotiated in employment contracts between ADs and coaches, for winning championships are much higher than bonuses for academic success which raises the question of where is the emphasis placed. The ADs indicate their background

AD Career Progression

is mostly in development, marketing, and business and none of these have strong interaction with the student-athletes.

Results from this study indicated that the career progression of an AD typically involves daily engagement with fiscal and human resource management, marketing, and fundraising. ADs may be obtaining degrees in sport management so they can be exposed to the inner-workings of the culture of sport organizations. More specifically, a degree in sport management would benefit individuals who aspire to be an AD because they would be challenged to think critically about the social issues at stake when dealing with students and operating within an institution of higher education. Furthermore, it appears that university presidents and chancellors appreciate a candidate who has a background in formally studying education given the fact that 25% of ADs in this study reported having a graduate degree in education.

This provides more evidence in the switch to the business profession of ADs at the Division I level rather than someone who is passionate about student-athletes' personal development and intercollegiate athletics. Division I ADs are focused on budgets, financials, marketing, and fundraising. All of these are important to the success of the student-athlete in that resources need to be available to help them succeed but it appears that the success of the athletic programs is more for the administration and athletic department rather than the student-athlete. Future research should explore the profiles and career progression of Division II and Division III ADs where the mission is much more focused on the student-athlete and not so much the experience of the general public, alumni, and fans.