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WHERE ARE ALL THE WOMEN?: USING ROLE CONGRUITY THEORY TO EXPLORE THE EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE INTERSCHOLASTIC ATHLETIC DIRECTORS

By

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B.S., Castleton University, 2016
M.S., Ball State University, 2019

A Dissertation
Submitted to the faculty of the College of Education and Human Development of the University of Louisville in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in Educational Leadership and Organizational Development

Department of Health and Sport Sciences
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

August 2023
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A Dissertation Approved on, June 7th, 2023

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Dr. James Johnson
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to both of grandmothers who are no longer with us. They provided amazing opportunities for myself and my sister and we would not be here without them. To Nana Ballou and Swim- we love you and miss you! I would also like to thank my mom, dad, sister, brother-in-law, and little P for their continued support during this journey, they have always been the catalyst of support for me in my career and academic career. From long talks on the phone, to being home for the holidays and summers- they provide a constant ray of light to me and push me to be my best self. Thank you for always believing in me and helping me get to this stage in life. I look forward to celebrating with you all!
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To my committee, I want to thank you for joining me on this ride of a dissertation. Dr. Hancock- I appreciate all of your support over the past four years, I truly would not be here without you. Through multiple rounds of edits, it has been a pleasure to learn from you both personally and professionally. Dr. Alagaraja- thank you for sticking with me and guiding me over the past two years. You always provide unique perspectives that have challenged me to be a better qualitative researcher. Dr. Greenwell- you have always been the motivator and I appreciate you being part of this journey. Your feedback throughout my time at UofL has been nothing short of amazing and I truly appreciate the thoughtfulness you provide. Dr. Johnson- who would have thought six years ago, we would be here! Thank you for always being a strong support system and always holding me accountable in my work. I’m a better writer and person because of your continual guidance.

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Leadership in sport organizations continues to be male dominated, even as multiple scholars have argued and proven the importance of women holding sport leadership positions (Burton & Leberman, 2017; Darvin & Lubke, 2021; Schull, 2017). The lack of women attaining these positions leads to fewer opportunities for role modeling and mentoring experiences for female athletes. As Burden et al. (2010) argue, interscholastic athletic directors are important as they usually represent the first interactions for young athletes with people in sport leadership positions. Researchers have investigated this phenomenon at the intercollegiate level (Bower & Hums, 2013; Darvin & Lubke, 2021; Taylor & Hardin, 2016), but little scholarship exists exploring sport leadership positions at the interscholastic level (Johnson et al., 2020; Whisenant et al., 2015).

The purpose of this two-paper study, utilizing role congruity theory, was to examine the experiences of women interscholastic athletic directors in attaining (career path and hiring process) and performing the role of athletic director. Using qualitative semi-structured interviews, the researcher conducted virtual interviews with 17 current
women interscholastic athletic directors (average 60-minutes per interview). The participants represented 14 states, worked at high schools of various sizes, and all held their current role for seven years or less.

The results from the first paper, focused on attaining the athletic director role, indicated the importance of holding a prior position in the school system (teacher, support services, and/or coach). Institutional knowledge of the interscholastic school system and sport facilitated participants in moving up the leadership ranks into the athletic director position. The researcher also found potential issues in the hiring system, suggesting that inconsistencies of job postings and the lack of structure associated with a ‘fair’ job hiring process for internal versus external candidates. The second manuscript, focused on the experiences of performing the athletic director role, found multiple factors of the athletic director position led to work/life and time challenges, potentially impacting the female participants more than their male athletic director counterparts. Overall, these two manuscripts confirm the tenets of role congruity theory, that women face significant barriers in attaining and performing leadership positions.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The current interscholastic sport system in the United States provides education-based athletic participation opportunities for boys and girls across the country (NFHS, n.d.a.). Blanton et al. (2021) define interscholastic education-based athletics as “an extracurricular sport-based context that supports the mission of the academic institution through offering youth experiential learning of life skills with the aim of developing constructive members of society” (p.19). Supporting this mission, scholars and athletes alike have reported the positive intrinsic and physical benefits of interscholastic athletic participation, such as improved self-confidence, physical well-being, and mental well-being (Bang et al., 2020; Dyer et al., 2017; Kendellen & Camiré, 2017; Lumpkin & Favor, 2013; Renfrow et al., 2011; Richman & Shaffer, 2000). The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) acts as the national service organization for interscholastic sport and currently represents the largest sport entity in the US (Blanton et al., 2021). Membership of the NFHS includes 51 state high school athletic associations (including DC) and 41 affiliate associations (includes private high school associations and Canadian province associations). Within the 92 athletic association’s membership there are 19,500 schools and 7.9 million participating athletes (NFHS, n.d.a., 2022).

While the governing umbrella of the NFHS holds a wide reach across North America, they merely act as a service organization, providing their membership with
general game-play rules/regulations, historical statistics, professional development, and education. While the NFHS acts as a service organization, each individual state has their own high school athletic association. These state level associations act as the governing power of interscholastic sport in the state, with membership including individual high schools. Thus, state high school athletic associations and member high schools hold decision-making power regarding regulations and policies for interscholastic sport. Subsequently, the structures and policies that exist in the governance of interscholastic sport will differ based on state, allowing for varying sport experiences for athletes, coaches, administrators, and fans (Perry, 2020a). The importance of athletic leadership positions at both the state and individual high school level cannot be understated, as these persons set the standards for competition and eligibility to participate across all sports. Given this structure, it is obvious that athletic directors represent pivotal leaders in the operations of high school sport.

The current interscholastic sport landscape represents a large and diverse space, however, it was not always this way. A momentous event in interscholastic sport was the passage of Title IX in 1972. The official language of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 states, “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” (US Department of Education, n.d.a., para. 1). The official language of Title IX does not include sport or athletics. Nevertheless, the educational based sport model in the US became a byproduct of the legislation (Stevenson, 2007).
One consequence of Title IX was the increased opportunities in sport for girls and women, especially within large governance structures such as interscholastic athletics (Stevenson, 2007; WSF, n.d.). The increase in female sport participation was staggering with over a 1000% increase in participation by female athletes. For example, female athlete participation numbers jumped from 300,000 (1971) to upwards of 3.2 million (2022) and the total number of teams jumped from just 14,836 (1971) to over 160,000 (2022; NFHS, 2022; WEEA, n.d.). When making comparisons to current male participation numbers, however, female opportunities remain relatively low, as over 4.3 million male athletes (56%) compete in interscholastic sport (NFHS, 2022). Still, the dramatic increases in women’s participation demonstrate a positive progression of athletic opportunities, resources, and visibility (Kihl et al., 2016).

While a positive shift in interscholastic female athlete participation has occurred since 1972, studies have also shed light on the continuing discrepancy in participation and sport offerings between males and females. For example, Wong (2015) suggest that many high schools across the country barely reach, and often fall short, on the minimum standards of compliance required by Title IX. This minimum standard of compliance was first introduced in 1979, when the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) released their updated Intercollegiate Athletics Policy Interpretation (IAPI; also applicable to interscholastic sport), which outlined the legal regulatory language of the three-prong test (proportionality, expansion, accommodating interest), setting a base standard for athletic participation under Title IX compliance¹ (Brake, 2000). In 2015, a study conducted by

¹ The three-prong test states schools must meet at least one of the following - proportionality (equal representation from student body to athlete participation), expansion (history of providing the under-represented group with new opportunities), and accommodating interests (meeting interest of school’s student body; for a full review see Brake, 2000).
the National Women’s Law Center reported that six states (AL, GA, LA, MS, SC, and TN) saw over 50% of their public high schools in non-compliance with the Title IX three-prong test. Furthermore, in Virginia, only 32 of 309 (10%) of high schools (public and private) met at least one of three prongs for Title IX compliance (Flowers-Umble & Rice, 2013). As we just passed the 50th anniversary of Title IX, opportunities for female athletes have reached an all-time high. Nevertheless, opportunities and resources remain disproportionately skewed toward male athletes and subsequently, male leaders.

When examining leadership positions at the interscholastic level, men are more likely to serve in key leadership positions, such as principals and athletic directors. For example, in education, while women make up 64% of high school teachers (NCES, 2021), they only represent 33% of high school principals and 24% of school district superintendents (Ramaswamy, 2020). This lack of representation for women demonstrates the systematic inequalities that currently exist within education. Regarding athletics, Title IX legislation adopted specific language addressing equal opportunity and resources for female athlete participation (Brake, 2000); however, no such language exists for the representation of women in leadership roles (Kihl et al., 2016). The increases in participation rates, funding, and services for women’s sport allowed coaching and administrative positions to become viable full-time career paths for the first time (Elsesser, 2019). As a result, an influx of men secured positions in women’s sport as coaches and administrators, thereby decreasing opportunities for women to hold these positions (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Elsesser, 2019; Kihl et al., 2016; Lapchick, 2020).

At the interscholastic level, women remain under-represented across all levels of athletic leadership (Whisenant et al., 2015; Fletcher, 2019). While the current executive
director for the NFHS is a woman (Dr. Karissa Niehoff), it is uncommon to have women in executive director/commissioner roles at the state level (NFHS, n.d.a.). For example, the researcher conducted a quick review of all high school athletic associations, women hold only 7 of the 51 (13.7%) executive director/commissioner roles in their respective state high school athletic associations. The executive director/commissioner represents an important position within the interscholastic governance structure, as the state athletic association holds substantial power in developing and implementing policies. Another key leadership position in interscholastic athletics is the athletic director at each individual high school. There currently is not a nationwide gender breakdown of the interscholastic athletic director position. Selections of smaller studies have reported sample populations with the consensus finding women hold between 15-20% of these leadership roles in high school sport (Dombeck, 2018; Fletcher, 2019; Mercogliano, 2019; Mullane & Whisenant, 2007; Whisenant, 2003, 2008). The largest sample size reported was from a 2017 personal communication from the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NIAAA) stating their membership consisted of 10,468 with only 1,577 (15%) being women athletic directors (Fletcher, 2019).

Even though women represent a low percentage of athletic directors, studies suggest that once women do attain the interscholastic athletic director position, they perform successfully (Pedersen & Whisenant, 2005) and provide positive role models for athletes (Kalin & Waldon, 2015). Burden et al. (2010) even notes women holding leadership roles may allow for positive perceptions of their capabilities, “young females (and males) need to see women in key decision-making positions where their abilities and contributions are valued” (p. 10). Thus, women holding leadership positions in
interscholastic sport may influence perceptions of women’s leadership capability. The lack of women holding leadership positions also becomes troublesome for the growth of the next generation of women leaders. Having female role models and mentoring relationships (same gender) have shown to improve experiences of women in attaining leadership roles (Bower, 2008; Lough, 2001; Hancock et al., 2018). When women are equally represented in leadership positions, it diversifies the pool of potential role models, consequently challenging gender stereotype perceptions that exist in sport leadership (Itoh, 2014; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012; Taylor & Hardin, 2016).

While other studies have confirmed the importance of women holding sport leadership roles (Burden et al., 2010; Burton & Leberman, 2017; Evans & Pfister, 2021; Kalin & Waldon, 2015; Robinson & Taylor, 2020), sport remains a hyper-masculine space (Fink, 2016; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). A hyper-masculine space is defined as an environment where men are often preferred, celebrated, and promoted as optimal sport leaders (Burton & Leberman, 2017). Schein (2001) described hyper-masculine spaces and stereotypical perceptions as a ‘think manager, think male’ approach to sport leadership, leaving women to face scrutiny in their attainment and performance of sport leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These biased perceptions of leadership effectiveness are gender-typed, with men being more likely to be identified and succeed within leadership roles (Burton et al., 2011; Kalin & Waldron, 2015; Whisenant, 2005). These stereotypes afford men greater opportunities to ascend to leadership positions faster and more frequently than women, maintaining the substantial gender gap in sport leadership roles (Lapchick, 2020; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Whisenant, 2008).
Once women do attain sport leadership positions, researchers have sought to understand their lived experiences as this can assist in illuminating structural problems (e.g., policies, hiring practices, etc; Burton et al. 2009, 2011; Darvin, 2020) and social inequities (e.g., discrimination, stereotyping, harassment; Madsen & McGarry, 2017; Whisenant et al., 2015). There are also positive attributes, such as women establishing strong support systems and mentoring opportunities (Bower & Hums, 2014). In one such study, Grappendorf and Lough (2006) found female intercollegiate athletic administrators held higher academic degrees than their male counterparts. The academic degrees were seen to be an effective tool to fight systematic discrimination as educational attainment is a tangible asset, negating stereotypical perspectives of their leadership capabilities. In a more recent study, intercollegiate women athletic directors expressed experiencing substantial pushback on their experience and credibility to make high level decisions (Taylor & Hardin, 2016). These studies highlight the resistance women face when they attain high-level leadership positions.

At the college level studies have uncovered negative experiences for women leaders regarding gender-typed leadership trait perceptions. For example, Grappendorf et al. (2008) highlighted experiences of Senior Women Administrators (SWAs)\(^2\), who overwhelmingly reported feeling left out of high-level financial decision-making conversations. This finding suggests that the organizational culture in athletics does not value the input of women when dealing with financial decisions, a predominately male-typed leadership skill in athletics (Grappendorf et al., 2008). Taylor and Wells (2017) highlighted similar negative effects of hegemonic masculinity (male traits preferred) on

\(^2\) Designation in the NCAA athletics system to identify the highest-ranking women in the athletic department (Tiell & Dixon, 2008).
organizational culture for women athletic directors. Female administrator participants voiced concern over their ‘place’ in the athletic department and the credibility given to them from male counterparts. However, the women in this study suggested that when they realized their own personal human and social capital, their athletic departments became more inclusive for themselves and other women in the department. These studies represent a sample of inquiries into women’s experiences in sport leadership positions at the intercollegiate level. To date, however, no similar qualitative studies have been conducted at the interscholastic level (Diacin & Lim, 2012; Grappendorf et al., 2008; Hancock & Hums, 2016). Hence, the voices and experiences of interscholastic woman athletic directors has yet to be explored in the literature.

While the studies providing the voices of interscholastic woman athletic directors are limited, researchers have investigated circumstances which may contribute to gender inequalities at the interscholastic level (Mullane & Whisenant, 2007; Pedersen & Whisenant, 2005; Whisenant, 2003, 2005, 2008; Whisenant & Pedersen, 2004; Whisenant et al., 2015). One such study conducted by Whisenant (2005) found 17% of Texas athletic director job descriptions required football head coaching experience. As women rarely hold interscholastic football head coaching positions, the athletic director role became gendered to better fit male candidates, giving disadvantaged opportunities to women candidates. A more recent study by Whisenant et al. (2015) found male head coaches were more likely to disagree with the decision-making of a female athletic director compared to a male athletic director. Nonetheless, Pedersen and Whisenant (2005) found woman interscholastic athletic directors attained higher success rates than
their male counterparts, with females representing a strong fit for the interscholastic athletic director role and potentially doing more with less when they attain the position.

These past studies suggest women face unequal opportunities in interscholastic sport. These studies, however, lack the voices and lived experiences of female interscholastic athletic directors. As Burden et al. (2010) argue, the experiences of interscholastic athletic directors are important because they can represent the first interactions young athletes and people in a local community have with sport leaders. Thus, the lack of leadership representation has the potential to impact leadership perceptions of young athletes. It is not surprising that few studies on women interscholastic leaders exist as the overall literature focusing on interscholastic athletics has been minimal (Forsyth et al., 2020). For example, Forsyth et al. (2020) found in eight prominent sport management journals (i.e., Journal of Sport Management, Sport Management Review, etc.) only 22 of 3,757 or .005% of published articles focused on interscholastic sport. While this number does not constitute the entire body of literature on interscholastic sport, it does suggest the need for a greater focus on the interscholastic sector. As such, expanding the already minimal literature to encompass the experiences of interscholastic woman athletic directors is warranted as it can add depth to the literature and highlight the unique experiences of women attaining and performing key sport leadership positions.

Statement of Problem

Throughout the literature, scholars have investigated the disproportionately high number of men holding sport leadership positions (Aicher & Samariniotis, 2011; Diacin & Lim, 2012; Tiell & Dixon, 2008; Tiell et al., 2012; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013;
Whisenant, 2005). Few studies, however, have investigated the phenomenon at the interscholastic sport level, which is interesting due to the low number of women holding leadership positions and the difficulties they face in these roles (Forsyth et al., 2020; Whisenant, 2015). In comparison, most studies on gender in sport leadership positions have been conducted at the professional or intercollegiate levels, both of which differ drastically from interscholastic athletics. Some of these differences include budgets, coaches (part-time v. full-time), infrastructure and facilities, mission statements, policies and procedures, staff and athletes, and schedules (Blackburn, 2013). Another difference is the athletic department staffing capacity, with intercollegiate athletic departments employing multiple employees, while interscholastic athletic departments usually only have one full-time representative, the athletic director (Blackburn, 2013). Thus, the experiences of interscholastic athletic directors may differ vastly from the intercollegiate space, giving credence to better understand the under-representation at the interscholastic level. Furthermore, the low numbers of women holding these positions leads to a lack of potential women role models and mentors for athletes, both male and female. The under-representation of women athletic directors might also highlight a lack of diversity in the decision-making process at the interscholastic level (Pedersen & Whisenant, 2005; Wicker et al., 2020). To date, the literature has yet to examine the experiences of women holding interscholastic athletic director positions, even though this population represents a key role in the sport leadership of interscholastic sport. This study seeks to address this problem by exploring the lived experiences of women in their career attainment/path and performing of the athletic director role. This study will allow for a better understanding
of the leadership in the interscholastic sport structure and address a major gap in the sport management literature field.

**Theoretical Framework**

To investigate this study, role congruity theory represents a useful framework to uncovers the actual lived experiences of women attaining and performing sport leadership roles. Derived from social role theory (Eagly, 1987), role congruity theory grounds itself in the investigation of circumstances where pre-perceived stereotypes in social groups become disrupted (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The framework of social role theory and role congruity theory indicates gender impacts social group roles, with males and females exhibiting differing social behaviors and personalities (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Based on social role theory, biases and pre-conceived notions suggest male behaviors encompass vitality and robustness, with biases suggesting females portray behaviors such as gentleness and compassion (Mudrick & Lin, 2017). These behaviors have also been described as communal and agentic (Eagly, 1987). Communal behavior has long been associated with female roles in social groups and best described as encompassing behaviors such as caring, nurturing, and understanding (Eagly, 2018). Agentic behaviors, historically associated with leadership positions and males in social groups, include self-assertion, independence, charisma, and control (Abele, 2003). The stereotypes surrounding biases and pre-conditioned gender roles and behaviors afford men the opportunities to become more associated with leadership roles, leaving women at a disadvantage in their desire to attain leadership roles. Subsequently, men hold the
dominant number of leadership positions, furthering the stereotypical perceptions of leadership positions and leaving women to be seen as incongruent with leadership roles.

These pre-conditioned gender role norms for both males and females have contributed to the development of role congruity theory. The theory specifically pertains to positions where women are under-represented in leadership positions—thus, role congruity theory applies to sport leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). For example, more men hold sport leadership positions, thus, perceptions and behaviors associated with sport leadership roles often overlap with traditional male traits (self-assertion, charisma, etc.; Aicher & Samariniotis, 2011). This potentially skews leadership capabilities for women seeking to attain and perform sport leadership roles, as they break the traditional norms associated with the positions (Burton et al., 2011). As such, role congruity theory relies on two foundational tenets—(a) women are perceived less favorably for leadership positions and (b) women are evaluated less favorably when performing leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

The stereotypical nature of these two mechanisms often leads to negative experiences for women in sport leadership (Burton et al., 2011). Eagly and Chin (2010) suggest that negative stereotyping of women in leadership roles may lead women to earn fewer leadership positions and potentially value the follower role, hence choosing to avoid high-level leadership positions all together. These negative perceptions assist in the development of stereotypical beliefs surrounding leadership and gender, leaving women who attain leadership positions in conflict with socially constructed gender role norms (agentic and communal; Eagly & Chin, 2010). Role congruity theory allows for a deeper examination of pre-conditioned gender role norms associated with leadership positions,
most notably, how perceptions of gender norm stereotypes impact those attaining leadership roles and how to break these stereotypical perspectives of leadership positions (Eagly & Chin, 2010; Eagly & Karau, 2002).

When applying role congruity theory to sport, Aicher and Samariniotis (2011) emphasized that pre-perceived stereotypes regarding behaviors leave women to face a significant double-bind in which “the paradox women face where masculine behavior [assertiveness and charisma] is neither accepted nor condoned and feminine behavior [caring and support] is not respected or valued” (p. 255). In alignment with the first tenet of role congruity theory (women are perceived less favorably for leadership positions), researchers have confirmed gender biases toward male sport leaders, leaving women to face discrimination in attaining leadership roles (Burton et al., 2011; Fabri, 2019; Miller, 2016; Whisenant, 2005). For example, results from Burton et al. (2011) found even when equal evaluations of male and female intercollegiate athletic director candidates were reported, study participants still selected the male candidates at a much higher rate. Role congruity theory also posits that when women do attain leadership roles, they oftentimes receive negative evaluations of their leadership capabilities. As Diacin and Lim (2012) found, leadership capacity perceptions differed between male and female intercollegiate athletic administrators. The results suggested women administrators were perceived to lack competency in making higher level decisions as they were identified to hold ‘lack-of-fit’ to handle these situations. Overall, the two tenets from role congruity theory represent a unique lens to investigate the holistic experience of women in attaining and performing leadership roles at the interscholastic level.
Study Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of women who attain and perform the athletic director position at the interscholastic level. As highlighted, little research has been conducted on interscholastic sport and the athletic director experience, especially when women hold the position. Therefore, by utilizing role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) this study explored the lived experiences of interscholastic women athletic directors, with a specific focus on how they perceived themselves overcoming barriers to attaining athletic director positions. The following research questions were identified to guide this study.

**RQ1:** What are the past career paths of current women interscholastic athletic directors?

**RQ2:** What are the lived experience(s) of current women interscholastic athletic directors in attaining their role?

**RQ3:** What are the lived experience(s) of women interscholastic athletic directors in performing their role?

Significance of Study

From a practical perspective, this study sought to better understand the experiences of women holding the title of athletic director in interscholastic athletics. By uncovering the lived experiences of this relatively small population, more formal in-state support systems may emerge to create stable pathways for women to enter interscholastic athletic administration positions. Furthermore, with the limited knowledge on experiences of interscholastic women athletic directors, this study may assist in the further development of research focused on women in sport leadership. In exploring this
unique population, this research sought to differentiate the phenomena and themes occurring in interscholastic sport from intercollegiate and professional sport. Potentially uncovering new phenomena may lead to a more holistic understanding of the current support systems, barriers, and challenges women in the interscholastic athletic director position may face in attaining and performing their roles.

From a theoretical perspective, role congruity theory literature indicates limited application with qualitative research designs. Thus, this study will further expand the feasibility of role congruity theory, as a qualitative inquiry allows for an in-depth analysis of the framework. While sport management literature has explored the lived experiences of women through various theoretical lenses, the majority of role congruity theory has yet to explore the experiences of women at the interscholastic level. This study sought to bridge this gap in role congruity theory literature to focus qualitatively on women in leadership positions experiences.

**Limitations**

With the unique governance structure of interscholastic athletics, the qualitative inquiry may lead to lack of generalizability. As such, the experiences of the women interscholastic athletic director’s participants in this study may not fully represent the experiences of all women holding similar roles. For example, the researcher interviewed participants from 14 states, which could lead to the voices of athletic directors from other states not being present in the results. While the researcher actively sought to diversify the sample size, with such variables as racial identity, size of school, and geographic location, these variables may be experienced differently by others not interviewed. Therefore, the experiences uncovered in this study highlighted the individual lived
experiences of participants but may not fully encompass the experiences of all individuals holding this role across the country.

The next limitation was the researcher’s gender identity. The researcher identifies as a white male, which may impact participants’ responses in their interviews. For example, when discussing certain experiences, the researcher may not be able to ‘relate,’ which may act as a barrier between the participant and the researcher. Furthermore, the low level of familiarity with participants and the lack of connection in the virtual interview setting may lead to hesitation from participants. The researcher worked to break down these barriers to provide an open and inclusive interview space where participants felt their voices are heard and understood.

Delimitations

A delimitation of this study included limiting the scope of inquiry. While the study participants were solicited from all 50 states, the researcher only included athletic directors currently working at interscholastic public high schools. Although there is a large group of private and preparatory high schools in the country, the decision to exclude these schools was tied to varying levels of funding. For example, private and preparatory high schools have historically funded athletics at a higher rate than public high schools, which could potentially impact the experiences of those performing the athletic director position (Kennedy, 2019). The next delimitation of this study was to only include interscholastic female athletic directors with at least one year of experience and no more than seven years in their position. The researchers identified the need for participants to hold at least one-year in their role to be able to discuss their experiences performing the role of athletic director. Furthermore, the reason behind excluding
participants over seven years of experience was to ensure that athletic directors could talk about their experience prior to attaining the athletic director role, as perceptions of experiences may fade with more time in the position.

**Definitions of Terms**

*Agentic Traits* – associated with behaviors such as self-assertion, independence, and control, often aligned with perceptions of behaviors of men leaders (Eagly, 1987)

*Athletic Director* – the highest-ranking representative of an athletic department, often tasked with administering the entire department and tasked with making high-level decisions (Blackburn, 2013)

*Communal Traits* – associated with behaviors such as caring, nurturing, and understanding, often aligned with perceptions of behaviors of women leaders (Abele, 2003; Eagly, 1987)

*Gendered Leadership* – the stereotypical perceptions that gender of an individual impacts their ability to attain and perform leadership positions (Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013)

*Homologous Reproduction* - the concept of homologous reproduction describes those in power maintaining their influence in an organization by hiring and promoting individuals with similar characteristics to themselves into power positions (Kanter, 1977).

*Intercollegiate Athletics* – educational based sport programming sponsored by college and/or universities that vary in size and sponsor multiple sport offerings. The participants are student-athletes and national associations guide the rules and regulations (NCAA, n.d.a.).

*Interscholastic Athletics* – educational based sport programming at the high school level, which includes offering competitions for both males and females, usually governed by
state associations and competition which typically stay inside state lines (Blackburn, 2013)

**NFHS** - the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) acts as the national service organization for interscholastic sport, providing education-based athletic participation opportunities for boys and girls across the country (NFHS, n.d.a.). The NFHS represents the largest sport entity based on participation in the United States.

**State High School Athletic Association** - each state high school athletic association represents the decision-making power regarding rules, regulations, and policies for interscholastic sport in their state.

**Title IX** – “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 educational program activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (US Department of Education, n.d., para. 1)
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of interscholastic women athletic directors. This study sought to address the gap in the literature surrounding interscholastic sport leadership positions in this historically male dominated field. Thus, to better understand the intricacies surrounding this study an in-depth analysis on interscholastic athletics and the athletic director role was provided. This literature review will also outline the experiences of women sport leaders, including discussing significant barriers to sport leadership roles. Lastly, the literature review will include an extensive review of the theoretical framework guiding this study, role congruity theory.

Interscholastic Athletics

Interscholastic athletics acts as the largest sport structure in the US with an estimated 7.9 million participating athletes who experience many positive intrinsic benefits, including school attendance (Videon, 2002), academic achievement (Bang et al., 2020; Dyer et al., 2017), self-esteem (Richman & Shaffer, 2000), health (Renfrow et al., 2011), life-skill development (Kendellen & Camiré, 2017), and higher education opportunities (Lumpkin & Favor, 2013; Troutman & Dufur, 2007). These positive attributes associated with interscholastic athletics are the rationale behind the continued support it receives at the national, state, and district levels. For example, Dyer et al. (2017) found academic achievement improved when students participated in school
sanctioned sport activities. More recently, reports indicated interscholastic sport participation had a positive effect on academic achievement regardless of racial identities (Bang et al., 2020). Furthermore, Veliz and Shakib (2012) found delinquency rates, both with serious crimes and suspensions, were lower in high schools with higher athletic participation. It has also been suggested that females who participate in interscholastic athletics show improved self-esteem and worth, fostering more positive perceptions of body image and gender identity (Richman & Shaffer, 2000).

While there are many positive benefits for participation in interscholastic athletics, gender differences in representation continue to be found at all levels, including athletes, coaches, athletic directors, and state executive roles. For example, under the NFHS umbrella, the 4.3 million male students participating far outpace the 3.2 million female student participants (NFHS, 2022). When examining the differences in gender representation amongst interscholastic head coaches, no studies have identified a national number, however a collection of smaller studies suggest women represent around 20-25% of the total head coaching population (Hawkman & Nielsen, 2019; Lumpkin et al., 2013). The breakdown of gender in coaching at the interscholastic level may also be influenced by the age of coaches. Lumpkin et al. (2013) found a high number of young female head coaches enter the position, however, this number steadily declined over time, with males continuing their coaching careers much longer than female coaches. At the higher levels of leadership in interscholastic sport, athletic directors and executive director/commissioner positions are also seen to hold gender preference for males. As noted above, women only hold between 15-20% of athletic director positions and 13.7% of executive director/commissioner positions (Dombeck, 2018; Fletcher, 2019;
Mercogliano, 2019; Mullane & Whisenant, 2007). This lack of progress to more equal gender representation across leadership positions is important due to the unique application of the governance structure that currently exists in the interscholastic athletic model.

**Governance**

Interscholastic athletics represents the largest sport governance structure amongst all major sporting structures in the US (NFHS, n.d.a.). At the core of its mission, interscholastic athletics centers itself on providing educational-based athletic participation for those attending high school (ages 13-19). To accomplish this, all athletic participation at the interscholastic level complements the academic experience for students and assists in the development of important life skills (Blanton et al., 2021). At the top of the governance structure lies the NFHS. Different from other major governance structures in the US, the NFHS acts simply as a service organization. In this service organization role, the NFHS holds many responsibilities, including guidance on rules and regulations, record keeping, leadership trainings, resources (coaches, officials/judges, athletic directors, and administrators), and streaming services (NFHS, n.d.a.). The membership of the NFHS includes 51 state high school athletic associations (including DC) and 41 affiliate associations (includes private high school associations, US territories associations, and Canadian province associations). Membership within these 92 athletic associations includes upward of 19,500 high schools (NFHS, n.d.a.). While the NFHS governance provides a wide reach in their service role for interscholastic athletics in North America, the individual state/territory/province association members hold control over the sporting experiences of their athletes. In more simpler terms, state high school
athletic associations and affiliate associations have the regulatory decision-making power over all procedures, policies, and championships in their individual state regarding interscholastic sport (Perry, 2020a). Simply put, the power in interscholastic sport governance lies at the state level (Hums et al., 2023).

Across the NFHS membership, state association governance structures vary. In 39 states, only one governing body oversees all interscholastic athletic participation. However, in contrast, some states hold multiple associations and affiliative memberships. For example, in 12 states (AL, GA, IA, MD, MS, NC, NY, OK, PA, SC, TX, VA), more than one governing body exists for interscholastic athletics (Perry, 2020a). In Iowa, two separate athletic associations vary by gender, with the Iowa High School Athletic Association (IHSAA) overseeing boy’s athletics and girls’ athletics being guided by the Iowa Girls High School Athletic Union (IGHSAU). In somewhat of a contrast, other states have varying athletic associations based on private versus public institutions. For example, in Texas, the University Interscholastic League (UIL) serves 1,479 public and open enrollment charter schools. Alternatively, the state has four other associations that govern private and charter schools. Two of the larger associations of these are the Texas Association of Private and Parochial Schools (TAPPS) and Texas Charter School Academic & Athletic League (TCSALL). Overall, this demonstrates the interscholastic governance structure does not represent a one size fits all approach, and varying procedures exist in the design and implementation of interscholastic athletics across the US.

While there are obvious differences in governance structures amongst state high school athletic associations, similarities do exist regarding procedures, organizational
structure, and regulatory power. At each individual state high school athletic association, a commissioner/executive director oversees the day-to-day operations, while also implementing and monitoring the policies and procedures outlined in the association’s constitution and bylaws. Along with the director, associations employ a handful of full-time executive staff members, usually carrying out varying responsibilities including sport administration/oversight, event management, official oversight, eligibility/rules, communication and social media, broadcasting, marketing, sport information (statistics), and technology support (Blackburn, 2013; Hums et al., 2023). While the director and executive staff are essential to the success of the association, the regulatory power in the governance structure belongs within the membership - the individual high schools throughout the state.

In most state high school athletic associations, high school athletic directors’ make-up the board of directors, executive committees, standing committees (sport, rules, infractions, etc.), and general assembly (Hums et al., 2023). For example, the Indiana High School Athletic Association’s (IHSAA) Board of Directors and Executive Committee are made up of athletic directors from various locations and divisions across the state (IHSAA, n.d.a.). These two groups hold substantial regulatory power in the decision-making process and are essential to amending current rules and regulations regarding by-laws set forth by their general assembly. However, while these committees hold power, all decisions regarding amendments must be voted on by the totality of the membership (IHSAA, 2021). This means at the yearly IHSAA annual meeting, each member high school may vote to either accept or reject any proposed amendment or regulation being put forth by the executive committee. Again, the representation for each
member high school is usually the athletic director (occasionally a principal or school district superintendent). Hence, athletic directors represent an important piece of the governance structure that implements and adapts the rules and regulations of interscholastic sport in their respective state.

**Athletic Director**

The traditional duties of interscholastic athletic director have evolved over time with the increase in participation numbers in an ever-changing sport environment (Blackburn, 2013). The athletic director duties involve overseeing and implementing all aspects of an interscholastic athletic department including communication and accessibility, student-athlete development, team/program management, planning, scheduling, transportation, contest oversight and management, legal and safety concerns, marketing, fund-raising, budgeting, and equipment and facilities management (Blackburn, 2013). Whisenant and Pederson (2004) also found 88% of athletic directors hold collateral coaching duties, adding another significant time commitment.

Arguably one of the most important duties of the interscholastic athletic director is to create and sustain relationships with coaches, athletes, parents, community members, boosters, and teachers (Fowler et al., 2017). Since athletic directors often represent the only full-time staff member within high school athletic departments, they are also tasked with shaping their high school’s and local community’s athletic culture (Kochanek & Erickson, 2021). Mather (2007) suggests creating a positive high school athletic culture sets the stage naturally for other sports in the community to follow suit, based on the significant reach of interscholastic athletics in the local community. An example of this positive athletic culture is fostering safe learning spaces through emphasizing positive
leadership development, inclusivity, and embracing social change into the ideals of athletes, coaches, the student-body, parents, and community members (Burden et al., 2010; Kochanek & Erickson, 2021).

The interscholastic sport structure, similar to all sport governing bodies in the US, faces new annual challenges. Some of the more recent challenges facing interscholastic athletic directors involve club sports, concussion protection, fan behavior, maintaining educational focus, parent behavior, qualified coaches, risk minimization, safety issues (Covid-19) and social media (Forsyth et al., 2020; Niehoff, 2020b, Perry, 2020b). While some of the above issues represent structural challenges for interscholastic athletics, they all present significant challenges for athletic directors at their respective high schools. For example, a recent study of 2,000 interscholastic athletic directors found over 60% identified the hardest challenge in their job is dealing with inappropriate fan and parent behavior (Niehoff, 2020a). These negative experiences with parents may occur in a variety of different modes including inappropriate behavior during games directed toward officials/referees and mediating conversations between coaches and parents. Handling parents is just one of the many intricacies associated with the interscholastic athletic director role. This led Hobbs (2018) to suggest the modern day interscholastic athletic director plays a vital role in the overall educational and athletic experience of their athletes, which can further expand to create positive perceptions amongst the community, region, and state.

The responsibilities and duties associated with interscholastic athletic director positions may also lead to high levels of stress and burnout (Green & Reese, 2006; Judge & Judge, 2009; Lee, 2021; Martin et al., 1999a; Martin et al., 1999b). In 2014, Sullivan et
al. found levels of burnout for interscholastic athletic directors were much higher than other comparable professions. Judge and Judge (2009) found the roles leading to the highest stress were associated with scheduling, budget, equipment, and special projects. Green and Reese (2006) suggest the multiple responsibilities of an interscholastic athletic director, especially when also taking on a coaching assignment, leads to conflicting role identity, often defined as role conflict. Role conflict creates competing interests, where full attention and energy may not be focused as wanted. When interscholastic athletic directors experience high levels of role conflict, they report significantly low levels of job satisfaction (Conant, 2017). In 2019, Lee et al. suggested the high stress levels associated with the interscholastic athletic director role may occur due to the interpersonal nature of the role, which can potentially be mitigated by adopting emotional intelligence (perceive, manage, and regulate emotions).

The athletic director represents an important leadership position in the current structure of interscholastic athletics at both the state level and at their respective high schools (Blackburn, 2013; Hobbs, 2018). Similar to the under-representation of women in other leadership positions in interscholastic athletics (coaches and commissioner or executive directors), the athletic director position also represents a highly male dominated role (Fletcher, 2019; Mercogliano, 2019; Whisenant, 2008). This becomes troublesome for a few reasons. First, unequal gender representation at the state high school level becomes reflected in both committees and membership voting. For example, the Kentucky High School Athletic Association’s (KHSAA) top leadership group is the KHSAA Board of Control, which represents 20 members from across the Commonwealth. Of these 20 members, four women (20%) and 16 men (80%) make up
the committee (KHSAA, n.d.a.). Similarly, in Tennessee, the Legislative Council of the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association (TSSAA) has a group of 12 individuals from across the state, with just two women (17%) and 10 men (83%; TSSAA, n.d.a.). This unequal representation leads to lack of diversity in decision-making at the state association level. Secondly, the impact of gender representation in the athletic director role at their respective high school level must not be under-emphasized, as this position can lead to varying perceptions of leadership capabilities and competencies. In most high schools around the country, the athletic director is the only full-time staff in their department; thus, they hold significant power over the day-to-day decision-making process at their respective schools (Blackburn, 2013; Burton & Leberman, 2017a; Hums et al., 2023). The high school level is usually the first time an athlete has participated in a sport housed in an ‘athletic department,’ potentially leading to them forming perceptions of leadership skills (positive or negative) with those who hold the athletic director position. These perceptions may carry on with them far past their high school athletic experience. With the low number of women high school athletic directors (around 15%), perceptions regarding sport leadership usually leave men being more frequently associated with these higher-level leadership positions (Burden et al., 2010).

Even with the lack of women holding leadership positions, the women who do attain such roles add significant value and diversity to the decision-making process, subsequently improving organizational culture (Burton & Leberman, 2017a). The representation of women in leadership positions may even additionally improve the monetary value of an organization (Hyder, 2021). As such, gender representation matters in sport leadership positions (Evans & Pfister, 2021). On top of the benefits to
organizational culture, women sport leaders are pivotal in the growth and development of women in the sport field, as they represent positive role models and mentors. Past studies have even shown the increased visibility for women in leadership positions may mitigate negative stereotypes and evaluations of women as appropriate sport leaders, beliefs and perceptions about which develop at a young age (Burden et al., 2010; Mullen & Tuten, 2004).

**Summary**

Overall, the low number of women holding interscholastic athletic director positions is problematic due to the levels of control and power in decision-making that athletic directors have at both the state and individual high school level. However, studies investigating interscholastic sport are few, especially when investigating the athletic director role and gender representation (Forsyth et al., 2020; Whisenant et al., 2015). Within the sport management literature, the predominant focus of research on women holding leadership roles has been conducted at the intercollegiate athletics level (Hancock & Hums, 2016; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Massengale & Lough, 2010; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Taylor & Wells, 2017). Thus, the following sections will outline the experiences of women in leadership roles in intercollegiate athletics, however, to address the importance of this current study and the difference between intercollegiate and interscholastic athletics, the next section will cover the differences between those structures.

**Comparing Interscholastic Athletics and Intercollegiate Athletics**

Overall, the differences between interscholastic athletics and intercollegiate athletics are quite glaring. To address the added value of this research, a brief overview
of the athletic director’s role and duties at the interscholastic and intercollegiate space is warranted. While the experiences of women sport leaders across all sport structures may overlap, the current literature does not demonstrate a significant research base discussing the experiences of female interscholastic athletic directors. Therefore, understanding the differences amongst the varying roles of leadership and the scope of the athletic director role is needed.

The department and support staff size between interscholastic and intercollegiate athletic departments represents a stark difference. For example, one larger academic institution participating in the Atlantic Coast Conference, the University of Louisville employees 341 individuals in their athletic department (Louisville Athletics, n.d.a.). Therefore, the responsibilities and role description for an intercollegiate athletic director at a place with so many constituents are grounded at strategic and visionary levels, usually involving conversations involving high level budgets, strategic planning, and fundraising opportunities for the department. While the intercollegiate athletic director holds immense responsibility overseeing large athletic departments, they are also afforded structures that allow for delegating the various job duties and responsibilities associated with running a successful program. In comparison, most interscholastic athletic departments have only one full-time employee (athletic director). Interscholastic athletic directors’ responsibilities range from budgeting, scheduling, marketing, hiring, team/coach management, and equipment and facility management/oversight,

A recent trend over the past few years has been an introduction of an assistant athletic director, but often times this individual also holds secondary teaching or coaching duties.
demonstrating a more hands on approach due to lack of organizational support (Blackburn, 2013; Lee, 2021).

Interscholastic athletic directors must also handle relationships with parents and fans who have become increasingly involved within the structure over the last twenty years. Interscholastic athletic directors must engage in discussions with parents regarding sport participation, disagreements with coaching decisions, and overall athletic experiences. Fowler et al. (2017) even suggested engagement from parents has become one of the most important aspects of the interscholastic athletic director position, as parents hold substantial power in the local community and subsequently the local school district. These athletic directors also must handle fans, who have become increasingly more vocal and disruptive in the post-Covid-19 era (Niehoff, 2020b). In comparison, intercollegiate athletic directors hardly interact with parents. While they might deal with fans, they are often not in-charge of discipling or ‘monitoring’ the crowd during sporting events.

Summary

Overall, this suggests there are marked differences in the experiences of athletic directors at both the interscholastic and intercollegiate levels. As such, the experiences of men and women attaining and performing these roles will likely differ drastically. At the current moment, the literature surrounding experiences of women in sport leadership roles at the intercollegiate level has been extensive (see below), however, this same wealth of knowledge does not exist at the interscholastic space. In comparing the two sport structures, the vast differences suggest that while commonalities may exist, the
experiences of women holding leadership roles at the interscholastic and intercollegiate level may also differ.

**Women in Athletic Leadership**

Similar to the disproportionate number of women leaders at the interscholastic level, women are equally under-represented at all levels of sport, including youth sport (Aspen Institute, 2019; Flanagan, 2017), intercollegiate athletics (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Lapchick, 2019a), professional sport (Lapchick, 2019b; WSF, 2016), and international sport (Robinson & Taylor, 2020). For example, the Aspen Institute (2019) found only 27% of youth sport coaches were female (Aspen Institute, 2019). Similarly, in professional sport, women lack representation in leadership positions amongst all major US sport leagues (NBA, MLB, NFL, NHL, & MLS; RGRC, 2019b; WSF, 2016) and in the two largest women’s professional leagues in the US (WNBA and NWSL), women only hold around 50% of the coaching positions (Rodriquez, 2021; WNBA, n.d.a.). At the intercollegiate level (NCAA), women only represent 21% of athletic directors and 24% of head coaches (men’s and women’s teams) across all three divisions (Lapchick, 2019a). Thus, Walker and Sartore-Baldwin (2013) infer the lack of women in leadership roles creates a culture of hypermasculinity\(^4\), where male traits (self-assertion, independence) are deemed as the most optimal for sport leadership positions. Since sport leadership has historically been a male dominated space, the perceptions associated with male traits have become normative with positions of power. This phenomenon is sometimes described as the ‘gendering’ of the sport workplace and leadership positions.

\(^4\) Mosher and Tomkins (1988) describe hypermasculinity as the exaggerating of stereotypical male traits such as risk taking, physical strength, aggression, assertiveness, often times, hypermasculinity behaviors are celebrated and encouraged in male dominated fields.
The gendering of leadership negatively impacts women in attaining and performing leadership roles, as they face significant role conflict based on pre-determined stereotypes surrounding these positions (Evans & Pfister, 2021).

The lack of women holding leadership positions also becomes troublesome for the growth of the next generation of women leaders. Having female role models and mentoring relationships (same gender) has been shown to improve experiences of women in attaining leadership roles (Bower, 2008; Lough, 2001; Hancock et al., 2018). When women are equally represented in leadership positions, it diversifies the pool of potential role models, consequently challenging gender stereotype perceptions that exist in sport leadership (Itoh, 2014; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). Furthermore, Massengale and Lough (2010) argue having positive same-gender role models can allow individuals to see themselves in leadership positions. Having positive role models can also increase one’s confidence to attain positions similar to their ‘role models,’ demonstrating the importance of visibility for women in these leadership roles.

Mentoring relationships can also promote women in sport leadership positions through heightened job attainment, career progression, and satisfaction in their career experiences (Bower, 2008; 2011). Mentoring relationships for women in intercollegiate athletics have shown to improve retention, productivity, and career success (O’Neill & Smith, 2019). Additionally, when women experience mentoring from other women (same-gender mentoring), they highlight the invaluable positive experiences of those relationships (Lough, 2001; Mercogliano, 2019; Murray et al., 2018). However, the current low number of women holding sport leadership roles may lead to struggles for women to identify and attain important same-gender role models and mentoring.
relationships (Hancock et al., 2018; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). While cross-gender role models and mentoring exist, these relationships occur much less frequently than same-gender role modeling and mentoring relationships (Bruening et al., 2016).

The lack of female role models in intercollegiate sport leadership acts as a central barrier in career attainment and mobility for females (Taylor & Hardin, 2016). It may also create ‘self-limiting behavior’ for females seeking sport leadership positions (Sartore, 2006). The term ‘self-limiting behavior’ implies individuals believe they lack experience for certain positions. In sport, this behavior has been found to be commonplace for women seeking leadership roles, as these roles have historically been filled by men (Madsen & McGarry, 2017; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). Therefore, women may unknowingly practice self-limiting behaviors by not applying for open positions they are qualified for, as their personal perceptions may challenge their own leadership capabilities (Bower & Hums, 2013; Kamphoff & Gill, 2008; Madsen & McGarry, 2017; Sartore, 2006). To potentially combat self-limiting behaviors, Henderson et al. (2011) suggests women who do attain leadership roles are oftentimes overqualified for these positions, creating an interesting paradigm where individuals’ perceptions lead to a belief of an arbitrarily high standard for women.

This high-standard perception may create a potential double standard of competence (see Foschi, 2000), suggesting when women do attain high level leadership roles (i.e., athletic director), they must have considerable past success, making them highly qualified (or over-qualified) in attaining those roles (Cabrera et al., 2009; Henderson et al., 2011). This theory also proposes that males are often more confident in applying and attaining leadership roles, based on the fact they have historically seen
themselves in sport leadership positions. Furthermore, males often hold larger networks which help them ascend to leadership level positions faster than their female counterparts. However, this may also suggest men are ascending to leadership positions with less experience and expertise than women based on the idea of a double standard of competence. One of the keys to understanding the gendering of leadership positions is to outline the past experiences of leaders and their career pathways. Past results indicate significant differences emerging based on gender and career pathways (Hardin et al., 2013; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019).

**Career Pathways**

For women in sport, career progression acts as a key element in attaining higher-level leadership positions. While all individuals attaining leadership roles hold unique experiences (not a one-size fits all approach), researchers have suggested similarities do exist for those attaining sport leadership roles. Within the intercollegiate athletics sport structure, many studies have investigated past experiences of women with varying results indicating multiple pathways into leadership positions (Grappendorf et al., 2004; Hancock et al., 2018; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Heard, 2021; Kirkpatrick, 2018; Lumpkin et al., 2015; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Veazy, 2011). The first, and arguably most important pathway into sport leadership for women is competing in a college sport. For example, in a study of female college athletic directors, Taylor and Hardin (2016) found nine of ten participants were former college athletes, while Heard (2021) found 11 of 13 female athletic directors in their study were former college athletes. This was further confirmed by Bower and Hums (2013) who found around 73% of Division I women intercollegiate athletic directors competed in college athletics, in comparison to just 15%
of male athletic directors. This suggests women may need to hold high levels of sporting participation experience and success to further prove they are capable of handling leadership positions.

The next common career progression for women athletic directors starts with them attaining head coaching responsibilities, and subsequently moving into athletic administration roles further down the road (Fitzgerald et al., 1994; Grappendorf et al., 2004; Lumpkin et al., 2015; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). When women have experience in both coaching and administration roles, they hold a breadth of knowledge on multiple levels of an athletic department, making them viable candidates for the athletic director position (Grappendorf et al., 2004). For example, Taylor and Hardin (2016) found nine of ten current female Division I athletic directors in their study had college coaching experience before switching over to the administrative side of college athletics. The participants suggested their past coaching experience allowed them to further connect with their head coaches, as their current head coaches felt the women athletic directors could understand their struggles.

The career pathway for women entering athletic director positions from coaching positions may also differ drastically from male athletic directors. In 2015, 63% of Division I female athletic directors had coaching experience in comparison to just 13% of male athletic directors (Lumpkin et al., 2015). The Lumpkin et al. (2015) study also suggested women were more likely to be hired for a position at an institution they held an academic degree from, suggesting that women may need prior experience or connections at an institution to be selected as an athletic director. In basic terms, this finding suggests
university leadership are more willing to take a chance on hiring an outside male athletic
director candidate than they are a female athletic director candidate.

The educational level of athletic directors has also been a point of study. For
athletic directors at both Division I and II institutions, few differences emerged in their
educational achievement. At the Division III level, however, women were found to hold
higher degrees than men, using this as a springboard into their athletic director positions
(Lumpkin et al., 2015). This indicates that in Division III athletic departments women
must prove themselves capable of handling duties of the athletic director through
educational achievement, which is an interesting finding due the largest percentage of
female NCAA athletic directors work the Division III level (30%; Lapchick, 2019a).

The next career pathway highlighted in the literature found that women are
attaining athletic department positions upon completion of their degree, without any
coaching experience. This indicates an interesting shift in the next generation of the
female leadership demographic, as they may possess less coaching experience than the
prior generation (Bower & Hums, 2013; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019). This may represent a
positive shift for women in sport leadership positions at the intercollegiate level, as the
predominant number of athletic directors do not possess coaching experience, and rather
have made a career of gaining knowledge by working in various departments within the
athletic department structure (Kirkpatrick, 2018; Veazy, 2011). The most notable
departments that assist people in attaining the athletic director position are in both finance
and fundraising (Tiell & Dixon, 2008; Wood et al., 2019). However, Hardin et al., 2013
contest that both the finance and fundraising departments represent male dominated
spaces, as females are more likely to hold positions in academic support and/or life skills,
based on current skills or interests of working directly with student-athletes (Hancock & Hums, 2016; Smith, 2017). Thus, attaining positions in academic support and/or life skills may actually impede career progression for women, as these positions have been shown to not correlate with athletic directors past experiences. This can be further explained as the differences in positions associated with communal and agentic traits (Kirkpatrick, 2018; Wood et al., 2019). Overall, the shift in career pathways for women in the intercollegiate level represents a positive outlook, however, many barriers still exist to leadership positions for women even in this new pathway, as women may need to prove themselves more in when they attain leadership roles at the intercollegiate level.

**Interscholastic Athletics**

While the literature surrounding career pathways and trajectories is extensive at the intercollegiate level, similar research has not been conducted for interscholastic athletic directors. As emphasized above, the responsibilities between interscholastic and intercollegiate structures differ drastically, therefore, highlighting that research on career pathways of interscholastic athletic directors is needed.

While those attaining the interscholastic athletic director position may do so for varying personal reasons, the majority enter the profession based on their enjoyment of working with and having an impact on young athletes (Conant, 2017; Mather, 2007). Based on their past experiences, this makes sense, as most interscholastic athletic directors come from the ranks of either physical education teachers and/or sport coaches (Folwer et al., 2017; Schneider & Stier, 2001; Steir & Schneider, 2000). While these two pathways (coaching and teaching) are mutually exclusive of each other, they do have some overlap. For example, Ray (2010) found of their eight interscholastic athletic
directors interviewed (4 male, 4 female), all had both physical education and coaching experience prior to attaining the athletic director position.

Fletcher (2019) highlighted similar overlap between coaching and physical education teaching experience in their sample of female interscholastic athletic directors. Twelve of 13 participants were former physical education teachers (later in career), and all were former high school head coaches. Interestingly, of the 13 participants, only two continued to coach after accepting their athletic director role. Similarly, Levensailor (2018) found only three of the 15 interscholastic female athletic directors in their study also held coaching responsibilities. This is in opposition to the claim made by Whisenant and Pederson (2004) who found 88% of athletic directors held collateral coaching positions. One potential reason for this disconnect could be the sample population of these studies. Whereas Whisenant and Pederson’s (2004) subjects were predominantly male athletic directors, Fletcher (2019) and Levensailor (2018) both examined exclusively female athletic directors. This was further outlined by Levensailor (2018), who determined female athletic director candidates were asked to give up their coaching positions (two-sport coach) if selected for the athletic director role, whereas male candidates for the same position was not asked to give up his coaching responsibilities (three-sport coach).

Regarding educational levels of interscholastic athletic directors, the vast majority held bachelor’s degrees in either physical education or sport management, with most holding master’s degrees in a similar content area (Fowler et al., 2017; Mercogliano, 2019; Ray, 2010). For example, Fowler et al. (2017) reported 69 of 70 interscholastic athletic directors indicated being a certified teacher at the high school level. However, of
their sample, only 32% were physical education teachers. This suggests a potential shift may be starting to occur for future interscholastic athletic directors, whereas they represent teachers, but not specifically physical education teachers. Furthermore, some states may even require administrative training and education. For example, the state of New York requires a School District Leader (SDL) certificate to be qualified for the athletic director role (Mercogliano, 2019). This may be troublesome for women in attaining interscholastic athletic director positions. As Ray (2010) indicates, males hold stronger connections to high school administration positions (male dominated profession), potentially assisting males in attaining the athletic director role and negatively impacting women in attaining athletic director positions in states with such requirements.

Another key component of career trajectory in sport leadership positions is past sport participation experiences. Ray (2010) found all female athletic director participants in their study competed in some level of college sport (usually high levels), whereas only a few of the male athletic directors competed in college sport. This was further confirmed by Fowler et al. (2017) whose results indicated only 13.5% of the male interscholastic athletic directors had college sport participation experience. Comparing this to the intercollegiate level, Bower and Hums (2013) found 76% of their population of women athletic administrators competed in college athletics, with all of them sharing this experience was a positive influence on their career path. This may suggest women have to be former successful athletes to ‘prove themselves’ capable of handling the role and gain an opportunity to attain the athletic director position (Ray, 2010). While differences exist between males and females in their career pathways within the interscholastic sport
structure, one potential reason for this difference are the barriers that exist in the attaining and performing of sport leadership positions for women.

**Barriers**

The barriers existing for women in sport leadership have been well documented and researched over the years, especially in the intercollegiate athletic space (Burton & Leberman 2017a; Buzuvis, 2015; Evans & Pfister, 2021; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019). However, Hancock and Hums (2016) suggest, barriers at one institution can act as support mechanisms at another, indicating the need to understand the lived experiences of women leaders individually, especially in different organizational sport structures. The barriers that exist in the sport industry help preserve the ‘status quo,’ where males hold the majority of leadership positions (Cunningham & Sagas, 2008). While many barriers exist in sport and have long been explored in sport management literature, some of the more commonly identified barriers for women in sport are gender stereotypes (Aicher & Sagas, 2010; Burton & Leberman, 2017a; Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008), sexism (Aicher & Sagas, 2010; Cunningham, 2008; Fink, 2016; Siegele et al., 2020), work-family conflict (Bower et al., 2015; Dixon & Bruening, 2005, 2007; Machida-Kosuga et al., 2016), and disproportionate networks (Bower & Hums, 2013; Katz et al., 2018; Rhode & Walker, 2008; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013; Whisenant et al., 2010).

**Gender Stereotypes**

In sport, women face high levels of gender stereotyping. These stereotypes have historically seeped into sport from external male dominated fields, such as business, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), and/or politics, demonstrating sport does not operate in a vacuum and is highly susceptible to societal
norms, perceptions, and biases (Burton & Leberman, 2017a; Byers, 2016; Coakley, 2014). These external gender stereotypes, along with the large quantity of males holding leadership positions, permits sport to become a highly gendered institution (Burton, 2015; Burton & Leberman, 2017a). As such, perceptions of masculine traits are often identified exclusively with sport leadership positions, leaving women to face significant gender-role conflicts (Cunningham and Sagas, 2008). Thus, women are often forced to conform to the identified ‘most ideal’ masculine traits associated with leadership roles. When women do choose to conform, they often then receive negative feedback and evaluations as they are seen as breaking pre-conceived stereotypes of how women should act in leadership roles. This leads to significant role conflict and questioning of leadership competency (Aicher & Sagas, 2010; Brescoll et al., 2010; Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013).

One such study outlining gender stereotype inconsistencies was conducted by Knoppers and Anthonissen (2008) who investigated perceptions of traits (masculine and feminine) associated with leadership roles in a sport organization at varying levels (entry, middle, and high-level). The results indicated that both the entry and middle-level leadership positions aligned with feminine traits (relation skills and/or displays of emotion), suggesting women represented better fits for entry and middle-level roles. Another study by Aicher and Sagas (2010) investigating intercollegiate coaching positions indicated feminine characteristics held little correlation with head coaching positions, and masculine characteristics and traits positively aligned to the head coaching role. Thus, stereotypes may lead to differentiating experiences and evaluations between male and female sport leaders, with males being perceived to hold more value in
leadership positions. At the interscholastic level, Moore et al. (2005) found similar results, where women were challenged in their leadership decision-making. The findings suggested women interscholastic athletic directors faced significant pushback in their roles. They were seen as unequal to past male athletic directors and received significant pushback from male coaches and community members who refused to accept female authority (Moore et al., 2005). When women face this significant pushback in their leadership capabilities, discrimination occurs. One commonly identified area of discrimination in the sport management research is sexism (Fink, 2016).

Sexism. A component of discrimination and a byproduct of gender stereotypes, sexism acts as a central barrier for women in sport leadership positions (Fink, 2016). The definition of sexism states, “prejudice or discrimination based on sex... and behavior, conditions, or attitudes that foster stereotypes of social roles based on sex” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.a., para. 1). Based on this definition, the experience of sexism may take multiple forms. The focus in the context of this study grounds itself in the experiences, perceptions, and expectations associated with gender roles in sport (Fink, 2016).

Amongst the exploration of sexism in sport, the use of ambivalent sexism has long been considered a viable framework to better understand experiences (Fink, 2016; Schrodter et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2018a; Taylor et al., 2018b; Whisenant et al., 2015). The framework of ambivalent sexism centers itself on two types of sexism experiences - benevolent and hostile sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996). The central argument with ambivalent sexism is that sexism is a multidimensional issue. For example, benevolent sexism exists as more subtle experiences and can be ingrained in everyday norms. As such, benevolent sexism often goes unnoticed and uncontested in organizational
structures. Women may also face hostile sexism, where they experience outward and aggressive discrimination (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Taylor et al., 2018a).

Benevolent sexism is often associated with institutionalized practices within sport organizations (Cunningham, 2008). When sexism becomes ingrained in sport leadership positions, societal perceptions celebrate and reward masculine traits within organizational culture and leadership roles, greatly impacting the experiences of women (Aicher & Sagas, 2010; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Taylor & Wells, 2017). According to Fink (2016), sexism in sport often goes uncontested and may occur subtly or ambiguously, as sexism embeds itself in organizational policies, procedures, and systems. Some forms of benevolent sexism that can embed in sport organizational culture include microaggressions, selective incivility, stereotypical views, and implicit bias (Fink, 2016). In their investigation of potential microaggression in sport, Kaskan and Ho (2014) suggest three themes are commonplace - inferiority, objectification, and restrictive gender roles.

A more recent example of benevolent sexism was found in a study by Williams et al. (2021), where female sport management students reported high levels of gender microaggressions, while also expressing feeling excluded and restricted in their academic programming due to their gender. Another example of benevolent sexism with students was found by Morris et al. (2019), who reported female undergraduate students often undertook larger workloads than male group partners. Subsequently, this led to experiences of feeling less equal treatment in their group based on their gender, as they were saddled with the perceptions that they will just do the group’s work. These negative perceptions even occur with females themselves as they have grown up in a system that
portrays males at the most optimal leaders. For example, Siegele et al. (2020) reported intercollegiate female swim coaches received negative feedback based on perceptions regarding their capabilities, specifically based on gender, from their female swimmers. More simply, perceptions created at a younger age can dictate an individual’s perceptions later in life regarding leadership capabilities. This gives credence to understanding the importance of women entering youth and interscholastic sport coaching positions and the need to better understand interscholastic athletic directors’ experiences.

While benevolent sexism becomes hard to identify once it is entrenched in organizational culture for generations, women also face hostile sexism, described as outward discrimination. Hostile sexism indicates an outward expression of negative attitudes toward individuals who break traditional gender norm stereotypes (Morrow et al., 1994). For women, the experience of hostile sexism leads to lower job satisfaction and higher turnover rates (Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2006; Morrow et al., 1994; Taylor et al., 2018a). In a recent study by Hindman and Walker (2020), all 21 women sport professionals interviewed expressed at least one instance of hostile sexism in their experiences in the sport industry. Schrodter et al. (2021) even found both male and female athletes demonstrate hostile sexism. For example, while it was more common for male athletes to portray hostile sexism to “maximize one’s utility by exploiting others” (Schrodter et al., 2021, p.5), female athletes occasionally expressed hostile sexism to reaffirm their superiority over a situation. Thus, sexism may not actually be subtle in sport organizations; rather, hostile sexism can become common and normalized within organizational cultures (Taylor et al., 2018a). Taylor et al. (2018b) further suggests, hostile sexism has even led to long-term impacts, as sport management faculty
experiences of hostile sexism reached such traumatic levels they had to seek medication, hospitalization, or therapy. The continual experience of both benevolent and hostile sexism for women in male-dominated positions will potentially lead them to exit or not seek sport leadership positions, furthering the gender gap in leadership positions (Cunningham, 2008; Fink et al., 2016; Hindman & Walker, 2020; Siegele et al., 2020).

**Interscholastic Athletics.** The research outlining the impacts of sexism in the sport management literature is less extensive in interscholastic sport. Most of the work in this space addresses benevolent sexism, with little inquiry into hostile sexism. Regarding experiences of benevolent sexism, past studies suggest varying perceptions of barriers to entry into interscholastic leadership positions between men and women (Moore et al., 2005; Welch, 2012). Welch (2012) discovered male interscholastic administrators believed organizational structures encouraged and/or promoted women into interscholastic athletic leadership, whereas women participants strongly disagreed with this statement. Further, participants differed when asked ‘Do you know of women qualified for position(s) in athletic administration but who do not apply for these same positions?’ Males selected strongly disagree, with females strongly confirmed. Lastly, the male participants showed no perceived gender discrimination for women, while the women participants indicated gender discrimination existed for women. These varying perceptions across gender of interscholastic athletic directors suggest sexism is also institutionally imbedded at the interscholastic sport level.

Moore et al. (2005) also suggest benevolent sexism may exist for female interscholastic athletic directors. When athletic directors were asked to outline barriers to their position, the women in the study highlighted feeling questioned in their authority
based on gender, not being treated equally with males, needing to convince the community of authority, and being overlooked by less experienced males. In a similar study, Whisenant et al. (2015) investigated the perceptions of male head coaches, with their findings suggesting males rated female athletic directors less favorably in their distributive justice, which can also be described as perceived fairness of decision-making. In simpler terms, the male head coaches disagreed with the decision-making outcomes of female athletic directors at a much higher rate than with male athletic directors. In similar findings, Levensailor (2018) found female interscholastic athletic directors received significant backlash from male coaches and male students, reporting multiple experiences of gender discrimination based on perceptions of their level of competency to handle decision-making responsibilities in their interscholastic athletic department. Nonetheless, Pedersen and Whisenant (2005) found female interscholastic athletic directors attained higher success rates than their male counterparts, with females representing a strong fit for the interscholastic athletic director role and potentially doing more with less when they attain the position. While these studies outlined perceptions and experiences of female interscholastic athletic directors, there is a lack of qualitative inquiry into the experiences of women and sexism at the interscholastic athletics level.

**Work-Family Conflict**

Work-family conflict represents another significant barrier faced by women in sport leadership positions. As Burton and Leberman (2017b) noted, the current sport culture places high value on success, with little concern for the long hours and unique time commitment needed to achieve it (Darvin, 2020). Furthermore, the salary range in sport does not correlate with the long hours worked (Fowler-Harris et al., 2015). Dixon
and Bruening (2005, 2007) suggested that in sport, work-family conflict impacts women more than men, based on stereotypical traditional family roles for women (primary caregiver duties). Further, men are often supported by their significant other at a higher rate when performing sport leadership positions (Burton & Leberman, 2017a; Dixon & Bruening, 2005). While traditional family roles have become blurred, women still face identity-crisis decisions when balancing work and family/life commitments, leading to significant role conflict (Bower et al., 2015; Machida-Kosuga et al., 2016). This role conflict may lead to stress, exhaustion, and guilt, while also straining relationships with children, significant others, family, and/or friends (Bruening & Dixon, 2007; Burton & Leberman, 2017a; Dixon & Bruening, 2005, 2007; Taylor & Wells, 2017). Burton and Leberman (2017a) state, “only those who have partners who are able to take on the majority of domestic and family responsibilities, or those who are not in relationships, are able or perhaps willing to make such significant personal/family trade-offs to meet work requirements” (p. 149). However, Darvin (2020) implies even women without a nuclear family (i.e. spouse and children) have expressed experiences with work-life conflicts, as the significant time commitment in sport created less time with non-nuclear family (i.e. parents and friends).

Women experiencing work-family conflict may be deterred from attaining higher level leadership roles also indicate the likelihood of leaving the profession all together (Darvin, 2020; Lumpkin et al., 2013; Machida-Kosuga et al., 2016; Pastore, 1991; Taylor & Wells, 2017). For example, Kamphoff (2010) found former women sport leaders cited both the long working hours and work-family conflict as the main reasons for leaving the profession. Similarly, coaches indicated ‘takes too much time away from family’ as the
number one reason for leaving the field (Lumpkin et al., 2013). According to Lumpkin et al. (2013), when few female role models handling the work-family conflict are visible, outside perceptions may conclude leadership positions do not foster positive work-family balance. Overall, work-family conflict acts as a significant barrier for women attaining and performing leadership positions within the sport industry (Dixon & Bruening, 2005, 2007; Darvin, 2020; Taylor & Wells, 2017).

**Interscholastic Athletics.** Similar to the intercollegiate athletics literature, Martin (1999a) suggests that the low number of women interscholastic athletic directors was partially based on the work-life balance stress associated with the role. At the interscholastic level, athletic directors are asked to work extremely long hours during the school year, leaving them in conflict with handling time commitments to family and work (Fletcher, 2019). One of the struggles in work-family conflict that existed for women athletic directors was attending their own children’s extra-curricular activities (Levensailor, 2018). With the heavy time commitment associated with an interscholastic athletic director position, conflicting time commitments were commonplace, weighing on the women handling athletic director roles (Levensailor, 2018). Fletcher (2019) suggested one tactic athletic directors used to negotiate the work-family conflict was to integrate their family into their job by having them attend sporting events. Another study investigating work-family conflict for women in interscholastic sport was conducted by Zdroik and Veliz (2021) who found interscholastic coaches struggled with handling the work-family conflict, especially when their coaching appointment was a part-time position. As Lumpkin et al. (2013) indicated, young female head coaches exit the field much earlier than their male counterparts. This may imply women head coaches in
interscholastic sport may leave due to work-family conflict, producing a smaller pool of potential women candidates to ascend from the head coaching ranks into the athletic director position. As highlighted, this career pathway is common for current interscholastic athletic directors and acts as one potential reason for the shortage of female representation in interscholastic sport. However, as such, few studies have outlined the impact of work-family conflict for women handling the interscholastic athletic director position.

**Disproportionate Networks**

Equal access to social and professional networks signifies another key barrier for women in leadership positions (Lovett & Lowry, 1994; Rhode & Walker, 2008). Historically, males have larger social and professional networks, better known as the ‘old boys’ club’ (Bower et al., 2015; Green et al., 1999; Nelsen, 2017; Rhode & Walker, 2008). The old boys’ club highlights an informal structured network of males demonstrating power in male dominated fields (Nelson, 2017). The function of the old boys’ network emphasizes an exclusive in-group for men, leaving women at a disadvantage due to inadequate connections (Rhode & Walker, 2008). This privileged network of men also extends power to them over the hiring process for leadership positions, especially in male dominated fields, i.e., sport leadership (Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). According to Green et al. (1999) this creates what she describes as ‘gendered networks,’ where women create their own oriented network where information about positions is shared. On the other hand, men hold networks that not only share information but also hold control and access to open positions, creating substantial inequalities in the selection and hiring process for those positions. Thus, the old boys’
club within sport can drastically impact the ability for women to attain and subsequently advance into leadership positions (Bower & Hums, 2013; Hindman & Walker, 2020). Rhode and Walker (2008) indicated the high number of males in key hiring decision-making positions (athletic director, school president, board of directors) perpetuated the hiring of male coaches, as search committees were more likely to hire someone familiar to them or similar to them, (referred to as homologous reproduction), furthering the disproportionate networks amongst sport leadership.

The literature supporting the ole boys’ club and various social network theories have historically been difficult to empirically measure and confirm (Katz et al., 2018). To address this, Katz et al. (2018) were the first to quantitatively investigate the social networks in sport by formulating the affiliation networks of both Senior Woman Administrator (SWA; 100% women) and athletic director (91% male). The results indicated large disparities in cohesion between the men and women and their respective networks, as the women’s networks (SWAs) held far less connections and much greater fragmented data across connections. The male network (ADs) held more extensive connections and more inter-connected data across their connections. This disconnect may be due to women being more likely to be internal hires who worked their way up the ranks of their institution, rather than moving up the ladder across multiple universities (Lumpkin et al., 2015). These results may also give credence to the formation of what is called the ‘old girls’ club,’ suggesting women holding stronger connections with other females (Bower et al., 2013; Katz et al., 2018; Lovett & Lowry, 1994; Shaw, 2006). However, this ‘old girls’ club’ did not hold the same substantial power influence in career pathways and leadership hiring process as the old boys’ club (Shaw, 2006; Katz et al.,
2018). Thus, across ‘gendered’ networks research suggests differentiate power exists between the identified old boys’ and old girls’ clubs which can result in discriminatory hiring practices for women candidates within intercollegiate athletics (Hoffman, 2010; Rhode & Walker, 2008).

**Interscholastic Athletics.** While the intercollegiate literature outlines clear divides between network opportunities based on gender, similar research has not been established in the interscholastic sport space. However, a few studies have outlined negative consequences of the old boys’ club. Fletcher (2019) gives mentions to the old boys’ network acting as a hinderance in the experiences of women athletic directors. Another study by Moore et al. (2005) also outlined the old boys’ club hindering women athletic directors from connecting and growing their networks with other athletic director colleagues. As such, female interscholastic athletic directors noted the old boys’ club as a potential significant barrier to the further development of future women interscholastic sport leaders, as they perceived male athletic directors were more likely to hire male head coaches. In other words, inequality of access to social and professional networks can lead to hiring similar others, often described as homologous reproduction (Stangl & Kane, 1991).

**Homologous Reproduction.** The concept of homologous reproduction describes those in power maintaining their influence in an organization by hiring and promoting individuals with similar characteristics to themselves into power positions (Kanter, 1977). In other words, males tend to hire more males, whereas females tend to hire more females (Darvin & Sagas, 2017). Initially conceptualized in the business sector (Kanter, 1977), homologous reproduction has been well documented in the sport setting across both
intercollegiate and interscholastic sport (Darvin & Lubke, 2021; Whisenant, 2008; Whisenant et al., 2010).

The introduction of studies investigating homologous reproduction in sport began with studies completed in Ohio (Stangl & Kane, 1991) and Texas (Lovett & Lowry, 1994) regarding interscholastic athletic directors and head coaches at their high schools. Building from these studies, the research surrounding homologous reproduction has become well developed in the intercollegiate sport space (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Darvin & Lubke, 2021; Darvin & Sagas, 2017; Kilty, 2006; Regan & Cunningham, 2013; Stahura & Greenwood, 2001). For example, Stahura and Greenwood (2001) established how colleges with male athletic directors held fewer female head coaches on staff in comparison to those with female athletic directors. Similarly, Kilty (2006) discovered the gender of the athletic director was related to the number of female head coaches at an institution. Acosta and Carpenter (2014) further confirmed homologous reproduction across all NCAA divisions, where results indicated institutions with female athletic directors (2014: 22.3%) employed higher percentages of women head coaches.

Furthermore, Darvin and Sagas (2017), uncovered male coaches hire male assistants at a higher rate than female assistants and vice versa for female sports.

A more recently study by Darvin and Lubke (2021) signified a potential shift in homologous reproduction at the intercollegiate level, as male head coaches were found to be hiring more female assistant coaches for female sport teams. While an extremely positive result, some debate surrounds these findings. For example, Madsen and McGarry (2017) found participants more highly identified the assistant coach role to align with feminine traits, suggesting hiring more female assistant coaches reinforces gender
stereotypes for the position. On the other hand, this may suggest an interesting double standard, as hiring more women into assistant coaching roles may also increase the pool of potential future head coaches. However, based on the current number of women head coaches, this positive shift in hiring practices at the assistant coach level has not changed the percentages of women head coaches amongst all divisions, with males still holding a large portion of positions in women’s sport (Darvin & Lubke, 2021). These results suggest a ‘leaky pipeline’ (Hancock & Hums, 2016) for women in their jump from assistant coach to head coach. While troublesome, it is important to remember the application of homologous reproduction is a byproduct of women’s unstable or disconnected sport networks. With more women being hired into assistant coaching positions, a shift in power may be occurring regarding intercollegiate women’s sport networks. This shift may take some time to change the actual representation of more women in leadership roles, but it demonstrates homologous reproduction and discriminatory hiring practices can be overcome.

**Interscholastic Sport.** According to Whisenant et al. (2010), homologous reproduction may present one of the most important ethical dilemmas in interscholastic sport. Stangl and Kane (1991) were some of the first researchers to report homologous reproduction in the interscholastic sport space. In the state of Ohio, men and women were hired at greater rates by similarly gendered administrators, leading to gendered hiring pattern amongst interscholastic sport (Stangl & Kane, 1991). Similar results were found in Texas interscholastic sport, where gender reproduction in hiring practices was confirmed regardless of leadership gender (Lovett and Lowry, 1994).
A more recent study by Whisenant (2008) reported the gender of the interscholastic athletic director influenced the gender of head coaches they hired, with both girls’ basketball and softball being the most significantly affected by the gender of athletic director. However, Mullane and Whisenant (2007) found no evidence of homologous reproduction amongst athletic directors and head coaches hired in Florida. The sample in their study included a high volume of male interscholastic athletic directors (90%), potentially skewing the data (Mullane & Whisenant, 2007). In the absence of hiring guidelines, individuals will hire based on similarity to themselves, centered on the ease and comfort level with those individuals (Stangl & Kane, 1991). This is extremely important when looking at interscholastic sport leadership pathways as outlined earlier. For example, women enter interscholastic athletic director positions from either the teaching side or the coaching side. If homologous reproduction occurs, there will likely be more males taking over for a former male athletic director, and vice versa for a female athletic director replacing a former female athletic director. However, as highlighted, women hold a small percentage of athletic director roles, which could be due to the hiring similarities that exist in interscholastic athletics.

**Summary**

While this section noted many barriers that exist for women in sport, this only represents a few of the many barriers women may face in attaining and performing leadership positions. These barriers may significantly impact women and lead to the continuance of the ‘status quo,’ where males dominate representation in leadership roles. Role congruity theory represents one theoretical framework used by researchers to examine and investigate barriers and stereotypes associated with leadership positions.
The following section gives an in-depth review of the literature using role congruity theory to investigate the status of women in sport leadership.

**Role Congruity Theory**

The original development of role congruity theory derived from social role theory (Eagly, 1987). Social role theory conceptually seeks to understand human behaviors in social groups; more specifically, how socially constructed social roles of individuals within groups affected behaviors. In theory, the construction of social roles amongst social groups is derived from gender stereotypes and perceptions, leading to varying group experiences across gender (Eagly et al., 2000; Kite et al., 1991). This suggests male and female group members portrayed different social behaviors and expressed personalities in social groups (Eagly, 1987). The pre-conditioned gender role norms for both males and females were conceptualized within two dimensions - communal and agentic (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Carli, 2007). The communal dimension, aligned with female roles and less associated with leadership (Abele, 2003), includes behaviors such as caring, nurturing, and understanding. The agentic dimension, associated with male roles, included quality leadership traits including self-assertion, independence, and control (Eagly, 1987). Thus, these pre-set gender roles greatly impact social group dynamics, leading to potential discrimination against women who are seeking group leadership, as they are perceived to be breaking pre-set norms. These norms are only further confirmed as women currently and historically lacked representation in dominant leadership positions in the division of labor (Eagly, 1987). The social role theory framework examines and predicts the differences in social behaviors and roles based on
gender within social groups, thus setting the groundwork for the development of role
congruity theory (Eagly et al., 2000; Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Role congruity theory extends social role theory to investigate circumstances
where pre-perceived stereotypes of women in social groups become disrupted,
specifically regarding leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). For example, women
disrupt social group norms when they ascend to leadership positions in historically male
dominated fields, as these fields have created societal norms and perceptions that males
hold the most identifiable and preferred traits for these roles (Kalin & Waldron, 2015).
Therefore, the perceptions surrounding agentic (male) traits become associated with
leadership positions, subsequently resulting in males being congruent with these roles,
whereas females are perceived as incongruent when they ascend to leadership positions.
For women, a position associated with communal (female) traits would be perceived to
align with congruent roles. Ferguson (2018) describes these gender role perception norms
as descriptive norms and prescriptive norms. Descriptive norms describe “shared beliefs
about what men and women actually do” (p. 410), whereas prescriptive norms describe
“what men and women actually do” (p. 410). As such, perceptions dictate the experiences
of those holding leadership roles, affording men and women varying levels of perceived
acceptance.

Further, women who ascend to leadership roles potentially break the gender
norms associated with leadership traits (communal v. agentic), resulting in pushback
against their performance in the position (Eagly & Chin, 2010; Koenig et al., 2011).
When women face perceptions of being incongruent with leadership roles, their
competency levels are often scrutinized at higher rates than men (Eagly, 2018). Eagly and
Chin (2010) noted that leadership stereotyping can even lead to women embracing the follower role and avoiding the group leader position all together. Role congruity theory relies on two foundational tenets - (a) women are perceived less favorably for leadership positions; and (b) women are evaluated less favorably when performing leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The stereotypical nature of these two tenets often leads to negative experiences for women in leadership, as role congruity suggests women face barriers at all points in their career when ascending to leadership roles (attaining and performing; Burton et al., 2011). Role congruity theory allows for a deeper examination of perceptions associated with gender role norms associated within leadership roles (Eagly & Chin, 2010). As such, role congruity theory has long been used to investigate perceptions and experiences of the male dominated sport leadership space (Burton et al., 2009; Tiell & Dixon, 2008). While the separate tenets of role congruity (attaining and performing leadership positions) have overlapping application in lived experiences, most studies investigate the tenets independently. Therefore, a review of each tenet is warranted. First, this paper investigates women attaining leadership position, and secondly, examines studies on women performing in a leadership position (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

**Attaining Leadership Positions**

The first tenet of role congruity theory investigates perceptions and experiences of women attaining leadership positions. Investigations in multiple fields have confirmed biases in women attaining leadership positions, including business (Dwivedi et al., 2018; Garcia-Retamero & Lopez-Zafr, 2006; Lee & James, 2007), higher education (Burton & Weiner, 2016; Diekman et al., 2010; Madden, 2011), and sport management (Burton et
al., 2009; Burton et al., 2016; Henderson et al., 2011; Walker et al., 2011). To better grasp the impact of role congruity on women attaining leadership across these fields, findings from all varying industries are explored here, as sport does not operate in a vacuum (Burton & Leberman, 2017a; Byers, 2016; Coakley, 2014).

Within the business sector, women represent only 6% of CEOs, and only 8% of profit-and-loss-roles (COO, Sales, Head of Division) for the top 3,000 companies in the United States (Fuhrmans, 2020). Thus, the business sector remains a male dominated leadership field, providing context to explore role congruity theory. One of the first studies to explore role congruity theory in the business sector was conducted by Lee and James (2007), who investigated shareholder responses to female CEO appointments. The analysis suggested negative perceptions from stakeholders to female appointments. The negative perceptions did fade when women were promoted from inside the organization, whereas shareholders were wary of women from outside the organization. A more recent study by Dwivedi et al. (2018), highlights similar discourse regarding appointments of women CEO candidates as they found internal hires experienced successful transitions based on familiarity with stakeholders and internal governance structures across the companies. However, this does suggest that negative perceptions of women still exist when the decision-makers (usually men) are not familiar with a candidate, suggesting the female applicants may not hold the traits associated with quality leadership, and suggesting women need to prove themselves to been seen as fit leaders.

Similar to the business field, higher education has historically been a male dominated space (Longman & Anderson, 2016; Reis & Grady, 2019; Whitford, 2020). While women now represent the majority of college graduates (bachelors: 56%, masters:
58%, doctoral: 53%) they still lag behind men in attaining leadership roles within higher education (Alcalde & Subramaniam, 2020; Perry, 2019). For example, women represent 42.5% of faculty members (all ranks combined), less than 40% of executive leadership roles, and only 30% of college presidents (Alcalde & Subramaniam, 2020; Colby & Fowler, 2020; Gardner, 2019). White (2003) describes the reasoning for a downward trend of women ascending to leadership positions in higher education is based on the value associated with male traits, leaving women to become perceived as incongruent for leadership roles. This is a troublesome as when women hold leadership positions, the decision-making process becomes more diverse, with the subsequent monetary value of an organization showing growth (Hyder, 2021).

In 2010, Diekman et al. investigated male and female undergraduate students in their perceptions to enter two fields – (a) the masculine stereotyped field of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM); or (b) the feminine stereotyped field of human resource management. The findings indicated women participants identified higher entrance desire for the human resource management position, as it aligned more closely to their communal goals, rather than their agentic goals. Diekman et al. suggests women may hold pre-conceived stereotypical notions of the STEM field, leading to them to neither attain nor aspire to positions in this industry. This demonstrates how social roles and perceptions may impact even the basic desire to enter certain industries, rather than just impacting leadership positions (Diekamn et al., 2010). Burton and Weiner (2016) further examined leadership positions within higher education through investigating a principal leadership program. They discovered that the principal leadership program was masculine driven, with heightened emphasis on leadership traits
aligning with masculine traits. This led the male participants to frame themselves as the ‘natural’ leaders, and further pushed the women participants in the program to position themselves as the ‘fighter.’ The female attendees in the program framed their experience in higher education as a grueling route to leadership, as they faced significant barriers. They were often overlooked for positions, which significantly discouraged them from pursuing their leadership ambitions (Burton & Weiner, 2016).

**Sport Leadership**

Based on the large discrepancies between gender representation in sport, role congruity theory has been used to investigate the attainment of sport leadership positions. As such, Burton et al. (2009) examined role congruity theory within college students’ opinions of characteristics aligning with an ideal athletic director. The participants indicated masculine managerial roles (allocating resources, managing conflicts, etc.) highly aligned with the athletic director position, leaving feminine managerial roles (planning, organizing, etc.) to align with the role, but only slightly. The high identification of masculine traits implies stereotypical gender role perceptions, as even the female participants indicated that their own skill sets were centered more upon feminine managerial roles, which do not align with the athletic director role.

Further, Burton et al. (2016) investigated perceptions of leadership qualities based on sport participation between male and female student-athletes. The female student-athletes in the study were observed to hold high leadership potential based on their sport participation. However, when it came to hiring a candidate, former male student-athletes were selected at a much higher rate. The author suggests being a student-athlete allowed the females to be perceived as holding high levels of agentic characteristics, breaking the
gender stereotypes for leadership positions and potentially leading to them being evaluated less favorably for the position. A similar study confirmed these findings, where female and male student-athletes with equal on-paper resumes received different evaluations when applying for an internship program, with males being perceived as better fits for the internship (Dwyer & Gillick, 2018). This leads to a double-bind for women seeking athletic leadership positions (Aicher & Samariniotis, 2011). For example, women seeking leadership roles must demonstrate agentic traits to show their ability to lead (based on perceptions), however, when they do engage in these behaviors, they are breaking the communal traits associated with women. Therefore, women conforming to pre-conditioned stereotypes of how they should act in a leadership role are seen as breaking norms set for women, leaving them being perceived as incongruent.

Another area of research used role congruity theory in the sport industry examining job descriptions (Burton & Hagan, 2009; Fabri, 2019; Miller, 2016; Whisenant, 2005). For example, Fabri (2019) established that job descriptions for intercollegiate athletic directors were gender-typed to portray masculine traits amongst sub-roles. These masculine traits included financial management and staffing. The women identified these roles as barriers to entrance into positions, as they had little experience in the application of these sub-roles. Similar findings emerged in interscholastic sport. Whisenant (2005) investigated Texas high school athletic director job descriptions, with 17% of listings including the requirement of head football coaching experience. At the time of this study, not a single women held a football head coaching position in Texas. Miller (2016) further confirmed this preference toward male candidates at the interscholastic level, where 73% of athletic administration job announcements in
Texas required experience as a coach for a boy’s sport, with 94% of those listing football, and 68% of these requiring experience as a head football coach. These studies highlight the gender norms associated with leadership positions in Texas, as football head coaching positions represent positions highly associated with masculine traits, further demonstrating how males hold power in the hiring process.

Additionally, Burton et al. (2011) employed role congruity theory to investigate college student perceptions toward the gender of athletic director candidates. Overall, the participants rated both male and female candidates similarly on their masculinity scale and potential success in the athletic director role. However, even though the candidates were rated equally across gender, the participants overwhelmingly preferred the male candidate for the athletic director role. The female candidates were seen to have ‘lack-of-fit,’ potentially indicating biases for leadership positions may be quite subtle and ambiguous (Burton et al., 2011).

Regarding coaching positions, Walker et al. (2011) similarly discovered men and women coaches were evaluated equally in competency and job-fit, yet males were selected at a much higher rate for head coaching positions. This suggests evaluations and perceptions of individual leaders themselves may equal out evenly based on gender, but pre-conditioned stereotypes will still afford men more opportunities than women in attaining leadership positions (Walker et al., 2011). Interestingly, Henderson et al. (2011) found when evaluating male and female athletic director candidates, the participants gave equal ratings to both candidates. This is one of the few studies contradicting role congruity theory where men and women were evaluated equally and selected for a role equally. More recently, Darvin (2020) argued a reason for this finding and suggested the
potential for a new application of role congruity theory in attaining leadership positions. For example, Darvin suggests women themselves negatively evaluate leadership positions not based on gender stereotypes but rather they express an unwillingness to adjust their personal morals in order to undertake sport leadership positions. This may suggest that leadership positions have become stereotyped as providing negative experiences for women, as the roles are associated with high stress, potentially suggesting the positive benefits that come with such positions may not outweigh the negative experiences.

Based on these past findings, role congruity theory has been shown to be a useful framework to guide the investigation into the perceptions of gender norms and stereotypes associated with attaining sport leadership roles. However, one glaring gap in the role congruity theory literature revolves around the perceptions and experiences of the women who attain these leadership positions in interscholastic sport. As such, this study used role congruity theory to further investigate the gender role norms, stereotypes, and perceptions associated with performing interscholastic leadership positions.

**Performing Leadership Roles**

The second tenet of role congruity theory states, even when women break through the preverbal ‘glass ceiling’ (Cotter et al., 2001) and attain leadership positions, they then face unfavorable evaluations, heavy scrutiny, and pushback (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Across multiple fields of study, role congruity theory has been utilized to investigate the evaluation and experiences of women performing incongruent gender typed leadership positions, including in business (Elsesser & Lever, 2011; Funk, 2019; Gupta et al., 2019; Hill et al., 2015; Hoyt & Burnette, 2013; Johnson et al., 2008), higher education (Cox,
2014; Dean, 2013; Dion et al., 2018; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2013; Knobloch-Westerwick & Glynn, 2013; Martin, 2016; Miller & Roksa, 2020; Rivera & Tielcsik, 2019; Wiedman, 2020), and sport management (Aicher & Samariniotis, 2011; Murdick & Lin, 2017; O’Connor et al., 2010; Tiell et al., 2012).

One of the first researchers to investigate the role congruity framework in the business setting were Johnson et al. (2008), who investigated gender trait differences for effective leadership in executive roles. The results indicated female leaders needed both strength and sensitivity to be perceived as effective, while male leaders were perceived to only need strength. Thus, women faced perceptions of double-standards in their leadership effectiveness, with the need to promote both agentic and communal behaviors, creating a challenging gender role conflict. In 2019, Funk investigated evaluations of leadership skills and competencies for public managers across masculine (economic development) and gender-neutral (children’s health) organizations. The findings indicated the female leaders faced negative perceptions in a masculine organization but were equally evaluated in more gender-neutral organizations. Furthermore, male participants evaluated women slightly more negatively across organizational type, which suggests the perceptions regarding gender roles and norms may be subjective to just males, which is a troublesome finding as males still hold significant power in the hiring process (Funk, 2019).

Another study investigating perceptions of women performing leadership positions investigated investor activism relative to a CEO appointment (Gupta et al., 2019). The results implied women CEOs were more likely to come under activist threat than men CEOs and also more likely to experience multiple activist threats at one time. In
the financial field this suggests outsider perceptions identify women as weak or incapable of handling the position, suggesting they represent ‘easy’ targets for hostile takeovers (Gupta et al., 2019). However, Hill et al. (2015) argued that while women may experience negative experiences in their first year (investor activism), if they can weather the ‘trial-by-fire’ year (first year), they gain respect and are seen as strong leaders who are highly invested in the success of an organization. This demonstrates that women CEOs must prove themselves capable of hanging with the men who dominate the financial sector. As highlighted earlier, this is a common experience for women who enter high level leadership roles, as outsiders (mostly men), perceive these women as not holding the specific traits associated with quality leadership. When women prove themselves worthy, however, they often gain the respect of both internal and external individuals.

In higher education, role congruity theory has also found gender differences amongst academic scholarly output. This is often referred to as the ‘Matilda effect,’ which was coined by Rossiter (1993) and references the lack of credibility given to female scientists with equal or more quality work compared to male colleagues. The ‘Matilda effect’ has been investigated and proven in various research fields. Wiedman (2020) analyzed perceived value (salary and citations) of Canadian accounting faculty. The results highlighted returns on research publications (comparison of research publications and respective salary) was lower for female faculty members in comparison to their male faculty colleagues. Interestingly, the statistical analysis revealed a relationship with female faculty’s school ranking and salary were significantly lower when they published in higher proportions with male colleagues. The authors argued this
may be attributed to women gaining significantly less credit when they publish research with men, while they receive equal credit in research production with other female colleagues. However, when males publish work with female colleagues, they receive no decrease in the credit they received. This led Wiedman (2019) to state, “women receive lower rewards for work when they collaborate with men because of role incongruity” (p. 13). This article also established a significant research double standard for females who faced greater challenges to be productive and received lower credit when they were.

In the communication field, Knobloch-Westerwick and Glynn (2013) found publications by male authors garnered more citations than work completed by female authors. Furthermore, male authors were less likely to cite female led research, while female scholars held no preference in their citations between male and female authors. The topics of research were also gender skewed, with stereotypical male topics receiving more citations. The authors argued productive female researchers break the female gender role in two ways – (a) holding a position in the field, and (b) completing high quality research. This leads to negative perceptions of female scholars, as 10% of the variance in citations could be explained by gender, which tremendously effects tenure, promotion, hiring decisions, and salary for women (Knobloch-Westerwick & Glynn, 2013). Similarly, Dion et al. (2018) investigated differences in gender and citations from political science, economics, and sociology. Women authors were less likely to be cited by male authors and mixed gender author teams, even when the field was heavily populated by female scholars (politics and gender). Dion et al. also investigated the impact of time on citations, since the social science field had a growing number of women graduating with PhDs in the field. However, they found senior women scholars
were not receiving comparable numbers of citations to male senior scholars; therefore, the lack of citations in social science by females must be explained by a lack of citation transparency across genders, with time not playing a role on impact (Dion et al., 2018).

Researchers have also investigated role congruity theory in teacher evaluations. Martin (2016) compared teacher evaluations across two different universities (Southern and Western region). First, the results indicated female professors taught smaller class sizes at both the Southern University (Female=34 and Male=51) and the Western University (Female=91 and Male=123). Secondly, when class sizes were small, teacher ratings were similar across gender of faculty, which aligns with communal traits, as smaller classrooms allow for the development of more connection. However, when the attendance numbers rose, to 100, 200, and 400, women faculty received negative ratings, with significant variance compared to male faculty. In the large classroom setting a lack of ‘connection’ may occur, negatively impacting female faculty. Another analysis of leadership positions in higher education was conducted by Cox (2014) who qualitatively investigated perceptions of high-level women leaders in higher education. The results indicated all women participants experienced prejudice in their lived experiences in higher education leadership. However, interestingly they accepted their choice to enter the field even knowing prejudice accompanies leadership roles in higher education for women. They also emphasized the perceived and reported judgement of their leadership ability, where they felt they were constantly being judged and treated differently than male leaders in the organization. This again illustrates how women must prove themselves by the longevity of their positions when handling leadership positions perceived as incongruent to their respective gender.
Dean (2013) investigated the role congruity theory plays in perceptions of Board of Trustee members by community college presidents. Since the community college model is the lowest level of higher education (two-year institution), it fosters a higher rate of female presidents in comparisons to other levels. At the time of the study in 2013, 29% of community college presidents were female, similar to the representation to Division III athletic directors where around 30% are female (Lapchick, 2019). It has been argued that women are equally represented in leadership roles amongst smaller governance structures (Junior College and NCAA Division III) as those leadership positions hold substantially less power than larger institutions (NCAA DI and DII; Yiamouyiannis & Osborne, 2012).

Dean (2013) specifically focused on North Carolina and included a sample of 12 total college boards, with 147 individual participants, completing a total of 97 total reviews of presidents. The results indicated the female presidents were rated significantly lower than their male counterparts on all three subscales included in the evaluation (extra effort, effectiveness, and satisfaction). The participants’ gender was related to no difference in their ratings and preference for a male president. These results indicated the community college president may be a gender typed position, allowing for males to be more positively evaluated for pre-perceived traits associated with leadership roles than their female counterparts. The community college system employs the highest number of female presidents. However, even amongst leadership positions with higher number of females represented, the pre-perceived gender stereotypes associated with specific gender roles lead individuals to think male candidates offer a better fit.
The literature has outlined significant application of role congruity theory in the business and higher education setting regarding women performing leadership roles. Similar trends have emerged in the sport industry.

**Sport Leadership**

The research focused on role congruity theory has occurred across multiple positions in sport, including athletic trainers (O’Connor et al., 2010), sport reporters (Mudrick & Lin, 2017), head coaches (Kalin & Waldron, 2015), and athletic directors (Peachey & Burton, 2011). Among these varying sport professions, males hold the majority of leadership positions, fostering an environment where masculine traits are encouraged and celebrated, leaving perceptions that males are more highly associated with leadership effectiveness (Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). Eagly and Chin (2010) further state that stereotypes drive negative evaluations of female leaders due to perceptions associated with leadership centered on agentic traits and the perceptions associated with masculine traits. Thus, the second tenant of role congruity theory addresses this by evaluating experiences and perceptions of women performing leadership positions.

Studies using role congruity theory have focused extensively on coaching and administrative roles within sport (Aicher & Samariniotis, 2011; Madsen & McGarry, 2017; Tiell & Dixon, 2008; Tiell et al., 2012). In 2017, Madsen and McGarry investigated gender differences between head coach and assistant coach positions. The head coach position (top level of leadership on a sport team) was found to align with masculine characteristics (forceful and assertive), with the assistant coach position aligning with feminine characteristics (caring and nurturing). This leaves women who
attain the head coach position to potentially break stereotypical gender norms, leading to more negative evaluations from both players and higher-level administrators (Madsen & McGarry, 2017). Further, Tiell and Dixon (2008) investigated the experiences and perceptions of Senior Woman Administrators. The findings suggested that Senior Woman Administrators hold little to no responsibility with agentic traits (budgeting and fundraising), and more responsibility with communal qualities (role modeling and monitoring Title IX issues). In a follow-up study, Tiell et al. (2012) found similar results, as the Senior Woman Administrator designation still lacked access to roles associated with department fundraising and budget management processes. Thus, while the Senior Woman Administrator designation indicates the highest-ranking woman in an athletic department, they may still lack upward career mobility into the athletic director role, based on perceptions that they are not fit to handle fundraising and budgetary components of the department. It must be pointed out that Senior Woman Administrator is a title in an athletic department, but not a position in the department like athletic director.

Role congruity theory inquiry continues to expand in other heavily male dominated sport professions such as sport reporting. Murdick and Lin (2017) investigated gender perceptions of sport reporters working in both football (masculine sport) and/or volleyball (feminine sport). Similar to the results in the business and higher education fields, women sport reporters were perceived to exhibit trustworthiness and expertise in covering football. However, these same women sport reporters who received equal ratings as their male counterparts received much lower evaluations on fit for position. The participants perceived women reporters in football to be performing incongruent
roles based on the dominant presence of male reporters. They also suggested that the rugged characteristics of football played a major impact on perceptions, which tied back to the results from earlier studies regarding females being perceived as inadequate athletic directors based on not holding positions in football (Miller, 2016; Murdick & Lin, 2017; Whisenant, 2005).

Similar results have been discovered in athletic training. O’Connor et al. (2010) found women also face discriminatory evaluations, especially when working with football programs. Male athletic trainers received overwhelmingly higher ratings in handling all treatment types. The athletic trainer position requires the same education and certification, regardless of an individual’s gender, however the communal traits (caring, nurturing, and affectionate) associated with female athletic trainers did not align with the stereotyped traits associated with football. Again, this is troublesome, as football athletic trainers often earn the highest salary of all athletic trainers within an athletic department. Thus, the negative perceptions regarding women in multiple professions in sport may potentially impact their leadership capabilities, further restricting their ability to move up the leadership ranks within their own department or at other institutions.

Role congruity theory has also been used to investigate evaluations of the athletic director position. For example, Aicher and Samariniotis (2011) examined perceptions of athletic director effectiveness based on gender representation in the position. Male athletic directors were rated as optimal leaders in both scenarios proposed (competitive and cooperative), demonstrating that regardless of the behaviors expressed in the position, preferences may exist for males. This potentially reaffirms the double-bind women face in sport leadership positions. As Aicher and Samariniotis (2011) explain,
“this situation illustrates the paradox women face where masculine behavior is neither accepted nor condoned and feminine behavior is not respected or valued” (p. 255).

Similar results were found by Whisenant et al. (2015), who examined perceptions of high school head coaches of their current athletic director. The 122 high school coaches (72% male) indicated no differences between the male and female athletic director in regard to their procedural justice (dispute resolution) and interpersonal justice (treatment of individual). However, male coaches perceived female athletic directors less favorably on fairness when rating their distributive justice (actual outcomes of a decision). This confirms different evaluations across gender in the athletic director role. More specifically, women receive greater push-back in their decision-making process, as male head coaches often disagreed with their decisions.

Overall, much of the literature on role congruity theory utilizes quantitative analysis to formulate results. While past studies have used qualitative inquiry to investigate experiences of women in athletic leadership positions (Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Taylor & Wells, 2017), few have utilized role congruity theory in this manner (Diacin & Lim, 2012). The Diacin and Lim (2012) qualitative study represents one of the few studies using role congruity theory to examine female intercollegiate athletic administrators’ lived experiences in performing their leadership positions. The results indicated three key themes: work-family conflict, gender ideologies, and networks. The work-family conflict theme discussed the differences between gender in domestic responsibilities, with males having more flexibility to work unusual hours. This finding ties back to the results from Lumpkin et al. (2013) in the interscholastic athletic space, with female head coaches leaving earlier than males, potentially based on the lack of
support from significant others and their care-taking responsibilities. The participants in the Diacin and Lim (2012) study also discussed gender ideologies (stereotypes) affecting their experiences, emphasizing the ‘lack-of-fit’ when they portray the characteristics of caring and nurturing in their roles (communal traits). Lastly, the participants discussed the lack of access to networks in athletic administration positions for women. Regarding networks, the participants particularly addressed the differences in access for themselves and their male counterparts, as they perceived males experienced easier access to connections and potential future employment, making it challenging for women to move up the leadership ranks. To date, the Diacin and Lim (2012) study represents one of the few qualitative inquiries into women’s sport leadership experiences through the lens of role congruity theory, with no such studies addressing the experiences of women in the interscholastic sport structure.

Summary

These past studies confirm role congruity theory as an appropriate theoretical framework to properly investigate women attaining and performing incongruent sport leadership positions. Building on past work—similar to Diacin and Lim (2012), Taylor and Hardin (2016), and Taylor and Wells (2017) at the intercollegiate level, this study expands the research to include women interscholastic athletic directors. Amongst the women in sport leadership and role congruity theory literature, no identified studies have examined the experiences of women interscholastic athletic directors. Thus, this study aimed to fill the literature gap by exploring the lived experiences of this under-represented and under-researched group of women performing sport leadership roles.
Summary of Literature

This literature review expressed the importance of gender representation in leadership roles, especially for the interscholastic athletic director position. The lack of women holding interscholastic athletic director positions is problematic due to the levels of control and power in decision-making that athletic directors have in interscholastic sport at both the state and individual high school level. While past studies such as Pedersen and Whisenant (2005) indicated women may be more successful and better fits for interscholastic athletic director roles, little research has focused on the sport structure and the importance of gender representation in high school sport leadership roles (Forsyth et al., 2020; Whisenant et al., 2015; Zdroik & Veliz, 2021).

The bulk of sport leadership research inquiry focused on gender has concentrated on the intercollegiate level. Past studies suggest inconsistencies in lived experiences between men and women and point out that women may face significant challenges and barriers in attaining and performing the tasks required in sport leadership positions (Hancock & Hums, 2016; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Massengale & Lough, 2010; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Taylor & Wells, 2017). When women do attain sport leadership roles, researchers suggest structural problems (e.g., policies, hiring practices, etc; Burton et al. 2009, 2011; Darvin, 2020) and social inequities (e.g., discrimination, stereotyping, harassment; Madsen & McGarry, 2017; Whisenant et al., 2015) significantly impact their experiences. These barriers can lead to women exiting the field earlier than their male counterparts or even not seeking leadership roles all together (Fink et al., 2016; Hindman & Walker, 2020; Siegele et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2022).
Role congruity theory acts as one appropriate theoretical framework to properly investigate women attaining (career path and hiring process) and performing incongruent sport leadership positions. Building on past work at the intercollegiate level (Diacin & Lim, 2012; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Taylor & Wells, 2017), this study expands the research to include women interscholastic athletic directors. Amongst the women in sport leadership and role congruity theory literature, no identified studies examined the experiences of women interscholastic athletic directors. Thus, this study fills the literature gap by exploring the lived experiences of this under-represented and under-researched group of women working in interscholastic sport leadership roles.
CHAPTER III

METHOD

This chapter outlines the research methodology for the study. The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of women interscholastic athletic directors. Little research has been conducted on interscholastic sport and the high school athletic director experience, especially when women hold the position. By utilizing role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), this study explored the lived experiences of female interscholastic athletic directors, with a focus on the attainment and performance of the interscholastic athletic director role. The following research questions guided this study.

**RQ1:** What are the past career paths of current women interscholastic athletic directors?

**RQ2:** What are the lived experience(s) of current women interscholastic athletic directors in attaining their role?

**RQ3:** What are the lived experience(s) of women interscholastic athletic directors in performing their role?

A qualitative research design was selected as the most appropriate method for this study (Patton, 2002). Aspers and Corte (2019) describe qualitative research as an “iterative process in which improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied” (p.155). Using qualitative research design in the context of this study allowed for detailed in-depth descriptions of the lived experiences amongst female
interscholastic athletic directors to be captured without limitations (Patton, 2002). By utilizing the guiding theoretical lens of role congruity theory to frame the various experiences in the attainment and performing of the athletic director role, qualitative research allows for the participants' individual voices to be uncovered and phenomenon to emerge naturally (Creswell & Popp, 2018; Glesne, 2018; Leavy, 2017).

**Research Design**

Within qualitative research, five main research approaches exist including case study, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative, and phenomenology (Patton, 2002). This study followed the phenomenological research approach because it best aligns with the stated research questions. As Vagle (2018) states, the rationale for selecting a research design represents a core component of a successful qualitative research study, therefore, the core competencies of a phenomenology study will be further explored below.

**Phenomenological Research**

The phenomenological method of inquiry best fits this study as it encompasses a deeper understanding of meaning associated with individual lived experiences, allowing for a stronger grasp of a natural phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Vagle, 2018). This qualitative philosophy in research design allows the unique individual perspectives of participants to emerge, as phenomenological research is not concerned with generalizing and quantifying the pre-conditioned outcomes, but rather focusing on the interpretive process to uncover emerging phenomenon (Vagle, 2018). This process makes the phenomenology approach an interpretive rather than a descriptive process. For example, this interpretive process explores and analyzes individual lived experiences of participants rather than comparing transcendental experiences (experiences across
participants), allowing for in-depth data collection and analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). In the context of this study, guided by the key tenets of role congruity theory the female interscholastic athletic directors shared their own unique individual perspectives and experiences, allowing for a deeper level understanding of the phenomenon (Glesne, 2018). To best capture the phenomenon in a phenomenology research study, the researcher must engage in bracketing, a strategy to mitigate biases and improve data reliability.

**Bracketing**

To conduct phenomenology research, the researcher must engage in bracketing, which ensures the researcher reflects on their own experiences and biases which may impact the research study’s outcomes (Chan et al., 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Vagle (2018) simply describes bracketing as acknowledging “one’s judgement and pre-understandings of the world” (p. 14). The use of bracketing can help separate the researcher from their pre-perceived notions and ideals, allowing for enriched data collection and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In qualitative work, the researcher represents the primary data collection instrument, therefore, they must be aware and sensitive to their own lived experiences and biases. While the researcher may not completely bracket themselves from their experiences, beliefs, and perceptions, and past theoretical inquiry- they must actively work to ensure past knowledge or judgements do not affect the understanding or interpretation of participants’ experiences or phenomenon (Chan et al., 2013; Giorgi, 2009).

The researcher who conducted this research study identifies as a white cisgender male, representing an outsider from the identified sample population. Furthermore, the
researcher worked in college athletics for two years, but never worked at the interscholastic level of sport, again, potentially leaving himself as an outsider to participants. Thus, the researcher in this study represented an outsider, bracketing themself from the participants, which potentially limits pre-conditioned notions associated with a researcher holding similar identities (in-group) as the participants. However, this does not completely eliminate the researcher from holding pre-conditioned perspectives. While the guiding principles of role congruity theory perpetuate some pre-conceived notions, in order to properly set aside these notions and ideals, the researcher must seek to fully encompass an unbiased perspective in the data collection and analysis process to truly embrace the research phenomenon.

**Philosophical Assumptions**

The design of this study relied on identifying and developing the researchers’ assumptions. In this case, these assumptions included ideas and content that may influence the data collection and/or analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, the interpretive framework selected to guide these assumptions was social constructivism, as it seeks to better understand the world through the construction of knowledge based on the experiences of others. Through the social constructivism approach, the development of knowledge occurs through independently comparing the participants’ experiences in their respective cultures. For example, the social constructivism approach challenges the researcher to become entrenched in the world of their participants to better comprehend their lived experiences. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), social constructivism can be explained as how “reality is co-constructed between the researcher and the researched and shaped by individual experiences” (p.86). This process can help develop varied and
multiple meanings of the participants’ lived experiences, which allows for a complexity of views to emerge through the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Gaining knowledge must not be inherent from the literature but rather formed from the actual experiences of the selected sample population for this study. Thus, the social constructivism approach formulates natural and organic themes, which allows for the comprehensive development and understanding of the phenomena being investigated. In the context of this study, the researcher utilized role congruity theory to formulate research questions surrounding attaining and performing an athletic director role-specific inquiry into the issue was kept broad to ensure unbiased perceptions during the interview protocol and coding. However, as stated by Creswell and Poth, the researcher plays an important role in the social constructivism approach, as they hold an important role in the research process. To that end, the researcher’s positionality will need to be further explored.

**Positionality**

According to Milner (2007), the ability to reflect on one’s own position within a research study can strengthen the research design, emphasizing the importance of the researchers’ identities, including their individual, racial, and/or cultural identities. In addressing one’s positionality, the goal is to mitigate any potential research biases, as biases can drastically shape the research methods and data analysis if not identified, explained, and explored prior to the conducting a qualitative research study (Milner, 2007).

The researcher in this study holds academic and research identities in promoting gender and racial equity within sport, however, the researcher personally identifies as a
white cisgender male. Pushing the researcher to be potentially viewed by participants as an ‘outsider’ to participants as such, questions regarding the researcher’s motive for completing the study was evident. The researcher positioned themself as an ally for women in sport leadership, as promoting more equitable career opportunities for the under-represented group of women sport leaders can create a more inclusive sport environment.

The next important aspect of positionality centers around cultural identity. As stated, the researcher identifies as a white cisgender male, originally from the state of Vermont, a state which holds little racial diversity amongst its population. Over time the researcher has lived in five states, with many different environmental backgrounds and demographics, all helping shape their cultural experiences. While these past experiences have helped shape the researcher’s beliefs, the experiences of being a white cisgender male have afforded them a high level of privilege throughout life and in the sport setting. This privilege helped shape their athletic, academic, and inter-personal experiences. Thus, identifying the privilege white males are afforded in society, and actively fighting to mitigate the perspective of privilege throughout this research and data analysis, was essential to the research study.

**Participants**

To best recruit participants for this study, both purposive and snowball sampling were utilized, based on the low number of women athletic directors in the interscholastic sport setting (Dombeck, 2018; Whisenant, 2003, 2008). The purposive sampling technique, or better described as ‘criterion-based sampling’ (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019), targeted one specific sample group with similar characteristics and/or lived experiences,
allowing for a better exploration of the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell, 2014; Palinkas et al., 2015). The study also utilized snowball sampling technique as an appropriate method. Snowball sampling has been identified to compliment purposive sampling as it relies on the study participants’ pre-set networks to reach additional participants, as these networks may expand the initial sampling pool of participants. Glesne (2018) best describes the snowball sampling technique as, “obtains knowledge of potential cases [participants] from people who know people who meet research interests” (p.51). The use of both sampling techniques (purposive and snowball) allowed the researcher to gain study participants from the specific unique population, in this case, female interscholastic athletic directors.

This study included four selection criteria for prospective participants in order to ensure a heterogeneous sample group, a core component of the phenomenology approach (Creswell & Popp, 2018). The criterion for this study included: (a) self-identify as female, (b) current interscholastic athletic director, (c) high school where the participant works is located in the United States and is a member of the state high school athletic association (Accredited NFHS member), and (d) held their athletic director position for at least one year and no more than seven years.

The criterion for this study helped set a heterogeneous sample by providing specific identifiers to ensure the phenomena may emerge naturally. To address the first criteria, as highlighted, the interscholastic sport leadership field holds minimal gender diversity. For example, the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NIAAA) membership breakdown includes only around 15% women athletic directors (Dombeck, 2018; Fletcher, 2019). Thus, women currently holding interscholastic athletic
director roles are performing roles in a male dominated field, allowing for unique perspectives and experiences while working in these leadership roles. Regarding the second component, this study exclusively focused on experiences of athletic directors as they hold the highest level of decision making in interscholastic athletic departments (Blackburn, 2013; Hobbs, 2018). While the experiences of other administrative roles (assistant and associate athletic director) may hold importance, opportunities to attain these positions in interscholastic sport are limited, as most high school athletic departments do not possess financial resources to hire full-time staff outside an athletic director (Thompson, 2021).

The third component was selected based on the current membership of the NFHS and the state high school associations, as this sample population encompasses a rather large and diverse sample of high schools. For example, the total full and affiliate membership of the NFHS includes 92 state high school associations and upwards of 19,500 high schools (NFHS, n.d.a). This designation also excludes private schools from the sample, as these schools have been found to provide greater amounts of resources to athletic departments, potentially skewing experiences of athletic directors (Kennedy, 2019). The last criteria for inclusion in this study ensured the sample participants have recently made the transition into the athletic director position. The one year minimum holding the athletic director position ensures the participants can discuss performing their role. The 7-year cap was selected based on the more recent transition into the role.

The participants for this study were recruited from the NIAAA, a national organization whose membership includes primarily current interscholastic athletic directors. The NIAAA sponsors multiple professional activities including annual
conferences, membership and networking, online leadership course trainings, and scholarship distribution (NIAAA, n.d.). The NIAAA has seven full-time staff members, with their membership equaling around 12,000 athletic administrators across all 50-states plus the District of Columbia.

Upon the approval of IRB, the researcher shared the study with the NIAAA executive director who emailed an infographic and survey link to all female athletic director members associated with the organization (Appendix A). This email included a description of the study, link to a Google Form to indicate their interest in participating, and a recruiting infographic. The NIAAA sent this email to their membership twice, with an initial email and a follow-up email, three weeks later.

The second recruiting technique utilized social media accounts. Social media platforms (Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook) represent a unique network to connect with participants. To this end, the infographic provided to participants via email was also shared to various social media pages, with the hopes participants not included in the contact list from the NIAAA may also be reached.

The final recruiting method used in this study was snowball sampling. The researcher, upon the completing the qualitative interview with participants asked if they would be willing to share the information regarding the study to other potential candidates.

Sample Size

The appropriate number of participants for phenomenological research varies across the literature. In 2018, Creswell and Popp stated phenomenology studies should range from 10 to 15 participants, while also highlighting some studies have ranged from
one to over 300 participants. Similarly, Cohen et al. (2000) suggested 10 to 15
participants but argues the sample population should be driven by the need for empirical
knowledge on the phenomena. Other researchers have stated various desired sample sizes
- Creswell (1998), five to 25 participants, and Ellis (2019) six to 20 participants.
However, the consensus across all phenomenological literature states the final count of
participants will be reached when saturation of the data can be acknowledged (Cohen et
al., 2000; Creswell, 1998, 2018; Ellis, 2019). To reach saturation, the researcher must
identify repeated similar illustrations, or rather, no additional information being
established, in the data (Creswell, 2018). Upon reaching saturation, the codes being
identified by the researcher will become consistent and repetitive, with little variation
from earlier participants. Thus, in a phenomenological study, the required saturation level
may be fluid, leaving the required participant number dependent on the phenomenon
emergence. For this study, the researcher completed 17 interviews until saturation was
met. This number matches past phenomenology research studies and allowed the research
to fully encompass the participants experiences.

As stated above, the researcher utilized the NIAAA to assist with disseminating
the research to their membership. Through the use of this third party and the lack of
information shared with the researcher from the NIAAA regarding their women
membership, an appropriate response rate was not available. After an initial recruitment
e-mail and a follow-up email three weeks later, 85 female athletic directors completed the
basic demographic survey. This demographic survey was conducted to screen
participants for the study. The demographic survey included, gender, race, state of
employment, years in role, classification (public or private), school size, sport offerings at
their school, gender of principal, gender of past athletic director, number of assistant
athletic directors, and willingness to complete a virtual interview (see Appendix B). Of
these potential participants, 33 participants matched the criteria outlined for the study and
all these individuals were emailed directly by the researcher asking for their participation
in a virtual interview. In total, 17 current women interscholastic athletic directors agreed
and completed semi-structured virtual interviews. The participants self-identified their
race, with the sample including White (n=14), Black or African American (n=1), and
American Indian (n=2). The sample population represented 14 states and participants
school sizes ranged from 30 to 2,900. The participants held various career lengths prior to
attaining the athletic director position, with the shortest career path to the athletic director
position at six years, with the longest 35 years. In total, the average length the individuals
had held their current athletic director role was three years, with some participants just
finished their first year as athletic director and some holding their role for seven years
(Full participant demographic data in Appendix C).

Data Collection

To best capture the phenomenon occurring within the identified population, this
study used multiple methods of data collection and triangulation (Creswell & Popp, 2018;
Leavy, 2018; Miles et al., 2020). The use of triangulation through multiple data sources
deepens the interpretations and understanding of the phenomenon, while also providing
rigor and depth to the data collection process (Gibbs, 2007; Glesne, 2018; Leavy, 2018).
The multiple levels of data collection selected for this study included (a) participant
interviews, (b) a demographic survey, and (c) document analysis (Creswell & Popp,
2018).
Interviews

The interview portion of this study was considered the primary data collection method. To best explore data using the phenomenology approach, the use of in-depth, semi-structured interviews was selected as the most appropriate method. The strength of semi-structured interviews lies in the use of probing questions to explore participant experiences. The use of probing questions allowed for more comprehensive responses, illuminating the full lived experiences and perceptions of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Siedman, 2006). The semi-structured approach also allows for natural themes to emerge from respondents, as the interview flows at a more conversational pace in comparison to other interview protocols (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The interviews were conducted via video conferencing software (Zoom). While face-to-face interviews were the preferred method for this study, other methods have been found to be consistent in their reliability (Archibald et al., 2019). According to Archibald et al. (2019), the use of video conferencing interviews does not affect outcomes of the data collection process.

The interview protocol developed for this study was guided by relevant literature and the study’s research questions. Upon the creation of the interview guide, two experts on women in sport leadership reviewed the protocol, with adjustments being made based on the experts’ feedback. The final interview protocol included 12 questions - with multiple probing questions - depending on the participants’ responses (See Appendix D for full interview protocol).

Demographic Questionnaire

Upon completing the interview, the participants were asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2018), the use of
surveys to gain further information from participants can strengthen the qualitative research design, while also allowing the participants to self-identify potentially sensitive information. Accordingly, the demographic questionnaire included gender identity, race/ethnicity, home state of their high school, size of their high school (approximate number in the student body population), number of sport teams at their school, gender of principal, gender of previous athletic director, and number of assistant athletic directors (if any, including gender). The use of a demographic questionnaire allowed the researcher to explore commonalities or differences among participants, helping illuminate potential trends within the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). (See Appendix B for full demographic survey).

**Document Analysis**

The use of accessible documentation has the ability to provide additional knowledge on a subject while expanding the knowledge base of an occurring phenomena (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). This tactic is a vital component of the phenomenology approach, as it allows the researcher to become more entrenched in the lived experiences of the participants (Vagle, 2018). Furthermore, utilizing document analysis provides triangulation within the study (Creswell & Popp, 2018; Leavy, 2017; Miles et al., 2020). Upon request, participants shared their current resume/CV for their athletic director position. All 17 participants agreed to sending over a resume/CV and this information assisted in the career path portion of this study.

**Data Analysis**

Upon completing data collection for this study, the use of thematic analysis was selected as the most appropriate method to analyze the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke,
The thematic analysis process includes analyzing data through the following six step process - (a) familiarizing with the data through reading and re-reading, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing potential themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Clarke & Braun, 2014). Upon organizing the data across multiple data points and methods, the researcher may move onto the coding process.

For this study, the first round of coding followed a line-by-line descriptive coding approach. The descriptive coding approach, best described as summarizing the data through a word or short phrase, often a noun, generates the main topics/ideas from the raw data (Miles et al., 2020; Saldana, 2012). The descriptive coding process was selected as the most appropriate for the first round of coding based on its ability to allow the phenomenon to emerge naturally, aligning well with the mechanics of the research questions and interview protocol. The next step in the coding process was to conduct a second round of coding, this time utilizing the simultaneous coding approach. The simultaneous coding approach is often used for data that potentially hold overlapping occurrences and data with multiple underlying meanings. Since the identified research questions hold overlap regarding the experiences of interscholastic athletic directors, the simultaneous coding process was selected as the ideal second level coding scheme in the first round of coding (Miles et al., 2020; Saldana, 2012). Upon completing the first round of descriptive and simultaneous coding, the original codes were organized into categories. These categories sought to best represent the phenomenon occurring through pairing codes with commonalities.
The second cycle of coding utilized the categories of first round codes. The axial coding technique was selected as the most appropriate for the second cycle of coding as it allows for the delineation of the categories to help create more concise categories and higher order themes (Miles et al., 2020). Furthermore, axial coding stays grounded in the participants’ voices and experiences, allowing for the researcher to construct linkages with categories identified in the first cycle of coding. Upon the completion of the second cycle of coding, the axial coding allowed for higher order themes to emerge across the research questions.

**Trustworthiness**

One potential drawback in the qualitative research design is the presence of analytic bias (Miles et al., 2020; Rolfe, 2006). Therefore, two separate trustworthiness and validity approaches will be explored. The first approach, triangulation, is best described as utilizing multiple sources of data to confirm findings (Leavy, 2017; Miles et al., 2020). This study employed multiple data sources to triangulate the data collected. For example, in the document analysis portion, the resumes/CVs were utilized to compare career trajectory and how the participants discussed these experiences in their career path. The second approach to ensure trustworthiness and validity in this study was the use of member checking (Seidman, 2006). Through member checking, the researcher gives the participants the ability to express their own personal opinion on the data analysis. Thus, the use of member-checking mitigates potential researcher bias, proving to be a powerful tool to confirm validity in qualitative results as it uses the participants themselves to confirm findings (Miles et al., 2020; Saldana, 2012).

**Ethical Considerations**
Many potential ethical considerations are present in qualitative research, including voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent (Sanjari, 2014). While each of these ethical considerations were addressed within the informed consent form, it will be beneficial to briefly review these here (see Appendix E for full consent form). First, the researcher communicated clearly to potential participants that their participation was completely voluntary. Next, proper communication regarding the lack of monetary or material compensation was included. To address anonymity and confidentiality, the researcher assigned each participant with a pseudonym, while also removing any identifiers in the interview transcriptions. Furthermore, the researcher only identified broad demographic information about participants in the reporting process. No responses were directly tied to identifiable participants. Furthermore, as required by IRB approval, the data transcripts and data were stored on a password protected computer, and only the researcher of the study and IRB personnel will have authority to monitor the collected data. Lastly, the informed consent for this study was verbal, as participants were asked prior to their interview to give verbal consent for completing the study (based on multiple data collection spaces). The verbal consent was recommended and the IRB approved due to the use of virtual interviews.
CHAPTER IV
WHERE ARE ALL THE WOMEN?: USING ROLE CONGRUITY THEORY TO EXPLORE THE CAREER PATH AND LEADERSHIP ATTAINMENT EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN INTERSCHOLASTIC ATHLETIC DIRECTORS

The passage of Title IX drastically improved the experiences of women in sport. While the scope of Title IX was solely focused on educational settings, its passage led to increased opportunities in sport for women, especially within large governance structures such as interscholastic athletics (Brake, 2000; Stevenson, 2007; WSF, n.d.). For athletes, the interscholastic female sport participation increased by a staggering with over a 1000% (Brake, 2000; NFHS, 2022). For example, female athlete participation numbers jumped from 300,000 (1971) to upwards of 3.2 million (2022) and the total number of teams jumped from just 14,836 (1971) to over 160,000 (2019; NFHS, 2022; WEEA, n.d.).

The positive impact of Title IX regarding sport participation is well evident, however, a negative impact occurred for the representation of women in leadership roles (Burton, 2015; Kihl et al., 2016). The increases in participation rates, funding, and services for women’s sport allowed coaching and administrative positions to become viable full-time career paths for the first time (Elsesser, 2019). As a result, an influx of men secured positions in women’s sport as coaches and administrators. The large proportion of men entering into sport leadership positions within women’s sport decreased the opportunities for women to hold these positions (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Kihl et al., 2016). As such, women sport leaders are under-represented at all levels
of sport, including youth sport (Aspen Institute, 2019; Flanagan, 2017), interscholastic athletics (Fletcher, 2019), intercollegiate athletics (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Lapchick, 2019a), professional sport (Lapchick, 2019b; WSF, 2016), and international sport (Robinson & Taylor, 2020).

At the interscholastic level, a quick review of all high school athletic associations in 2022 revealed that women hold only 7 of the 51 (13.7%) state athletic association executive director/commissioner roles. While there is no official gender breakdown reported for athletic directors across the country, a collection of past studies suggest women only hold around 15% of interscholastic athletic director positions (Dombeck, 2018; Fletcher, 2019; Mercogliano, 2019; Mullane & Whisenant, 2007; Whisenant, 2003, 2008). However, visibility of women in leadership positions can be seen as vital to perceptions of young athletes. As young athletes often adopt their own sport leadership beliefs and perceptions at a young age- thus, more women holding the athletic director position in interscholastic athletics, may help mitigate negative stereotypes of women as leaders (Burden et al., 2010; Mullen & Tuten, 2004).

One theory that has been adopted to investigate the lack of women in leadership roles is role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This study applied role congruity theory, which posits that women are perceived less favorably in attaining leadership positions and face negative experiences when they do reach leadership levels, based on gender stereotyping of leadership roles. The majority of research has focused on the experience of women attaining leadership roles in intercollegiate level (Aicher & Samariniotis, 2011; Diacin & Lim, 2012; Hancock et al., 2018; Tiell & Dixon, 2008; Tiell et al., 2012; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013; Whisenant, 2005). For example, past
studies found intercollegiate leadership candidates (coaches and athletic directors) are often evaluated similarly when comparing gender, but when it came to hiring, male candidates were selected for positions (Burton et al., 2011; Darvin, 2020; Walker et al., 2011). These pre-perceived notions of intercollegiate leadership roles demonstrate the inconsistencies across genders in attaining leadership roles, with men being afforded more opportunities.

Some past studies have even suggested that women are more successful than their male counterparts when they do attain the interscholastic athletic director position (Pedersen & Whisenant, 2005). These findings indicated women athletic directors had the potential for success at an earlier age. The earlier age in attaining the athletic director role indicates women are highly qualified and hold the appropriate skills to perform the position. While this would be seen as positive for the progression for women into interscholastic athletic director roles, at the current moment, we have a lack of women holding those roles and a lack of understanding of their experiences.

The research inquiry on experiences of women in sport leadership is well-documented across sport structures (Bower et al., 2015; Hancock et al., 2018; Katz et al., 2018; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Whisenant et al., 2010). The inconsistency in research at the interscholastic level, however, must be addressed to better understand the lack of female representation in the interscholastic athletic director role. This is especially true when investigating the experiences of women in attaining the high school athletic director role; hence, this study seeks to examine that issue. The current study, guided by the principles of role congruity theory will address the gap in literature by investigating the experiences of women interscholastic athletic directors in attaining their current role.
Better understanding the experiences of how women attain the role of interscholastic athletic director allows for a better understanding of the structural and inter-personal problems to address when examining the under-representation of women in the athletic director position.

**Literature Review**

The following section provides an overview of the essential literature on high school athletic directors and the role congruity theory which provided the background for this study. The major topic areas include information on gender representation of high school athletic directors and career paths.

**Interscholastic Athletic Directors Gender Representation**

When examining leadership positions at the interscholastic level, men are more likely than women to serve in key leadership administrative positions (i.e., principals and athletic directors). For example, in education (interscholastic level), while women make up 64% of high school teachers (NCES, 2021), they represent only 33% of high school principals, 24% of school district superintendents, and 15% athletic directors (Fletcher, 2019; Ramaswamy, 2020). This lack of upward mobility toward administration positions for women potentially demonstrates the systematic inequalities that currently exist within the larger interscholastic educational system. Of even greater concern is that women are less likely to attain an athletic director position, suggesting women are viewed as capable to hold leadership roles in school systems (principals and/or school district superintendents), as long as they don’t oversee athletics (Fletcher, 2019). This lack of mobility into sport leadership for women illustrates the importance of better understanding the interscholastic sport leadership landscape.
The impact of gender representation in the athletic director role at the high school level cannot be over-emphasized, as this position can lead to varying perceptions of leadership capabilities and competencies (Burden et al., 2010; Fletcher, 2019). In most high schools around the country, the athletic director is the only full-time staff in their department; thus, they hold significant power over the day-to-day decision-making processes at their respective schools (Blackburn, 2013; Burton & Leberman, 2017; Hums et al., 2023). The high school level usually represents the first time an athlete has participated in a sport housed in an ‘athletic department,’ potentially leading to them forming perceptions of leadership skills (positive or negative) with those who hold the athletic director position. These perceptions may remain with them far past their high school athletic experience. With the low number of women high school athletic directors (around 15%), perceptions regarding sport leadership usually leave the impression men are associated with these higher-level leadership positions more naturally than women (Burden et al., 2010; Whisenant, 2008; Whisenant et al., 2015).

This was further explained by Welch (2012), who found that male interscholastic administrators believed organizational structures encouraged and/or promoted women (mentoring, training, etc.) into interscholastic athletic leadership, whereas women interscholastic administrators strongly disagreed with this statement. Further, participants differed when asked ‘Do you know of women qualified for position(s) in athletic administration but who do not apply for these same positions?’ Males selected strongly disagree, with females strongly confirming. Lastly, the male participants showed no perceived gender discrimination for women, while the women participants indicated agreement with gender discrimination for women. These varying perceptions across
gender of interscholastic athletic directors suggest sexism is also institutionally embedded at the interscholastic sport level (Welch, 2012).

**Interscholastic Athletic Director Career Paths**

One of the key aspects of an athletic director’s career path in sport leadership positions is based on past sport participation experiences. In a comparison study of male and female athletic directors, Ray (2010) found all female athletic director participants in their study competed in some level of college sport (usually high levels), whereas only a few of the male athletic directors competed in college sport. This was further confirmed by Fowler et al. (2017) whose results indicated only 13.5% of male interscholastic athletic directors had college sport participation experience. Comparing this to the intercollegiate level, Bower and Hums (2013) found 76% of their population of women athletic administrators competed in college athletics, with all of them seeing this experience as a positive influence on their career paths. This may suggest women have to be former successful athletes to ‘prove themselves’ capable of handling the role and gain an opportunity to attain the athletic director position (Ray, 2010).

While those attaining the interscholastic athletic director position may do so for varying reasons, the majority enter the profession based on their enjoyment of working with and having an impact on young athletes (Conant, 2017; Mather, 2007). Based on their past experiences, this makes sense, as most interscholastic athletic directors have been found to come from the ranks of either teachers and/or sport coaches (Folwer et al., 2017; Schneider & Stier, 2001; Steir & Schneider, 2000). While coaching and teaching are mutually exclusive career pathways, they do have some overlap. For example, Ray (2010) found of their eight interscholastic athletic director participants (4 male, 4 female),
all had both physical education teaching and coaching experience. Similarly, Fowler et al. (2017) found 69 of 70 interscholastic athletic directors (66 male and 4 female participants) were certified teachers at the high school level. However, of their sample, only 32% were certified physical education teachers. Fletcher (2019) highlighted similar overlap between coaching and physical education teaching experience in their sample of female interscholastic athletic directors. Of the sample, 12 of 13 participants were former physical education teachers (later in their careers), and all were former high school head coaches. This indicates the importance for the career path for women to be in either teaching and/or coaching, with the combination of the two being the most optimal.

Regarding educational levels of interscholastic athletic directors, the vast majority held bachelor’s degrees in either physical education or sport management, with most holding master’s degrees in a similar content area (Fowler et al., 2017; Mercogliano, 2019; Ray, 2010). In past studies, amongst small sample sizes, researchers have found no real gender difference in educational attainment of interscholastic athletic directors (Fowler et al., 2017, Ray, 2010). However, Grappendorf and Lough (2006) at the intercollegiate level found female athletic administrators held higher academic degrees than their male counterparts. Academic achievement was seen to be an effective tool to fight systematic discrimination, as educational attainment is a tangible asset, negating stereotypical perspectives of leadership capabilities.

Furthermore, some states may even require administrative training and education. The state of New York requires a School District Leader (SDL) certificate to be qualified for the athletic director role (Mercogliano, 2019). This may be troublesome for women in attaining interscholastic athletic director positions, as Ray (2010) indicates that males
hold stronger connections to high school administration positions (a male dominated profession), potentially assisting males in attaining the athletic director role and negatively impacting women in attaining athletic director positions in states with such requirements. While these few studies have shed light on interscholastic athletic director past experiences, only Fletcher (2019) included a sample of exclusively women interscholastic athletic directors (n=13); thus, a further examination is required to better understand this population.

Overall, the career pathway of women into the athletic director role acts as a vital research inquiry. As Lumpkin et al. (2013) argue, women coaches leave the profession earlier than men, thus, this potentially leaves a smaller pool of women candidates for higher level leadership roles (Hindman & Walker, 2018). To best address the overarching issue of lack of gender diversity in the athletic director position, better understanding of where women athletic directors come from can help create more supported and sustainable pipelines for the next generation of women interscholastic athletic directors. While studies have highlighted important roles in the career pathways (coaching and teaching) for both men and women (Fowler, 2017; Ray, 2010), specific inquiry for women pursuing the high school athletic director role can help start addressing gender representation in leadership positions issues (Fletcher, 2019).

**Theoretical Framework**

Role congruity theory extends social role theory (Eagly, 1987) to investigate circumstances where pre-perceived stereotypes of women in social groups become disrupted, specifically regarding leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). For example, females disrupt social group norms when they seek and attain leadership positions in
historically male dominated fields (e.g., sport leadership). These fields have created societal norms and perceptions that males and traditional male dominated traits hold the most identifiable and preferred traits for these roles (Kalin & Waldron, 2015). These perceptions, as Eagly and Chin (2010) suggest, lead to the stereotyping of women into thinking that they should embrace the follower role and thus avoid the group leader position all together. As such, role congruity theory relies on two foundational tenets - (a) women are perceived less favorably for leadership positions; and (b) women are evaluated less favorably when performing leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The current study will focus exclusively on the first tenet - the experiences of attaining leadership roles for women in male dominated fields.

One of the first studies to explore role congruity theory was conducted by Lee and James (2007), who investigated shareholder responses to female CEO appointments. Their analysis suggested stakeholders held negative perceptions of female appointments. However, these negative perceptions faded when women were promoted from inside the organization, whereas shareholders were wary of women from outside the organization. A more recent study by Dwivedi et al. (2018), highlights similar discourse regarding appointments of women CEO candidates as they found internal hires experienced successful transitions based on familiarity with stakeholders and internal governance structures across the companies. However, this does suggest that negative perceptions of women still exist when the decision-makers (usually men) are not familiar with a candidate, suggesting women may not hold the traits associated with quality leadership, and suggesting they need to prove themselves to been seen as fit leaders.

**Attaining Leadership Roles**
Similar studies using role congruity theory have investigated women attaining sport leadership positions. Burton et al. (2009) indicated participants indicated that masculine managerial roles (allocating resources, managing conflicts, etc.) highly aligned with the athletic director position, leaving feminine managerial roles (planning, organizing, etc.) to align with the role, but only slightly. Additionally, in 2011, Burton et al. found at the intercollegiate level, even when equal evaluations of male and female athletic director candidates were reported, study participants still selected the male candidates at a much higher rate. The female candidates were seen to have ‘lack-of-fit,’ potentially indicating biases for leadership positions may be quite subtle and ambiguous. Therefore, the pre-conceived perceptions of the athletic director role were inherently male dominated, leaving highly qualified women being negatively impacted during their career path.

Burton et al. (2011) employed role congruity theory to investigate college student perceptions toward the gender of athletic director candidates. Overall, the participants rated both male and female candidates similarly on their masculinity scale and potential success in the athletic director role. However, even though the candidates were rated equally across gender, the participants overwhelmingly preferred the male candidate for the athletic director role. The female candidates were seen to have ‘lack-of-fit,’ potentially indicating biases for leadership positions may be quite subtle and ambiguous (Burton et al., 2011).

The high identification of masculine roles implies stereotypical gender role perceptions, which was further confirmed by Burton et al. (2016) and again by Dwyer and Gillick (2018) with evaluations of male and female student-athletes. Whereas
participants evaluated candidates for leadership positions similarly, they still more frequently indicated the male candidates were better fits for those positions. This leads to a double-bind for women seeking athletic leadership roles (Aicher & Samariniotis, 2011). For example, women seeking leadership roles must demonstrate agentic traits to show their ability to lead (based on perceptions), however, when they do engage in these behaviors, they are breaking the communal traits associated with women. Therefore, women conforming to pre-conditioned stereotypes of how they should act in a leadership role are seen as breaking norms set for women, leaving them being perceived as incongruent with leadership positions.

Regarding coaching positions, Walker et al. (2011) similarly discovered men and women coaches were evaluated equally in competency and job-fit, yet males were selected at a much higher rate for head coaching positions. This suggests evaluations and perceptions of individual leaders themselves may equal out evenly on gender, but pre-conditioned stereotypes will still afford men more opportunities than women in attaining leadership positions (Walker et al., 2011). Interestingly, Henderson et al. (2011) found when evaluating male and female athletic director candidates, the participants gave equal ratings to both candidates. This is one of the few studies contradicting role congruity theory where men and women were evaluated equally and selected for a role equally. The authors argue this was due to women being so under-represented in the athletic director role that potential candidates ‘must be’ qualified for the role. More recently, Darvin (2020) suggests a potential new application of role congruity theory when examining the attainment of leadership positions. Darvin suggests women themselves negatively evaluate leadership positions not based on gender stereotypes but rather they express an
unwillingness to adjust their personal morals in order to undertake sport leadership positions. This may suggest that leadership positions have become stereotyped as providing negative experiences for women, suggesting the positive benefits that come with such positions may not outweigh the negative experiences.

More specifically in the interscholastic sport space, past works have investigated job descriptions for the interscholastic athletic director position. In the state of Texas, Miller (2016) and Whisenant (2005) found job descriptions for athletic directors often included the need for past football coaching experience. This made men the most desirable candidates for the athletic director positions by fault, as few women hold football coaching experience (Miller, 2016; Whisenant, 2005). While these results are alarming, little research has been solely focused on the important sub-sector of interscholastic athletics and women attaining leadership roles. Thus, this current study sought to investigate the career path and athletic director role attainment (making employment decisions and/or securing employment) experiences of female interscholastic athletic directors.

While the experiences and perceptions for women leaders in attaining leadership roles have been documented, to date we have few studies to help us better understand the experiences of sport leadership attainment at the interscholastic level. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences of women who attained the athletic director position at the interscholastic level. As highlighted, little research in sport management has been conducted on interscholastic sport and particularly on the career path and leadership role attainment experience of female athletic directors. The inquiry into experiences prior to attaining the athletic director position will allow researchers to
better understand the phenomena surrounding the small percentage of women interscholastic athletic directors. Therefore, by utilizing role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), the purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of current women interscholastic athletic directors in their attainment of the position, with a specific focus on their career path and experiences in attaining leadership roles. The following research questions were identified to guide this study.

**RQ1:** What are the past career paths of current women interscholastic athletic directors?

**RQ2:** What are the lived experience(s) of current women interscholastic athletic directors in attaining their role?

**Method**

To answer the research questions, an in-depth semi-structured qualitative research study was conducted to better understand the career paths and leadership attainment (employment decisions and/or securing employment) experiences of female interscholastic athletic directors. This study’s research design followed a phenomenological approach, as this allows for participants’ experiences to emerge individually and organically (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Vagle, 2018). This inquiry best fits this study as it encompasses a deeper understanding of meaning associated with individual lived experiences and the guiding principles of role congruity theory, allowing for a stronger grasp of a natural phenomenon occurring for participants (Vagle, 2018). In the context of this study, the qualitative phenomenological approach allowed for the interpretive process to occur naturally through the research, as participants themselves gave context to their experiences. This led to a deeper level of interpretation of the
phenomenon occurring directly from the participants themselves (Diacin & Lim, 2012; Glense, 2018).

While conducting phenomenological research inquiry, the positionality of the researcher is necessary to understand potential biases and limitations. The researcher identifies as a white cisgender male, meaning the researcher may potentially be viewed by participants as an ‘outsider.’. As such, questions regarding the researcher’s motive for completing the study may arise. The researcher positioned themself as an ally for women in sport leadership, as someone interested in how creating more equitable career opportunities for the under-represented group of women sport leaders can promote a more inclusive sport environment. However, the researcher does not share lived experiences with the participants, which may limit the data analysis because he may interpret some responses differently than if he identified as female. To mitigate this perspective- the researcher reported the findings through the participants’ voices (using participants’ own words through the coding cycles), to help ensure consistency within the participants’ lived experiences.

Participant Recruitment and Demographics

The participant recruiting process for this study utilized a purposive sampling approach, based on the low number of women athletic directors in the interscholastic sport setting (Dombeck, 2018; Whisenant, 2003, 2008). The purposive sampling technique, or better described as ‘criterion-based sampling’ (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019), targets one specific sample group with similar characteristics and/or lived experiences, allowing for a better exploration of the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell, 2018; Palinkas et al., 2015). The study included four selection criteria for prospective
participants in order to ensure a heterogeneous sample group, a core component of the phenomenology approach (Creswell & Popp, 2018). The criteria for this study included: (a) self-identify as female, (b) currently an interscholastic athletic director, (c) high school where the participant works is located in the United States and is a member of the state high school athletic association (Accredited NFHS member), and (d) held their athletic director position for at least one year and no more than seven years.

Following the purposive sampling approach, participants for this study were recruited from the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NIAAA), a national organization with membership of around 12,000 athletic administrators across all 50-states (including DC), with the membership estimated to be around 15% female athletic directors (Fletcher, 2019). Upon IRB approval, an NIAAA representative sent an email to all female athletic director members- outlining the research study and providing a Google Forms link that asked participants basic demographic information. The NIAAA representative sent the initial email and three weeks later, sent a follow-up email to the membership. The researchers also recruited participants through social media, by posting study information via a graphic on both Twitter and Facebook.

In total, 85 respondents completed the demographic survey. No response rate is available for this study as an unknown number of original emails were sent by the NIAAA. Of the 85 total responses, 33 participants matched the criteria outlined for the study. Of these 33 eligible participants, the researcher sent follow-up emails to ask for

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5 This demographic survey included, gender, race, state of employment, years in role, classification (public or private), school size, sport offerings at their school, gender of principal, gender of past athletic director, number of assistant athletic directors, and willingness to complete a virtual interview.
participation. In total, 17 female interscholastic athletic directors agreed to participate in the study and completed semi-structured interviews. The participants self-identified their race, with the sample including White (n=14), Black or African American (n=1), and American Indian (n=2). The sample population represented 14 states and participants school sizes ranged from 30 to 2,900. The participants held various career lengths with the shortest career path to the athletic director position at six years, with the longest 35 years. Table 1 below provides a summarized overview of the participants.

Table 1

Overview of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Year in Position</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>School Size*</th>
<th>Coaching Experience</th>
<th>Teaching Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>MA- Athletic Administration</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Yes (7 years)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regina</td>
<td>MA- Special Education</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Yes (10 years)</td>
<td>Yes (8 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mikayla</td>
<td>MA- Education Leadership</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>Big</td>
<td>Yes (12 years)</td>
<td>Yes (8 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>MS-Educational Leadership</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (14 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hailey</td>
<td>MS-Sports Medicine</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Yes (20 years)</td>
<td>Yes (20 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>MS- Sport Psychology</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Yes (14 years)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brigitte</td>
<td>MA-Athletic Administration</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>Big</td>
<td>Yes (8 years)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carson</td>
<td>MS-Education (Elementary Ed)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Yes (14 years)</td>
<td>Yes (15 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>MS- Teaching &amp; Curriculum</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Yes (4 years)</td>
<td>Yes (6 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emory</td>
<td>MS- Earth Science</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Utah</td>
<td>Big</td>
<td>Yes (10 years)</td>
<td>Yes (11 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kendra</td>
<td>MS-Educational Leadership</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Yes (11 years)</td>
<td>Yes (10 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabella</td>
<td>MA-Education (Counselor Ed)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Yes (8 years)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>School Size</td>
<td>Passed Up?</td>
<td>Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>MS-Educational Leadership</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Yes (10 years)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>MA- Education Administration</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (7 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meghan</td>
<td>MS- Education Leadership</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Yes (17 years)</td>
<td>Yes (17 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>MA- Public Health</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Yes (5 years)</td>
<td>Yes (5 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piper</td>
<td>MS- Athletic Training</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>Big</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (6 years)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*School Size - Small= 500> students, Medium=501-1000 students, Large=1,001-1,500 students, Big=1,501< students

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The virtual interviews in this study lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were all conducted via zoom video conferencing technology. All participants were given a pseudonym to protect their identity. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed via the digital software service Otter™. The interviewer reviewed each transcription for data cleaning and accuracy, while also becoming more familiar with the data. In addition, the researcher collected in-depth memoing notes to encompass personal expressions of the participants that would not be encompassed in the audio recording. The interview protocol for the semi-structured interviews included questions such as: What past experience made you stick with a career in sport? What have been some challenges in your career progression? Do you feel you have ever been passed up for a position? In addition to these questions focusing on participants career paths and leadership attainment, participants were also asked questions on their experiences holding the athletic director position (see Appendix D). The researcher also asked participants for their most up-to-date resumes to cross reference their assist in putting together missing information from the interview regarding their past experiences.
The coding process followed Braun and Clarke’s (2012) thematic analysis which allows for systematic organizing, identifying, and offering patterns of meanings/themes across the interviews. Following this process, the first cycle followed a line-by-line descriptive and simultaneous coding approach. This allowed the researcher to code and organize material based on the participants views, but also allowed a systematic code book to emerge, which guided the coding. Once the first cycle was completed, the researcher used axial coding (Miles et al., 2020), which systematically organized the data through common line-by-line codes, allowing for higher order themes to emerge from the data.

**Trustworthiness**

One potential drawback in qualitative research design is the presence of analytic bias (Miles et al., 2020; Rolfe, 2006). Therefore, two separate trustworthiness and validity approaches were implemented. The first approach, triangulation, is best described as utilizing multiple sources of data to confirm findings (Leavy, 2017; Miles et al., 2020). This study employed multiple data sources to triangulate the data collected. This researcher collected two forms of secondary data and memoing. The two forms of secondary data included asking participants to complete a demographic survey and provide their most updated resume. The researcher compared the secondary data to the interviews to gain further perspective on the participants experiences. Through the use of resumes, the researcher was able to check past experiences missed in the interview along with length of time associated with positions the participants held. This allowed the researcher to better understand the importance of positions in the career path to the
individual participant themselves. For example, one participant held a role as a math
teacher for upwards of five years, but never mentioned this position in the interview.

The researcher also utilized personal memoing during each interview and
compiled post-interview notes, which assisted in triangulating the qualitative data gained
from participants. Through the memoing process, the researcher was looking for non-
verbal cues and perspectives that might be missed during the audio recording. The use of
memoing in virtual interviews can mitigate the drawbacks of not conducting in-person
interviews, along with gaining the personal perspective of the participant. For example,
one participant in this study became emotional during her discussion of family support,
this would not have been recorded in the audio version- but memoing allowed the
researcher to understand the depth of support the participant was receiving from the
family unit. The second approach to ensure trustworthiness and validity in this study was
the use of member checking (Seidman, 2006). The member checking was completed by
multiple participants, as they were asked to re-read their transcripts and ensure the data
represented their own personal opinions. Through utilizing both data triangulation and
member-checking, the researcher attempted to mitigate potential researcher bias (Miles et
al., 2020; Saldáná, 2012).

Findings

This study was guided by the theoretical framework of role congruity theory, with
two research questions being adopted to better understand the experiences of female
interscholastic athletic directors during both their career path and attaining (making
employment decisions and/or securing employment) their current role.
Research Question 1: What Are the Past Career Paths of Current Women Interscholastic Athletic Directors?

The first research question focused on the career pathway of participants, which fostered two key themes – (a) Importance of Educational Achievement and (b) Working in the School Setting. The participants in this study all followed varying career paths to attain their current interscholastic athletic director role. This suggests that while there were consistent past experiences, no specific career path is necessary for women to attain the interscholastic athletic director position. While the participants all indicated various career paths, some commonalities existed across experiences. The first that was consistent was education.

Theme 1: Importance of Educational Achievement

The participants in this study all held master’s degrees. Interestingly, their degree paths all varied across participants. For example, the most common degree path that participants took was Educational Leadership ($n=6$) and Education- Topic Specific (i.e., Elementary Education and Teaching & Curriculum Development; $n=6$). The rest of the five participants were sport related but also varied, including Athletic Admin./Sport Psychology ($n=3$) and Sport Medicine/Athletic Training ($n=2$). Interestingly, the participants discussed attaining their higher level of education (master’s and/or certificates) in passing, suggesting the idea that attaining higher levels of education has become a fundamental aspect of women seeking interscholastic athletic director positions. They most commonly discussed earning the advanced degree/certificate for purposes of career building. For example, Abby shared that the only way she could move
up in her state was to attain the administrative/supervisor certificate; therefore, she did this to attain the athletic director position.

The next level of education discussed was attaining administration/supervisor licenses. With 14 separate states being represented, the participants all hold athletic director positions with varying levels of state requirements. For example, Mikayla stated, “You need to be an AD and Assistant Principal. So, you need your admin certification. So I went back for my masters and I graduated in 2012” indicating administrative certification was part of the job description and a requirement of attaining an athletic director position in the state. This was further expressed by Chloe, who stated “I went back to school to get my master's in education so I could achieve the goal to be a principal” suggesting the importance of upward mobility at the interscholastic level might be driven by educational attainment/achievement. Sarah expressed similar rhetoric when discussing moving forward from her athletic director role into a heightened administrative role, as she stated, “I think I do have aspirations, I am a licensed administrator.” In total, even without specific requirements for all participants, nine of the 17 participants held an administration/supervisor license. These results make sense, as nine of the 17 participants (not all the same nine who held licenses) also noted holding dual administration responsibilities at the school (i.e., assistant principal, behavior coordinator). This could indicate the higher educational attainment, the more women ‘on paper’ can prove themselves.

**Theme 2: Working in the School Setting**

The second theme in this section was the overlap of past experiences. The participants in this study mostly came from the ranks of former teachers \( n=12 \) and
coaches \( (n=14) \), however, their past experiences differed drastically. For example, past studies have suggested that most interscholastic athletic directors come from the ranks of teachers in Physical Education/Health. However only four of the 12 former teachers taught Physical Education/Health. The participants in this study came from various backgrounds, including Social Studies \( (n=3) \), Science \( (n=3) \), English/Reading \( (n=2) \), Math \( (n=1) \), and Elementary Education \( (n=1) \). These various backgrounds challenge past educational research and suggest that interscholastic athletic directors past teaching experience may be shifting.

One interesting finding in the career path of participants was their various positions in the school system. While not all participants were teachers, they all worked in some capacity at the school. For example, three participants held zero teaching experience, but worked as special education professionals \( (n=2) \) or school counselors \( (n=1) \). In total, seven of 17 participants indicated they worked in various roles in the high school or middle school setting. This suggested that while some athletic directors do not come from the ranks of teachers, they are not outsiders to the high school education system and politics associated with decision-making amongst school districts. The findings here also indicated that the participants were most likely to be hired to an athletic director role in their own district, with 11 of the 17 participants receiving their appointment in a school district of their previous employment.

Moving down to the past coaching experiences, almost all participants were a head coach at the interscholastic level \( (n=14) \). While coaches are not specifically in the school during the day, they are still hired by the school itself or the school district, meaning they are part of the educational system. Past experiences of being a coach makes
sense for interscholastic athletic directors and aligns with previous studies regarding athletic directors’ past experiences (Fowler et al., 2017). Noteworthy, the past coaching experience of this sample population varied, with the most frequent being track and field ($n=5$), basketball ($n=5$), and volleyball ($n=5$). Most of the coaches noted these past coaching experiences allowed them to feel confident in their ability to attain the interscholastic athletic director position. As Regina stated, “I've always been a track coach- for the last 10 years. And so I thought about being an athletic director.” The coaching role also allowed participants to get involved within the sporting realm, which lead to larger responsibilities, as Emory indicated, “I was hired as the assistant girl’s soccer coach. So, started coaching and then just kind of started helping with other sporting events and helping run them and stuff.”

The participants for this study did not note holding past experiences in athletic specific leadership roles prior to attaining their positions. For example, only two participants in this study held a position as the middle school athletic director, a position with many similar role responsibilities to the interscholastic athletic director position. Also, the interscholastic athletic director position was only found to be held by two of 17 participants. This makes sense, as most athletic departments do not have proper funds to support assistant athletic director roles, but almost all participants indicated they could use the support of such positions to assist with their workload as an athletic director.

**Research Question 2: What Are the Lived Experience(s) of Current Women Interscholastic Athletic Directors in Attaining Their Role?**
The second research question, which focused on the experiences of women in their leadership position attainment found three emerging higher order themes – (a) Structural Constraints, (b) Familiarity in Process, and (c) Perception of Self.

Table 2

Research Question #2-O rganized Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question #2: Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>#1 Structural Constraints</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a. Inconsistency of Job Postings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b. Getting the Job I didn’t Apply For</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1c. Turnover of Position</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme 1: Structural Constraints**

The participants discussed multiple structural constraints that existed in their leadership attainment. Often, these constraints were identified by participants as challenges. This was expressed by Brigitte, who stated, “I know that it's been more challenging for me to get positions than maybe my counterparts.” The participants openly discussed the lack of consistency with timing of job postings, getting the job I didn’t apply for, and turnover of positions. These sub-themes highlight potential structural issues in the interscholastic model for women attaining the athletic director positions.

**Subtheme #1: Inconsistency with Timing of Job Openings.** The first major structural constraint outlined by participants was the lack of consistency with timing of job openings, sometimes even leading to their current athletic director role not having had a job posting. For example, seven of the participants indicated that the timing of the job opening was not optimal. Two individuals did not even interview for their roles. Of the seven who indicated timing was less than ideal to start their positions, Regina started her
position just four weeks into the school year, with her athletic director quitting the first week of the year, as she stated, “and I became the athletic director in the middle of football season, never done it before and learned trial by fire, I guess.” This highlights the potential negative aspects of transition and outside viewership of the position - as this person only got appointed the position based on the timing. Chloe expressed similar frustration with the hiring process, where she was selected for a role mid-year without the job being posted,

It's very unique and if I could have done everything over again, I wish that they would have posted it, gone through the process, and allowed people to be hired because what it did it created some I’d say it created some frustrations for internal people of one not even knowing it was a position and then now there's this new person who shows up.

There are potentially great opportunities for women to get promoted to the athletic director role based on unique timing of turnover. However, this becomes a major concern as selecting someone out of necessity narrows the scope of the job search for open athletic director positions. This keeps most of the job searches internal, where historically we have more male coaches and leadership representation.

While the timing negatively impacted most participants, Abby noted her mid-school year transition was smooth based on her Middle School AD responsibilities, tasking her with the skills to have a lot of confidence from both her and central administration. She argued,

And I think my background was already organizing sports and it was a middle of the year position. The former athletic director retired in January.
So, I think it was helpful that someone already knew the process and could hit the ground running because it was already mid-year. This indicates that holding roles (Assistant AD and/or Middle School AD) associated with similar leadership traits as the athletic director may positively benefit women in inconveniently timed leadership transitions (which only four participants indicated in their past experiences).

**Subtheme 2: Getting the Job I Didn’t Apply For.** As noted above, a few participants actually did not even interview for their role. While most did interview for their role, at least four participants indicated they applied for another role (i.e., principal and/or assistant principal), and did not receive that job but were suggested to take on the athletic director position. For example, Chloe highlighted this,

So, I applied for this assistant principal at the middle school. I got number two, Superintendent tells me you’re number two, thank you so much. And I was like I’m done. Okay. It is what it is. Calls me the next day and says we actually have an opening at the high school. I think you’d be perfect for it.

This is an interesting finding especially because this was suggested by multiple participants. As Hailey also highlighted, “They shared the information that they had offered the position to another candidate. That was their current assistant principal/athletic director, but now they had that position open. Would I be interested in that?” The participants did not note the potential reasons for this phenomenon, but it could be associated with the perception that the athletic director role is potentially less of
a leadership role than other administration positions. The participants also noted the importance and prevalence of turnover amongst interscholastic athletic directors.

**Subtheme 3: Turnover of Position.** This was set in two separate contexts – state-wide turnover and school district/county turnover of the athletic director position. For example, Meghan stated, “I mean, we had the turnover and I’m sure it’s not unique to Michigan, the turnover here, but we had like 130 new ADs last year. Out of like only 700 high schools.” Grace echoed similar thoughts, “Yeah, it was interesting. So, there is like you said there’s a lot of turnover in this position.” While this potentially demonstrates more ‘open’ athletic director positions for women candidates, the current percentages of gender diversity has stayed consistent (around 15%), suggesting men are still hired into these open roles more frequently than their women counterparts.

The large turnover percentages would potentially suggest a positive situation for the next generation of women entering into leadership roles- as more open positions potentially suggests more opportunities for women candidates. However, on the contrary, multiple participants in this study mentioned the lack of turnover in their individual geographic area. This was vitally important for most participants as they did not feel comfortable moving districts and/or locations due to various reasons. As Abby noted,

This was the first one I applied for but that’s because I know, I want to stay in (Location). I don’t want to leave the district. And there’s only a certain number there’s five high schools in my (Location) that have athletics. There’s a bunch more high schools but only five have sports teams. So, the job is not like if there was one available every like every year, they don’t come up and they’re kind of coveted and you get the job
and you tend to stay until retirement age and it was, I got my certification at a time where I was lucky enough that there was a retirement in a position came up.

This implies, while there are more open positions across the state, women are less likely than their male counterparts to move geographic locations or school districts to seek positions. This was somewhat evident in this study, as only five of the participants indicated they moved location (counties) for their current roles. This was expressed by Hailey, who stayed in her school district to start her new athletic director role. She stated, “I’ve always enjoyed athletics and I tell everybody, it took me 35 years to get the job I wanted which was athletic director.” Lauren indicated after moving through multiple sport leadership roles, “It was like that job came out like oh, that’s the one I want, that’s the one.” This was often discussed by participants based on their family and perceptions of the impact on their children. As Sarah shares here in discussing her potentially moving into a principal position,

Well- are you just kind of waiting for a principal position to open or whatever? And I’m like, well, if it opens here in (location), that’s one thing. But if it’s not here in (location), then I guarantee you I’m not going anywhere for the next three years until my freshman graduates from high school. So those were the factors that you know, the mom factor was a big one”

However, interestingly enough, even when some participants indicated they were willing to move locations for an athletic director position, they struggled with attaining positions. As Grace outlines,
They were around (location). I wanted to stay on the west side of the state. So primarily, I was putting in applications there. Places that I want to move, you know, like (location), I did kind of all-over… I applied, for all different, all different things….Did not receive one, not one hear back or interview.

Overall, the importance of location of positions proved to be a major structural issue for participants. While they might have had issues with moving to new locations for jobs, even when participants were willing to make this move, they potentially lacked the familiarity with the search committee to be considered an adequate candidate, highlighting the importance of the district aspect of the interscholastic level.

**Theme 2: Familiarity in Process**

The second higher-order theme that emerged from participants was the idea of *Familiarity in Process*, which was expressed by all participants. Of this theme, three important sub-themes materialized, which included, internal v. external candidate, proved yourself, and mentoring. As noted above, the school district and location of positions ended up being major factor in women attaining leadership experiences. The participants all noted the interesting aspects of the in-district ‘candidate’ and how this potentially impacted their experience.

**Subtheme #1: Internal v. External Candidates.** The discussion of internal job candidates played a major role throughout these interviews. Hailey suggested for the most part, all things aside, an internal candidate is the optimal candidate, as she notes, I think you have to you have to wait, again, what plusses and minuses to each bring. If, at the end of the day, they’re equal. And there’s very little
gain or loss. I think the internal the person you know, is the person you go for, just because you already know the commodity that you’re purchasing.

While the participants in this study who were hired internally discussed how candidate bias potentially benefited them, there was also a discussion of the challenges with going up against an individual who is the internal candidate. This outlines the idea that the internal candidate inherently has an upper-hand in the interview process. As Brigitte suggests,

It’s always hard to be an internal candidate that has just a different knowledge base of where you’re at and what your needs are. Because you when you’re outside looking in like you have an idea of what may be going on, you have an idea of what their needs might be, but you can’t speak specifically to things and I think when you’re an internal candidate allows you to just have a different conversation with the people in the room.

Furthermore, Kendra outlines “In athletics, there tends to be like a progression of who’s going to be there moving internally. There’s always like that next internal candidate. If you’re coming from the outside, how do you get how do you get that role?” This illuminates the unique challenges associated with the interscholastic hiring process. In addition, being an internal candidate might even have significant impact on the overall experiences of athletic directors. This was evident by when Chloe discussed her not getting the athletic director position at her school,

I’d been on the receiving end of it like I’ve been the internal candidate at my school, and this other person got it over me and I know that’s
hard and you swallow it and then it’s hard to be the bigger person and
not only see the flaws, but they do and you’re like I could have done
that better, I could have done that better.

On the opposite side, Isabella, suggested being the ‘outside’ candidate potentially
impacted her transition into her new role,

I had not been familiar with this, this area of the county, I don’t think
anybody quite knew how to kind of feel about me when I first got this
position. I do know that there was someone else who had interviewed
that everyone thought was gonna get it. So, I think it was kind of a
shock when he did not.

The challenges with hiring internal candidates is evident and may also have long-term
impact on decision-making when looking at the athletic director position. Thus, internal
candidates may have the upper advantage in demonstrating their ability to handle
leadership roles, subsequently proving themselves more than just what is on their resume.

**Subtheme #2: Proved Yourself.** As stated above, the school district/county also
plays an important role on the perceptions of candidates, especially associated with the
idea of ‘proved/proving yourself.’ Multiple participants discussed their ability to have
proven themselves through their past work experiences that helped lead to them getting
their position. While Mikayla was technically not ‘in-district’, her in-region network
provided her an opportunity at her school based on the fact, she had proven her leadership
skills,

Luckily, I was close enough that I have a good reputation, because they
wanted me. But so is it not in district but it’s close enough that they knew
who I was kind of thing. It wasn’t like I came from you know, Netherlands or California or you know, something where the you even the up right, alright, so it had some semblance of K I do exist. Here’s my reputation. Here’s what I’ve done. And it could easily ask people that they knew about me, which they did.

Similarly, in her experience of applying for a job in her district, Lauren stated,

I think so because they knew my work ethic, I mean, they knew what I was capable of. And because I think it every situation I worked with each person except for the principal of (high school). I had worked with everybody else in some type of program or some type of training or somewhat/somehow, I had worked with every single person on that panel.

Overall, the familiarity aspect of the in-district hire for participants was overtly positive, based on the perception that they had already ‘proved’ themselves to the hiring committee.

**Subtheme #3: Mentoring.** The last sub-theme discussed from participants which overlaps well with the ‘proving’ yourself theme was the aspect of mentoring. The participants noted that in-district support systems were extremely helpful in their ascension into leadership roles by encouraging them to apply or even seeking them out for the athletic director position. Madison expressed this was vital in her even applying to the athletic director role, saying, “Yeah, so my principal came to me and said, I would like you to do this. And… I asked her why she thought, you know, I could fulfill the duties and she said that she saw some leadership qualities.” This was further explained in detail by Carson,
I was teaching summer school and our athletic director at the time came in on one of my breaks and she was female also. And she said, you know, I was your athletic director and you did a really good job with our softball team as far as the administrative part of it. She said, I’m resigning and going she went to a college just down the road to further her career. And she said, I think you would be really good in this role. I think you I really think that you should consider applying.

Piper explained this mentoring process as “a champion in my corner,” where she actively had someone pushing her and advocating for her success. Historically, we know the importance for mentoring during the career path for women (Bower, 2008, 2011; Lough, 2001; Hancock et al., 2018; O’Neill & Smith, 2019), this study shed light on the unique ability of mentoring to really impact career trajectory in high school leadership attainment.

**Theme 3: Perceptions of Self**

The participants in this study often discussed how they viewed themselves in the process of attaining their leadership positions. Two key subthemes emerged here – the impact of athletic participation and perceptions of gender and skills to perform leadership roles. The perception of how these individuals viewed themselves was important to understand in their leadership attainment.

**Subtheme #1: Athletic Participation.** The participants were quick to discuss their experiences as former athletes themselves. The majority of participants voiced their desire to enter and stay in sport leadership based on their past positive sport participation. They viewed sport as part of their identity and a positive aspect in their life, thus, they
expressed the want/need to improve the experiences of others. This was first expressed by Brigitte, who stated,

I think my why is I had a great high school experience. I had a great athletic experience. And I want all students to have a great experience. And seeing our students have those opportunities and the ability to participate and do things that maybe they’ve never done before or continue to grow get better.

Positive sport participation not only impacted their desire to improve the next generation of athletes, but as Lauren explained, her past experiences of traveling in youth sport was part of her family’s passion and led her to desire a sport leadership position. She also discussed the ability to use this positive experience to provide guidance in her role, “just trying to capitalize on that opportunity and trying to relay that information to students. I guess another one is my ability to play at the college level and letting them know what it's like.” Similarly, Abby shared, “I’m I guess a lifelong athlete- and athletics was always important in my family.” Participants even discussed the importance of sport participation on gender representation, as Meghan stated,

I mean, the relationships that I built as an athlete, you know, I build among my peers, and I see that is such an important part, not just for female student athletes, but all of them. And so, you know, I get to go to school every day. I get to be around sports every day. And that’s what I’ve always loved the most. And so being able to have a career that allows me to do that is pretty great.
Subtheme #2: Perceptions of Gender and Competence. The mention of gender in participants’ self-perceptions was not only discussed in their past sport participation, but also in the intersection of being a woman and seeking leadership roles. The women in this study were consistent when noting the importance of having women in leadership roles can help challenge the status quo regarding leadership representation. As Grace voiced,

I wanted to be a female role model in that aspect for young kids, because I had never seen one and actually had one in my career as an athlete. I only had one female coach for like one year when I was young, so I wanted to kind of make an impact in that space.

The importance of gender here also had its drawbacks for the participants, as multiple individuals discussed the negative association of being a woman applying for leadership roles. This was mostly associated with the idea that to overcome the societal perceptions of women in leadership roles, you must work hard and show you belong. As Abby outlines,

I’ve never tried to look at gender as an excuse or a crutch. It’s always been a challenge, to I have to act or be twice as good to get the respect so my focus was never on what was not allowed or viewed differently. But what I could do.

Meghan even notes,

I’ve always chosen the path that seems to have more male leaders. And so to convince myself that I deserve to be at the table…that was an internal
challenge the internal struggle and I think that’s characteristic of females.

As I do deserve to be at the table.”

This demonstrates that the potential lack of women in leadership roles can lead to self-perceptions of not belonging and these negative perceptions may lead to more negative experiences in the leadership attainment process. Lauren even states, “As a women, you have to be twice as good.” This was further expressed by Grace, when she noted,

You know, convincing people to trust you is a huge thing. Especially being a female athletic director, is even as a female coach, it’s really hard to get position, you know, I feel like it might be in internal depth, you know, an internal attribute but you feel like you have to be overqualified for these positions to get them.

This was further outlined by Isabella, who stated “So I was very concerned about taking the position just for the simple fact of feeling like I wasn’t qualified.” Overall, the participants noted that perceptions of self and their gender does impact their leadership attainment in the high school space, especially when leadership representation in the current athletic director ranks lacks gender diversity.

Discussion

This research study utilized role congruity theory and sought to uncover the experiences of women athletic directors in their attainment of leadership roles. The first tenet of role congruity theory suggests women face discrimination in attaining leadership roles and positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The study had two guiding research questions - career paths of current woman interscholastic athletic directors and their lived experiences of making their employment decisions and/or securing employment. Overall,
the results from this study were consistent with the first tenant of the role congruity theory – women are perceived less favorably for leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Chin, 2010). The participants discussed multiple constraints, including the importance of gender in their career path and leadership attainment. These results are informative for those women seeking to attain leadership positions in high school athletics.

The first important finding in this study was the unique but similar career paths of current female athletic directors. For example, the majority of participants had past experience as teachers (12 of 17), however, multiple participants worked various roles other than teaching. Fletcher (2019) found 12 of 13 women interscholastic athletic directors held a physical education teaching role prior to the transition into the athletic director role. This demonstrates a potential shift in perceptions of women interscholastic candidates, suggesting they can come from multiple background to attain leadership roles. Interestingly, this study also shed light on the importance of the physical education teaching role as the central teaching position to attain athletic director (Fletcher, 2019). Only four of 12 former teachers in this study held their teaching position in physical education, a significant shift in who we view as ‘qualified’ teachers to handle leadership roles. These findings challenge the importance of being a teacher (especially physical education teacher) but affirmed the idea that you must work in education, as all participants (regardless of their career path), worked in a school system prior to being selected into their athletic director position.

Experience working as a coach played another key role in the career progression for women athletic directors. The findings here mirror past studies of high school athletic
directors, where researchers found the majority of participants formerly held coaching roles (Fletcher, 2019; Whisenant & Pederson, 2004). However, the participants in past studies held majority of their coaching positions in basketball and soccer (Whisenant & Pedersen, 2004). The results from our participants indicated a variety of past coaching experience, with five participants indicating coaching basketball, volleyball, and track and field. This study investigated only women candidates, whereas past studies (Whisenant & Pederson, 2004) focused on majority male population. This may demonstrate that males coaching more main-stream sports (basketball and soccer) have easier access to the athletic director position. On the other hand, women coaches may demonstrate competency from just holding the position of head coach regardless of sport, since coaching is traditionally a male dominated field (73% of youth coaches are male, Aspen, 2019). This indicates, a positive for leadership attainment for women suggesting a more diverse population of women coaches (vs. men) are being identified potentially to hold leadership traits associated with the athletic director position.

While almost all participants were former coaches (14 of 17), these results shed light on a major inconsistently among their career progressions to the athletic director position. Bower and Hums (2013) and Heard (2021) found in the college space, all athletic directors come through the ranks of the athletic department and ascend to leadership from assistant/associate athletic director positions. However, in this study, only two participants held assistant athletic director roles and two held Middle School athletic director positions. While this makes sense due to the lack of positions in the high school space- often associated with funding opportunities (only three of 17 participants had their own assistant AD’s), the importance of these positions cannot be understated.
(Hoch, 2017, Thompson, 2021). The lack of assistant athletic director positions creates inconsistent career pathways for women in attaining the athletic director role (not a single woman held the same path in this study). At the college level, those fighting for equal access to leadership roles have the ability to identify specific positions in the structure to assist in improving gender representation (Miller, 2019; Thompson, 2021). However, the lack of assistant athletic director positions in the high school space indicates inconsistent stepping-stone positions for women who are often overlooked for athletic director positions. The assistant athletic director role can act as a specific resume builder directly associated with handling leadership responsibilities of an athletic director, making women ‘on paper’ more qualified to make the jump to the specific sport centered leadership role of athletic director. However, without these roles being available across the country, we will continue to see a lack of women using these positions as their career pathway into the interscholastic athletic director role.

Another finding that affirmed role congruity theory—women facing discrimination in attaining leadership positions—is the lack of consistency in the hiring process. The results indicated that positions were often not even posted, with some only being posted in their district hiring system. In theory, schools are not able to control the timing associated with a change with their athletic director, but they can control the job posting, job interviews, and hiring process.

While multiple participants in this study suggested the inconsistency was of benefit to them attaining their position, the role of homologous reproduction becomes relevant to the experience. According to Whisenant et al. (2010), homologous reproduction may present one of the most important ethical dilemmas in interscholastic
sport, as it suggests men hire more men, women hire more women, and has been found among all sport levels (Whisenant, 2008). In the context of interscholastic sport, homologous reproduction means male principals hire the next generation of male athletic directors, male athletic directors hire the next generation of male coaches. The reason this applies here, is that if schools don’t post jobs, they will often hire internally in their own network (or those that look/act like them). With the large number of principals and athletic directors being male, this may perhaps account for the lack of gender diversity in the athletic director role (Whisenant et al., 2010). In the current study, 11 of the 17 principals were men, which might suggest no homologous reproduction a potential positive finding of this study, however, two potential reasons come into play. First, principal roles also have high turnover rates with 75% of participants in this study indicating turnover in their principal during their current athletic director tenure. Secondly, it is important to remember that while principals are critical decision-makers in hiring an athletic director, district school boards and superintendents are also involved (again, predominately men hold these roles), which may play a larger role in the homologous reproduction argument. Across the country, the inconsistency in gender representation in athletic director roles still exists, suggesting the importance of having formal hiring processes and consistent and widespread job postings. Both of those may potentially grow the population of women applicants. As Burden et al. (2010) argues, increased visibility for women in leadership positions may mitigate negative stereotypes and evaluations of women as appropriate sport leaders. Those beliefs and perceptions develop at a young age. Thus, women holding high school athletic director positions are vital to the continued breaking of gender stereotypes.
The female athletic directors in this study also discussed how their gender impacted their athletic director role attainment. The first major concern here was the in-district hiring practices that participants noted. Of the participants, 11 of the 17 participants were hired for their athletic director position in the school district where they worked. This negatively impacts women attaining athletic director roles, as even with large recent turnover in high school athletic director positions (Allibone, 2022), as it suggests women are less likely to move locations to accept an athletic director position. This was mirrored in the intercollegiate space, as Lumpkin et al. (2015) found that women were more likely to stay at their institution and work their way up the ranks, rather than moving to new locations/schools to climb the ladder in their careers. The participants discussed how this lack of movement is usually due to family roles and feeling comfortable in their community. The participants mentioned how the family aspect plays a major role, which traditionally makes sense, as men have historically received more family support to work in long-hour positions like athletic director (Dixon & Bruening, 2005, 2007; Fletcher, 2019, Zdroik & Veliz, 2021). Thus, in-district positions (or similar location) positions may hold more importance to women than male counterparts.

The importance of in-district hires was also discussed based on the ability of the women to ‘prove themselves’ as capable of handling the athletic director role. Dwivedi et al. (2018) suggest internal hires of CEOs are often successful based on familiarity with an organization and the ability to have already proven themselves to the Board of Directors and other C-suite leadership. In the sport realm, Lumpkin et al. (2015) indicated women are more likely to reach higher levels of leadership internally in the intercollegiate space,
based on the fact that women are more likely to stay at an institution longer than their male counterparts. This current study suggests that women who haven’t yet ‘proved themselves’ to a hiring committee are at a significant disadvantage compared to male candidates. The negative stereotypes of women’s leadership capabilities indicate that the tenets of role congruity theory are present in leadership attainment in the high school athletic director role.

This also holds interesting overlap when comparing interscholastic and intercollegiate athletics, as the women athletic directors in the current study commonly mentioned the ability to ‘prove themselves’ which might be of a harder task in the interscholastic sport level. For example, based on a network analysis by Katz et al. (2018), the networks of women working in college athletics are quite large (even though males held larger overall networks), the same may not hold true in the interscholastic space. Whereas the Katz et al. findings indicated larger networks due to diverse career paths (working at multiple schools)- our study indicated participants were less likely to move around for jobs, suggesting smaller networks for women at the interscholastic level- in comparison to the intercollegiate space.

This study sheds light on the career pathways and experiences of women high school athletic directors. The results indicate significant barriers into attaining the positions and confirms the role congruity theory exists in high school sport. This is one of the first studies to address role congruity theory through the voices of the under-represented group (women interscholastic athletic directors) themselves. Investigating role congruity theory amongst women interscholastic athletic directors affords a deeper
understanding of the phenomenon occurring at the high school level. This may suggest inconsistencies in the experiences between men and women in these roles.

**Practical Implications**

To create a more equitable path to leadership and more diverse leadership representation, this study suggests that high schools and state athletic associations need to ensure open communication with job positions and the hiring process. They should also seek to add assistant athletic directors (even if part-time) to help women improve representation of women in leadership roles and allow them to ‘prove’ that they are capable of handling the responsibilities of the athletic director role. While the financial burden of this addition might be a barrier to implementation, using a budgeting model similar to one used to determine ways to raise coaching salaries or combining multiple responsibilities (school administration, support, etc.) can help increase opportunities and allow for those wanting to work in the athletic sphere to become more marketable. With an increase ‘career pathway’ into the athletic director role, through positions like assistant athletic director we may have the ability to create more equitable representation of the athletic director role. Furthermore, the results suggest that the only way to re-envision the leadership space of high school athletic directors is to increase the number of women coaches and teachers involved in sport (even from a supervision status). The increased capacity of women holding roles in the most frequently identified career paths can potentially lead to more candidates to take on the role of high school athletic director.

**Future Research**

Building from this study will be vital to understand the phenomenon of the lack of gender representation happening across the country. While this study utilized participants
from multiple states, the perceptions of high school sport and job attainment experiences are very much associated with individual states leadership/high school athletic association. Thus, a future study must use a case study approach on one state to better understand the experiences and make stronger connections across the hiring process. Further, it would be interesting to gain perceptions of those on the other side of the interview process, for example the hiring committee. While the hiring committees for interscholastic athletic director positions are made up of multiple individuals, participants indicated principals and school district representatives hold substantial power in the decision-making process (and are often majority males), making them an essential group to examine. Lastly, this study shed light on the diversity of career pathways from participants, a more in-depth investigation of career pathways and comparisons between men and women athletic directors is needed to better understand the current hiring environment.
CHAPTER V

“How do you try to take gender out of it? But also keep gender in it?” Exploring the experiences of women interscholastic athletic directors

The current interscholastic sport landscape is large and diverse. The largest educational-based sport opportunities for boys and girls in the country, with around 7.6 million participants, resides under the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) governance umbrella (NFHS, 2022). Girls’ participation in high school sport has seen a 1000% growth since the passage of Title IX in 1973 (1971: 300,000; 2022: 3,200,000, NFHS, 2022; WEEA, n.d.). The positives of Title IX are evident across access and sport participation, however, the growth in the number of women holding leadership positions in interscholastic sport continues to lag behind that of athlete participation. While the current NFHS executive director is a woman (Dr. Karissa Niehoff, NFHS, n.d.a.), the lack of representation for women holding leadership roles amongst state associations and athletic directors around the country still exists. One glaring example of this is the gender representation on the NFHS Board of Directors, who have 12 active members (current athletic directors) and only 3 identify as women (25%; NFHS, n.d.b.).

At the individual state athletic association level, low female representation exists in executive director/commissioner roles. For example, a quick review by researchers of high school athletic associations websites found women hold only seven of the 51 (13.7%) executive director/commissioner roles. The executive director/commissioner
represents an important position within the interscholastic governance structure, as the state athletic association holds substantial power in developing and implementing policies. Similarly, amongst interscholastic athletic directors, a selection of smaller studies reported sample populations with consensus findings suggesting women hold between 15-20% of interscholastic athletic director roles (Dombeck, 2018; Fletcher, 2019; Mercogliano, 2019; Mullane & Whisenant, 2007; Whisenant, 2003, 2008). Thus, the lack of female representation in interscholastic sport, across all levels of governance and leadership is evident.

The lack of representation at individual schools also holds repercussions for the state level, as athletic directors impact policy decision-making at the state level (Burton & Leberman, 2017). As such, gender representation matters in sport leadership positions (Evans & Pfister, 2020). The lack of gender representation at the state high school level exists in both committees and membership voting. For example, the Kentucky High School Athletic Association’s (KHSAA) top leadership group is the KHSAA Board of Control, which includes 20 members from across the Commonwealth. Of these 20 members, four women (20%) and 16 men (80%) make up the committee (KHSAA, n.d.a.). Similarly, in Tennessee, the Legislative Council of the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association (TSSAA) consists of a group of 12 individuals from across the state, with just two women (17%) and 10 men (83%; TSSAA, n.d.a.). This unequal representation leads to lack of diversity in decision-making at the state association level. For example, the lack of women’s voices in policy development and voting could potentially negatively impact girls sport in the respective state. When there is leadership diversity, decision-making groups are often more successful (Burton & Leberman, 2017).
Even though women represent a low percentage of leadership roles such as athletic director, studies suggest that once women do ascend to leadership, they perform successfully in the role of interscholastic athletic director (Pedersen & Whisenant, 2005) and provide positive role models for athletes (Kalin & Waldon, 2015). For example, Kalin and Waldon (2015) suggest leadership perceptions begin at a young age, and the interscholastic athletic director acts as a central role model holding a leadership position. These perceptions (based on current athletic director representation) often skew toward viewing high school athletic leadership as a male dominated field. Burden et al. (2010) highlights this by stating, “young females (and males) need to see women in key decision-making positions where their abilities and contributions are valued” (p. 10). As such, representation of women holding interscholastic athletic director positions is important to create an inclusive sport environment and potentially impact perceptions of the next generation of athletes.

The continued push to diversify leadership in sport has been evident in research, with past studies indicating women have unique experiences in sport leadership roles, as they are often seen as breaking stereotypical leadership perceptions (Burton et al., 2011; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Kalin & Waldron, 2015). Taylor and Hardin (2016) found women intercollegiate athletic directors face significant pushback on their credibility and experience when making higher level decisions. Furthermore, Taylor and Wells (2017) highlighted similar negative effects of hegemonic masculinity (male traits preferred) on organizational culture for women athletic directors. Female administrator participants in their study voiced concern over their ‘place’ in the athletic department and the credibility given to them by male counterparts. While these past studies highlight negative
experiences of women intercollegiate athletic directors, to date, little research is known about interscholastic level.

The NCAA membership includes a higher percentage of women athletic directors (24%; WLCS, 2022) than the interscholastic level (15%; Fletcher, 2019). However, the bulk of research on the experiences of women has occurred amongst the NCAA structure, with little research attention on women interscholastic sport leaders (Pedersen & Whisenant; 2005; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Taylor & Wells, 2017). A study conducted by Yiamouyiannis and Osborne (2012) on leadership representation at the college level suggests that the more powerful the leadership positions (DI NCAA governance structure), the more likely you will find higher percentages of men. This leaves women more likely to hold leadership positions in less visible and powerful leadership roles. This might suggest that women should hold more representation in high school athletic director roles. It is not surprising that few studies on women interscholastic leaders exist, as the overall literature focusing on interscholastic athletics has been minimal (Forsyth et al., 2020). For example, Forsyth et al. (2020) found in eight prominent sport management journals (i.e., Journal of Sport Management, Sport Management Review, etc.) only 22 of 3,757 or .005% of published articles focused on interscholastic sport. While these journals and articles do not constitute the entire body of literature on interscholastic sport, this low percentage does suggest the need for a greater focus on the interscholastic sector. As such, expanding the already minimal literature to encompass the experiences of female interscholastic athletic directors is warranted as it can add depth to the literature and highlight the unique experiences of women in key leadership positions.
To fully understand the under-representation of women interscholastic athletic directors, inquiry into the experiences of the current population is needed. As noted, past studies have highlighted the inconsistency of experiences for women in sport leadership roles (Kalin & Waldron, 2015; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Taylor & Wells, 2017), which may lead to women exiting the field earlier than their male counterparts (Lumpkin et al., 2013). At the interscholastic sport level, the gap in research investigating the under-representation of women sport leadership experiences can lead to a lack of fundamental understanding of interscholastic sport and the challenges facing women holding sport leadership roles in the space. To help address the under-representation of women interscholastic athletic directors, hearing from those performing the position can allow for more comprehensive understanding of systematic issues and inconsistencies in that sport space. Thus, this study seeks to investigate the phenomena behind the under-representation of women interscholastic athletic directors, seeking to help create a more gender inclusive environment amongst interscholastic sport leadership.

**Literature Review**

The following section provides an overview of the essential literature on high school athletic directors and the role congruity theory which provided the background for this study. The major topic areas include information on the role of interscholastic athletic director and challenges associated with the role.

**Interscholastic Sport and the Athletic Director**

The traditional duties of interscholastic athletic directors have evolved over time with the increase in high school sport participation numbers in an ever-changing sport environment (Blackburn, 2013). The athletic director’s duties involve overseeing and
implementing all aspects of an interscholastic athletic department including communication and accessibility, student-athlete development, team/program management, planning, scheduling, transportation, contest oversight and management, legal and safety concerns, marketing, fund-raising, budgeting, and equipment and facilities management (Blackburn, 2013). Whisenant and Pederson (2004) also found 88% of athletic directors hold collateral coaching duties, adding another significant time commitment.

Arguably two of the most important duties of the interscholastic athletic director are creating and sustaining relationships with coaches, athletes, parents, community members, boosters, and teachers (Fowler et al., 2017). Since athletic directors often represent the only full-time staff member amongst high school athletic departments, they are also tasked with shaping their high school’s and local community’s athletic cultures (Kochanek & Erickson, 2021). Overall, this demonstrates the challenges associated with being a modern-day athletic director, as they are tasked with handling multiple roles in their duties.

As Hobbs (2018) suggests, the modern day interscholastic athletic director plays a vital role in the overall educational and athletic experience of their athletes, but their influence can further expand to create positive perceptions amongst the community, region, and state. Interscholastic athletic directors are the potential first interaction an athlete or community member has with a sport leadership position, thus, giving context to the idea that seeing women athletic directors impacts student perceptions of their leadership skills (Burden et al., 2010; Whisenant et al., 2010). When women do reach the interscholastic athletic director role, they perform successfully, projecting a positive
image of their leadership abilities (Pedersen & Whisenant, 2005). These researchers reviewed the records over 400 athletic directors and found that when women attained interscholastic athletic director positions, they experienced higher success rates than their male counterparts. The authors suggest women represent a strong fit in the interscholastic athletic director role, potentially doing more with less, due to current and past successes in their roles. Further, the study found that younger women were attaining the role of athletic director and finding success, breaking the stereotypical perceptions of women as sport leaders (Pedersen & Whisenant, 2005).

Whisenant et al. (2010) found that one issue needing attention within the interscholastic sporting space was the lack of women holding coaching roles. The authors state, “what clearly stands out from those studies is that women have not been granted the opportunity to fully capitalize on the growth of interscholastic sport” (p. 111). This was further demonstrated by a Lumpkin et al. (2013) study investigating coaching representation across 21 states (3,910 coaches). The findings indicated that by the age of 50 most female head coaches had moved on with their life due to the time commitment that coaching required. Coaches indicated that they saw fellow colleagues leave the coaching profession because it took too much time away from their family obligations (Lumpkin et al., 2013). This is important because past research suggests most athletic directors come from the coaching ranks (Fletcher, 2019; Levensailor, 2018; Whisenant & Pedersen, 2004). If women are leaving earlier than their male counterparts we have fewer women who can potentially ascend to the athletic director role. This is consistent with past studies where women left sport leadership positions faster than their male counterparts (Hindman & Walker, 2018; Quaterman et al., 2006).
In investigating the extent of potential work-life and family balance issues in interscholastic sport, Martin (1999) suggests that the low number of women interscholastic athletic directors was partially based on the challenges with balancing work and life. At the interscholastic level, athletic directors are asked to work extremely long hours during the school year, leaving them in conflict with handling time commitments to family and work (Fletcher, 2019). One of the struggles in the work-family conflict that existed for women athletic directors was attending their own children’s extra-curricular activities (Levensailor, 2018). With the heavy time commitment associated with an interscholastic athletic director position, conflicting time commitments were commonplace, weighing on the women handling athletic director roles (Levensailor, 2018). Fletcher (2019) suggested one way which athletic directors negotiate work-family conflict was to integrate their family into their job by having them attend sporting events. Another study investigating work-family conflict for women in interscholastic sport was conducted by Zdroik and Veliz (2021) who found interscholastic coaches struggled with handling work and family conflict, especially when their coaching appointment was a part-time position.

Other past studies have suggested negative overall experiences and perceptions of women performing the interscholastic athletic director roles (Levensailor, 2018; Whisenant, 2015; Welch, 2012). For example, when Moore et al. (2005) asked women athletic director to outline barriers to their role, the women highlighted feeling questioned in their authority based on gender, not being treated equally with males, needing to convince the community of their authority, and being overlooked by less experienced males. This potentially indicates the impact of gender on experiences in the athletic
director role. Furthermore, Welch (2012) found varying perceptions of access to the athletic director role between male and female participants. Male participants overwhelmingly expressed positive outlooks, while the females held opposite views on access and opportunities to the athletic director role for female candidates. This suggests varying perceptions across the gender of interscholastic athletic directors, implying sexism is also institutionally embedded at the interscholastic sport level.

These perceptions of leadership capabilities negatively impact the experiences of female interscholastic athletic directors. This was expressed by Levensailor (2018) who found female interscholastic athletic directors received significant backlash from male coaches and male students, reporting multiple experiences of gender discrimination based on perceptions of their level of competency to handle decision-making responsibilities. This was further confirmed when Whisenant et al. (2015) found male head coaches were more likely to disagree with the decision-making of a female athletic director compared to a male athletic director. These few studies highlight potential negative experiences of women handling the athletic director role, which can be further investigated through the lens of role congruity theory.

**Theoretical Framework**

The original development of role congruity theory derived from social role theory (Eagly, 1987). Social role theory conceptually seeks to understand human behaviors in social groups; more specifically, how socially constructed social roles of individuals within groups affect behaviors. In theory, the construction of social roles amongst social groups is derived from gender stereotypes and perceptions, leading to varying group experiences across gender (Eagly et al., 2000; Kite et al., 1991). This suggests male and
female group members portray different social behaviors and expressed personalities in social groups (Eagly, 1987). These pre-set gender roles greatly impact social group dynamics, leading to potential discrimination against women who are seeking group leadership, as they are perceived to be breaking social norms. These norms are only further confirmed when women have currently and historically lacked representation in dominant positions in the division of labor (i.e., sport leadership; Eagly, 1987; Mudrick & Lin, 2017).

Role congruity theory extends social role theory to investigate circumstances where pre-conceived stereotypes of women in social groups become disrupted, specifically regarding leadership roles (Eagly et al., 2000; Eagly & Karau, 2002). For example, females disrupt social group norms when they perform leadership positions in historically male dominated fields, as these fields have created societal norms and perceptions that males hold the most identifiable and preferred traits for these roles (Kalin & Waldron, 2015). Therefore, the perceptions surrounding agentic traits become associated with leadership positions, subsequently giving males congruency with these roles, whereas females are perceived as incongruent to perform leadership roles. For women, a position associated with communal traits would be perceived to align with congruent roles. Ferguson (2018) describes these gender role perception norms as descriptive norms and prescriptive norms. Descriptive norms (or stereotypical norms) describe “shared beliefs about what men and women actually do” (p. 410), whereas prescriptive norms describe “what men and women actually do” (p. 410). As such, descriptive norms often impact experiences of those holding leadership roles, affording
men and women varying levels of perceived acceptance of their leadership capacity (Ferguson, 2018).

Further, when women ascend to leadership roles, they potentially break the gender norms associated with leadership traits (communal v. agentic), resulting in pushback against their performance in the position (Eagly & Chin, 2010; Koenig et al., 2011). When women face perceptions of being incongruent with leadership roles, their competency levels are often scrutinized at higher levels than men (Eagly, 2018). Eagly and Chin (2010) noted that leadership stereotyping often leads to women embracing the follower role and avoiding the group leader position all together.

As such, role congruity theory relies on two foundational tenets - (a) women are perceived less favorably for leadership positions; and (b) women are evaluated less favorably when performing leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The stereotypical nature of these two tenets often leads to negative experiences for women in leadership, as role congruity suggests women face barriers at all points in their career when performing leadership roles (Burton et al., 2011). This study exclusively focused on the second tenant, where women evaluated less favorably when performing leadership positions- potentially leading to more negative experiences in these roles.

**Performing Leadership Roles**

The second tenet of role congruity theory states that even when women break through the proverbial ‘glass ceiling’ (Cotter et al., 2001) and attain leadership positions, they then face unfavorable evaluations, heavy scrutiny, and pushback (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Across multiple fields of study, role congruity theory has been utilized to investigate the evaluation and experiences of women performing incongruent gender
typed leadership positions, including in business (Funk, 2019; Gupta et al., 2019; Hill et al., 2015), higher education (Cox, 2014; Miller & Roksa, 2020; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2019; Wiedman, 2020), and sport management (Aicher & Samariniotis, 2011; Mudrick & Lin, 2017; O’Connor et al., 2010; Tiell et al., 2012).

Researchers focused on role congruity theory have examined the theory across multiple professions in sport, including athletic trainers (O’Connor et al., 2010), sport reporters (Mudrick & Lin, 2017), head coaches (Kalin & Waldron, 2015), and athletic directors (Peachey & Burton, 2011). Among these varying sport professions, males hold the majority of leadership positions, fostering an environment where masculine traits are encouraged and celebrated, leaving perceptions that they are associated with leadership effectiveness (Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). Eagly and Chin (2010) further state that stereotypes drive negative evaluations of female leaders due to perceptions associated with leadership centered on agentic traits (self-assertion, independence, control, and charisma; see Abele, 2003), which align with traditional perceptions of masculinity. Thus, the second tenant of role congruity theory addresses this by evaluating experiences and perceptions of women performing leadership positions.

Studies using role congruity theory have focused extensively on coaching and administrative roles within sport (Aicher & Samariniotis, 2011; Madsen & McGarry, 2017; Tiell & Dixon, 2008; Tiell et al., 2012). In 2017, Madsen and McGarry investigated gender differences between head coach and assistant coach positions. The head coach position (top level of leadership on a sport team) was found to align with masculine characteristics (forceful and assertive), with the assistant coach position aligning with feminine characteristics (caring and nurturing). This leaves women who
attain the head coach position to potentially break stereotypical gender norms, potentially leading to more negative evaluations from both players and higher-level administrative leaders (Madsen & McGarry, 2017). Further, Tiell and Dixon (2008) investigated the experiences and perceptions of senior women administrators. The findings suggested that senior women administrators hold little to no responsibility with agentic traits (budgeting and fundraising), and more responsibility with communal qualities (role modeling and monitoring Title IX issues). In a follow-up study, Tiell et al. (2012) found similar results, as the senior woman administrator designation still lacked access to roles associated with department fundraising and budget management processes. Thus, while the senior woman administrator designation is intended to indicate the highest-ranking women in an athletic department, they may still lack upward career mobility into the athletic director role, based on perceptions that they are not fit to handle the fundraising and budgetary components of the department.

Role congruity theory has also been used to investigate evaluations of the athletic director position. For example, Aicher and Samariniotis (2011) examined perceptions of athletic director effectiveness based on gender representation in the position. Male athletic directors were rated as optimal leaders in both scenarios proposed (competitive and cooperative), demonstrating that regardless of the behaviors expressed in the position, preferences may exist for males. This potentially reaffirms the double-bind women face in sport leadership positions. As Aicher and Samariniotis (2011) explain, “this situation illustrates the paradox women face where masculine behavior is neither accepted nor condoned and feminine behavior is not respected or valued” (p. 255). Similar results were found by Whisenant et al. (2015), who examined perceptions of high
school head coaches of their current athletic director. The 122 high school coaches (72% male) indicated no difference for the male and female athletic director in regard to their procedural justice (dispute resolution) and interpersonal justice (treatment of individual). However, male coaches perceived female athletic directors less favorably on fairness when rating their distributive justice (actual outcomes of a decision). This confirms different evaluations across gender in the high school athletic director role. More specifically, women receive greater push-back in their decision-making process, as male head coaches often disagreed with their decisions.

Overall, much of the literature on role congruity theory utilizes quantitative analysis to formulate results. One of the few studies utilizing a qualitative approach was done by Diacin and Lim (2012) whose study used role congruity theory to examine female intercollegiate athletic administrators’ lived experiences in performing leadership positions. The results indicated three key themes: work-family conflict, gender ideologies, and networks. The work-family conflict theme illustrated the differences between genders in domestic responsibilities, with males having more flexibility to work unusual hours based on family role responsibilities. The participants also discussed gender ideologies (stereotypes) affecting their experiences, emphasizing the ‘lack-of-fit’ when they portray the characteristics of caring and nurturing in their roles (communal traits). Lastly, the participants discussed the lack of access to networks in athletic administration positions for women. Regarding networks, the participants particularly addressed the differences in access for themselves and their male counterparts, as they perceived males had easier access to connections and potential future employment, making it challenging for women to move up the leadership ranks.
To date, multiple studies used role congruity theory to investigate the perceptions of leadership, but little research inquiry directly asked female interscholastic athletic directors about lived experiences. As such, the purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences of current women interscholastic athletic directors. As highlighted, little is known of the actual experience of female athletic directors in their own voices, and therefore, role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) acts as a good lens to theoretically investigate those experiences. This study seeks to holistically understand the current support systems, barriers, and challenges women in the interscholastic athletic director position may face when performing their roles, which will help address the fundamental issue of the gender under-representation of position. The following research question was identified to guide this study:

**RQ1:** What are the lived experience(s) of women interscholastic athletic directors in performing their role?

**Method**

To best address the research question a phenomenological method of inquiry was selected as the best fit for present study. Utilizing a semi-structured interview protocol, researchers sought to address the research question surrounding the experiences of current women interscholastic athletic directors.

**Phenomenology**

The phenomenological approach attempts to uncover a deeper understanding of the meaning associated with individual lived experiences, allowing for a stronger grasp of a natural phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Vagle, 2018). This qualitative philosophy in research design allows the unique individual perspectives of participants to emerge, as
phenomenological research is not concerned with generalizing and quantifying the pre-conditioned outcomes, but rather focusing on the interpretive process to uncover emerging phenomenon (Vagle, 2018). This process makes the phenomenological approach an interpretive rather than a descriptive process. For example, this interpretive process explores and analyzes individual lived experiences of participants rather than comparing transcendental experiences (experiences across participants), allowing for in-depth data collection and analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). In the context of the study at hand using role congruity theory, female interscholastic athletic directors shared their own unique individual perspectives and experiences, allowing for a deeper level of understanding of the phenomenon (Glesne, 2018).

**Recruiting Procedures**

The sampling procedure used for this study followed a purposive sample approach, based on the small population of women interscholastic athletic directors across the country (Dombeck, 2018; Fletcher, 2019; Whisenant, 2003, 2008). This criterion-based sampling allowed the researcher to target a specific group of individuals with similar lived experiences to allow emerging phenomena to emerge (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell, 2014; Palinkas et al., 2015). The purposive sampling for this study included the following selection criteria for participants: (a) self-identify as female, (b) current interscholastic athletic director, and (c) high school where the participant works is located in the United States and is a member of the state high school athletic association (Accredited NFHS member), and (d) held their athletic director position for at least one year and no more than seven years.
Following the purposive sampling approach, participants for this study were recruited from the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NIAAA), a national organization with membership of around 12,000 athletic administrators across all 50 states (including DC), with the population estimated to be around 15% female athletic directors (Fowler, 2019). Upon IRB approval, an NIAAA representative sent an email to all female athletic director members outlining the research study and providing a Google Forms link that asked participants basic demographic information. The NIAAA representative sent the initial email and three weeks later, sent a follow-up email to the membership. The researchers also recruited participants through social media, by posting study information via a graphic on both Twitter and Facebook.

**Participants**

Once IRB approved this study, the researcher contacted the NIAAA to share the purpose of the study and ask for contact information of all female membership. Instead of having the researchers send out the recruitment email, the NIAAA sent a confidential Listserv email to their women members. This left the researcher without an official response rate. After an initial recruitment email and a follow-up email three weeks later, 85 female athletic directors completed the basic demographic survey. This demographic survey was conducted to screen participants for the study. The demographic survey included, gender, race, state of employment, years in role, classification (public or private), school size, sport offerings at their school, gender of principal, gender of past athletic director, number of assistant athletic directors, and willingness to complete a virtual interview. Of these 33 eligible participants, the researcher sent follow-up emails to ask for participation. In total, 17 female interscholastic athletic directors agreed to
participate in the study and completed semi-structured virtual interviews. The participants self-identified their race, with the sample including White \((n=14)\), Black or African American \((n=1)\), and American Indian \((n=2)\). The sample population represented 14 states and participants school sizes ranged from 30 to 2,900. The participants had various career lengths with the shortest career path to the athletic director position at six years, with the longest 35 years. Table 3 below provides a summarized overview of the participants.

Table 3

*Overview of Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Racial Identity</th>
<th>Year in Position</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>School Size*</th>
<th>Dual Role</th>
<th>Assistant Athletic Director</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>American Indian or Alaskan Native</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Yes (Coach)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regina</td>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Yes (Special Education)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mikayla</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>Huge</td>
<td>Yes (Middle School AD)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Yes (Assistant Principal)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hailey</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Yes (Assistant Principal)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brigitte</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>Huge</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carson</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Yes (Associate Principal)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emory</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Utah</td>
<td>Huge</td>
<td>Yes (Teacher)</td>
<td>1 (Dual-ADs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kendra</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Yes (Assistant Principal)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabella</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Yes (Assistant Principal)</td>
<td>3 (1 per season)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
*School Size- Small= 500> students, Medium=501-1000 students, Large=1,001-1,500 students, Huge= 1,501< students

### Data Collection and Analysis

The virtual interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and the researcher used Zoom, a commonly used video conferencing technology. Upon the start of the interview, the interviewer got verbal consent from the participants and asked participants to provide a potential pseudonym name for their confidentiality. The interviews were audio-recorded (no video recording was attained) and transcribed via the digital software service Otter™. The researcher also created in-depth notes, which would be described as ‘memoing’ notes. These allowed the researcher to observe body language and document any personal observations from the interview. Upon completion of the interviews, the researcher re-read and cleaned all data for accuracy and clarity.

The interview guide adopted for this study was member-checked via a panel of scholars with expertise in women in sport leadership and interscholastic sport. The finalized interview protocol that was adopted included questions such as: What is your driving motivation and/or your personal why? Do you feel you have every been passed up for a position in the sport field? During your time as athletic director, how do you feel your inter-personal relationships have grown? Do you feel working hours has been a barrier for you in the athletic director position? Do you feel gender stereotypes exist for
the interscholastic athletic director position and how have they potentially impacted your experiences? (Full interview protocol-Appendix D).

The coding process followed Braun and Clarke’s (2012) thematic analysis which allows for systematic organizing, identifying, and then offering patterns of meanings/themes across the interviews. Following this process, the first cycle followed a line-by-line descriptive and simultaneous coding approach. This allowed the researcher to code and organize material based on the participants’ views, but also allowed a systematic code book to emerge, which guided the coding. Once the first cycle was completed, the researcher used axial coding (Miles et al., 2020), which systematically organized the data through common line-by-line codes, allowing for higher order themes to emerge from the data.

**Trustworthiness**

One potential drawback in qualitative research design is the presence of analytic bias (Miles et al., 2020; Rolfe, 2006). Therefore, two separate trustworthiness and validity approaches were implemented. The first approach, triangulation, is best described as utilizing multiple sources of data to confirm findings (Leavy, 2017; Miles et al., 2020). This study employed multiple data sources to triangulate the data collected. This researcher collected two forms of secondary data and memoing. The two forms of secondary data included asking participants to complete a demographic survey and provide their most updated resume. The researcher compared the secondary data to the interviews to gain further perspective on the participants experiences. Through the use of resumes, the researcher was able to check past experiences missed in the interview along with length of time associated with positions the participants held. This allowed the
researcher to better understand the importance of positions in the career path to the individual participant themselves. For example, one participant held a role as a math teacher for upwards of five years, but never mentioned this position in the interview.

The researcher also utilized personal memoing during each interview and compiled post-interview notes, which assisted in triangulating the qualitative data gained from participants. Through the memoing process, the researcher was looking for non-verbal cues and perspectives that might be missed during the audio recording. The use of memoing in virtual interviews can mitigate the drawbacks of not conducting in-person interviews, along with gaining the personal perspective of the participant. For example, one participant in this study became emotional during her discussion of family support, this would not have been recorded in the audio version but memoing allowed the researcher to understand the depth of support the participant was receiving from the family unit. The second approach to ensure trustworthiness and validity in this study was the use of member checking (Seidman, 2006). The member checking was completed by multiple participants, as they were asked to re-read their transcripts and ensure the data represented their own personal opinions. Through utilizing both data triangulation and member-checking, the researcher attempted to mitigate potential researcher bias (Miles et al., 2020; Saldáná, 2012).

**Findings**

This study followed the theoretical lens of role congruity theory to explore the experiences of women interscholastic athletic directors. The purpose of this study focused solely on their experiences in the role of athletic director, with two overarching themes emerging from the data: (a) Discrimination in Sport Leadership and (b) Proving Yourself.
These themes have multiple sub-themes that highlight their experiences performing the role of interscholastic athletic director.

The researcher in this study acknowledges that findings from the identified research questions for this study yielded additional themes that were not included in this research paper. The exclusion of these higher order themes was based on the participants potentially alluding to gender neutral experiences. For example, two of the overarching themes that were not included were, ‘dual role responsibility’ and ‘work is life.’ After multiple discussions the decision was made that these themes could be experienced by both men and women athletic directors. However, the researcher plans to explore these perspectives in future research studies to better understand the holistic experiences of athletic directors (men and women).

Table 4
Organized Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1- Impact of Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a. Discrimination (Micro-aggression)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b. Family Implications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2- Proving Yourself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2a. Qualification on Paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2b. I Deserve to be Here</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Theme #1: Impact of Gender

The next theme that arose was the discussion of how gender impacts the experiences of participants in performing the role of athletic director. The consistent feedback from participants was that gender did impact their experiences as athletic directors and they were constantly aware of their under-representation in the role. As Olivia noted,

There aren't a lot of females that are in this role that are in this job. And also, you know, how do you try to take gender out of it? But also keep
gender in? You know, like, how do you stand up and I am female, see me shine without it being about me being a female.

One participant even indicated the lack of representation in their state led to a lack of diversity in the decision-making process (board of directors). As Sarah states, “every single one of them was male so there aren't even any female candidates for those board of director positions just based on the fact that there are so few female athletic directors or athletic staff members in the state.” This statement highlights the major issue associated with the lack of women athletic directors. The sub-themes that emerged here include discrimination (micro-aggressions) and family implications.

**Subtheme #1: Discrimination (Micro-aggressions)**

Overall, almost every participant discussed the negative impact of discrimination, mostly associated with micro-aggressions. It is important to note that not all participants indicated they faced any significant pushback in their role, as two participants indicated they felt no impact of gender. For example, Sarah noticed that she did not really have a negative experience based on her gender, but she articulated that gender did impact others in her state, as she noted,

I have been oblivious to the challenges I've faced as a female, or I really have just been lucky to avoid a lot of those. Because when I sit and listen to some of the other females that are in these sessions with me, they’re experiencing a lot more frustration with what they face as being females.

While it is positive that participants like Sarah did not experience negative impacts, others expressed significant drawbacks. As Kendra stated broadly, certain aspects of her job were harder based on gender, “So I again, I love athletics a ton, but being a woman is
definitely a detriment. So, I think that's really difficult.” Brigitte furthered this frustration when she expressed,

yet I still find myself second place to that middle aged white man,… I definitely think that there's a fit that is required. And if that's not the fit that you need, that's fine, but I also think that there's just this like unhealed. This unconscious bias.

These quotes outline the negative impact of gender on their experiences, but participants even noted specific incidences that potentially devalued their leadership skills based on perspectives of their gender. As Mikayla communicated,

There’s been that passive aggressive, kind of comments. Like I said, oh, you must be the girlfriend. You must be the mom. You can't talk to the players, only coaches can talk to the players. it's kind of those like, unconscious bias, like family roles, kind of where women are kind of part of this process, especially coaching in the men's sphere a little bit too.

Others expressed similar opinions, as Brigitte indicated, “I've had other male athletic administrators tell me to shut up and do what I'm told, which just would never happen to a male, or just invalidated opinions or you don't know what you're talking about kind of stuff.” In more subtle ways, Abby and Grace explained that they had been mistaken for the ‘athletic secretary’ noting that these types of perceptions indicate that women can hold roles in sport- but not leadership positions.

The participants also indicated that the negative perceptions of leadership often come from stereotypical gender perceptions in society, explained by Carson as,
A lot of times men in general think that we don't know what we're doing, regardless of what realm it's in, you know, coaching wise, or administrator wise. Until they get to know you, you know, and once they figure out that, oh, she does know what she's doing, then then everything's fine. You know, then your opinion is valued. And then you're asked to give input and that kind of thing. But it's unfortunate that the assumption the majority of the time is that she doesn't know what she's doing.

This was further expressed by participant Grace who explained,

So as constant and I will say I don't deal with a lot of issues in house with being a female in my position. I feel like in my building. It's no issue. I don't feel like any issue at all. It comes from outside people, you know, comes from reporters that come from officials, it comes from outside stakeholders that don't know me…It's those type of things that I think I deal with the most like outside personnel, right? The people that know me or it's the people that don't know me that are less likely to give me that respect or what time is it because you do you think that's because you've proven yourself here.

While the participants constantly indicated the negative perceptions of gender, they also expressed how the lack of representation in the field of athletic directors can have a negative impact. This was expressed by multiple participants as they noted that they were the only female athletic director in their region and there was minimal female state level representation. This was explained by Kendra, “there are six schools in our conference and I’m the only female of the athletic director group and the boys were
nervous when I joined because they were like I don’t know how these meetings are gonna
go.” This was further explained by Chloe who stated,

> Gender comes up. It can’t help but come up. It’s the elephant in the room. I
> mean, you walk into any AD meeting, and it's a room of 200 men and six
> women and, and mostly white guys too… which is really great when you
> need to use the restroom on bathroom break. So that's the benefit.

While the participants did express some humor in the situation, the lack of representation
has the potential to invalidate their voices amongst fellow athletic directors, as they are
seen as ‘outcasts’ in their positions.

**Subtheme #2: Family Implications**

The second sub-theme that coded under impact of gender was the overlap of the
family within the position of the athletic director role. It’s important to note, as past
research suggests (Darvin, 2020; Taylor & Wells, 2017), that the impact on family is a
much larger conversation for women ascending to higher level leadership positions, than
for men. While some participants noted balancing the work-family unit was working for
them, most noted this to be one of the more challenging portions of the role. As
participant Piper notes,

> So that's to being understanding of females, I think have the added
> pressure. We have two full time jobs if you work, any job, that I have a
> full-time job of being an athletic director. But I also have a full-time job
> when I come home at night regardless of what time it is… And so that
> conversation of how do we make it work?
The conversations surrounding how the participants handle the intersection of family and the role of athletic director broke down into two groups. The first group was those who integrated the family unit into their role, which was seen from multiple participants. The second group was smaller but tried to create boundaries between the role and family, which overall seemed to work best with those without children or older children who did not require as much time commitment.

The first group, which noted the integration of the role with their family unit discussed various strategies. Of interest, Lauren expressed the importance of her family’s deep love for athletics and how they would be committing this much time to athletics, regardless of her role. As she stated,

But everyone looks at me and says, how can you be at games, how are you at every game, every night and stay and watch practices every day, don’t you get tired? I say, I live for this stuff, I mean, even my own kids, on the weekends we are driving here or there to watch them play, my mom comes, and my dad comes, we go watch games, that is what we do and have always done. And I was like, it doesn’t even feel like a job, I’m just going to watch the game, it’s fun for me, its exciting. I like to see kids do their best and give their best effort, if they didn’t pay me, I would do it anyway!

While not everyone expressed this level of commitment, this similar rhetoric was expressed by a few other participants. For example, Sarah has two kids currently in her high school system and she uses her athletic director role to see a lot of their games,
So, it was a joke actually with my admin assistant who is a friend of mine, and she sits in on these meetings too. And she'd say you're gonna go to the JV girls’ basketball game that's at you know, a town 45 minutes away and I'm like, yes, my daughter is on the team.

This was also expressed by Meghan, even though her kids had just graduated. She used the connection of her daughters participating at the school she was athletic director to get to see a lot of their games and this was expressed as extremely positive.

Another way participants integrated their families into the athletic director position was having them constantly be around the athletic department. For example, Madison expressed the ability of her significant other to integrate in by assisting in multiple capacities,

My husband is so patient, and he helps me out a lot in my role like if there's a football game, he'll be my score clock operator, basketball games, same thing. So, he's very flexible and, and willing to help out too.

This same rhetoric was expressed by Piper, who outlined the way she integrated her son and husband into the everyday activities in her role as athletic director,

First of all, he is he's my bus driver. So, I sent him on trips all the time and he doesn't complain about it. If he's not on a bus trip taking a team, he's at the school if I'm there, he's there in the evening most of the time, helping me….. We still had dinner as a family. It wasn't at the kitchen table. It was often around my desk or in the in the gym lobby. But we still sat down as a family and tried to have dinner together even at a sporting event. I still
figured out in the gym, he would bring his homework or how the baseball field… No, it's not balanced. It never will be. But we do this together.

While these participants found ways to integrate their family into their experiences, there were also others who found the strain on their family balance to be quite challenging. As noted by Regina,

The system is a horrible system, and then your pay it's not a lot of pay, so they require work in between you know, a basketball game will start to seven o'clock. It's not going to be over till nine o'clock. By the time you clean up the gym and make sure everything's done you leave in at 10 o'clock. I'm a woman with two children at home.

The participants even indicated that their families sometimes make comments about their absences, as Isabella states, “I get a lot of static from my family about the amount of time I work. Well, you shouldn't have to stay for that and you shouldn't and that's fine. It's part of my job - got to do it.” This challenge to create the balance from work-family can sometimes even lead to relationship challenges, with both significant other and kids. Chloe expressed this when she said,

So, again, same thing you have to intentionally schedule a date night, otherwise you go three years without ever dating your spouse or, taking your kids to the mountain or taking your kids to the beach. And so it's like, no, it's got to get on the calendar. It's got to get done. It's got to be a priority.

However, some participants noted the importance of the age of their kids as a reason for their potential success balancing the role. As Emory hinted the age of her kids potentially
helps her balance a bit easier, “but I've been really lucky all my kids are older and so they
don't require as much from me at home. So, it's just my husband who I have to make sure
I keep happy.” Overall, the consistent rhetoric from participants was that there was not
one fundamental way that they addressed the issue of work-family balance, but most
indicated this was a significant hurdle- adding a lot of stress in their role and family.

**Theme 2: Proving Yourself**

The last phenomenon that became evident from participants was that they had to
prove themselves to be accepted in the role. As such, the overlap here with impact of
gender did exist, however the participants discussed their ability to lead and handle the
role of athletic director independently. The sub-themes that emerged here were
qualifications and “I deserve to be here.”

**Subtheme #1: Qualifications**

This type of conversation was common from participants. The participants
indicated that they wanted to be part of the leadership conversation, but they wanted this
to be associated with their leadership ability rather than just because of their gender.
Chloe explains, “Don't hire me because I'm a female hire me because of the fit” which
was similar rhetoric from multiple participants. Participant Abby even articulated, “I
think locally, the females that have gotten the job have proven that we're just as capable,
if not more than some of our male counterparts. So, I think that respect is already there”
which suggests that gender may potentially not impact decision-making of leadership
based on past successes of female leaders in their community.
Furthermore, the participants expressed they are quality leaders, as Kendra argues, “I'm kind of like the badass, you know, female administrator that everyone's afraid of, but not in a bad way.” Furthermore, Sarah expressed,

I am not a weak female. Neither are the other female athletic directors or assistant athletic directors that I work with. I don't know how you could be in this role and be too weak, but I'm not going to shy away from a situation even if I think there might be some bias against me because I'm a female, that's probably going to make me push into it even harder. And sometimes that's probably even subconscious.

Meghan even voiced this point in her hiring of coaches, when she stated, “I need to hire the best coach. It doesn't matter gender, it doesn't matter race. I need the best coach, but there is a push, a completely correct and justifiable push that we need more women in leadership roles.” Grace further confirmed this perspective when discussing her experience into the athletic director role,

I was a professional athlete, I was a national champion, and they made that very, very clear. If I did not have a national championship, I don't think I would have got an interview. If I didn't have those things that they can kind of sell me to the community with I don't think I would have got the position. I don't think I would have been as accepted.

This highlights the potential impact of qualifications for women holding sport leadership positions. As they must prove via qualifications that they can perform their leadership roles, as Grace suggests in her statement. Without her past successful sport participation, there was no way she even got an interview for her position. As she even stated,
you feel like you have to be overqualified for these positions to get them.

But I also feel like you do kind of have to be overqualified to get them like

I do have to be overqualified to beat out some of these candidates.

Overall, these results suggest that while women do face significant qualification barriers in comparison to their male athletic director counterparts, they might use this to their advantage. For example, the participants often discussed they have faced an uphill battle their entire career in sport suggesting this pushback creates the mentality that they deserve to be in sport leadership roles, no matter perceptions of social norms and qualifications.

**Subtheme #2: I Deserve to be Here**

The participants in this study often held the view that they had to convince themselves that they deserved their role. This was an interesting finding across the interviews, as they attributed this to the lack of women representation and potential discrimination from outside entities. As such, the participants often internalized the discussion of self-worth, as Meghan notes, “I've always chosen the path that seems to have more male leaders. And so to convince myself that I deserve to be at the table that was an internal challenge.” Piper further explains this by stating,

I’ve always felt and as early as high school the best way to show them that you deserve to be there is to make sure that you're educated. Did you work hard, that you know what you're doing? And so that's what I did. And I will allow my actions to speak louder than my words, I'm going to show you I know what the heck I'm doing and that I understand what's going on.
This illuminates that women have to somewhat validate themselves in their roles to garner similar respect to their male counterparts. This was also discussed by Abby, who stated,

It's always been a challenge. I have to act or be twice as good to get the respect so my focus was never on what was not allowed or viewed differently…I mean, first and foremost, hopefully I lead by example, putting in the hours and not afraid to haul stuff around and do the hard work.

This quote further explains that the ‘I deserve to be here’ sub-theme might be associated with a strong work ethic and the ability to demonstrate your worth to those around you.

Overall, the participants concluded that they felt an added pressure performing the role, leading to a heightened focus on them demonstrating hard work and proving themselves as quality leaders.

In framing the importance of this study, we discussed the lack of knowledge on leadership experiences in the interscholastic space. To further confirm the necessary importance of this study, and the perceptions of the participants to this study, the researcher wanted to share the perspective of one participant, as Grace states,

I mean, for me, you know, I looked at intercollegiate, you know, and I read all these studies about lack of representation in the intercollegiate setting and institutions. And it was, like, a lot of it was like, well, we need more representation at a lower level. So, then I go down to high school, and I'm like, well, there's no studies that are done on nothing….. all this guidance has been like go to high school, but then there's nothing there to
help us in that room. So, honestly, one is more high school representation.

I think is key.

This quote, which was not provoked, highlights the wants and needs of participants to make the space of interscholastic sport more inclusive and highlights the importance of this study to help the participants become better informed in order to help challenge the status quo of gender representation in interscholastic sport.

**Discussion**

This study sought to explore the women interscholastic athletic directors’ experience through the lens of role congruity theory. The second tenant of role congruity states women face significant pushback when they hold leadership roles in female under-represented positions. In the context of sport leadership, especially interscholastic leadership positions, such as athletic director, only a small percentage of women lead their schools’ athletics departments. Overall, this study suggests that the experiences of participants in their role as interscholastic athletic directors led to negative perceptions of their ability, thus confirming role congruity theory. As such, implications toward research and practical applications will be explored below.

The family role aspect held a significant place in the experiences of participants in this study. Participants expressed not having a work-life balance and often their work was their life, while they also faced the burdens of expectations surrounding primary care of their household (regardless if they had children or not). Similar to what the current study found, Fletcher (2019) suggested that most interscholastic athletic directors try to integrate their families into their work, and the results somewhat confirm this phenomenon. Based on past findings, women are more negatively impacted by dealing
with work-family balance than men (Burton, 2015; Diacin & Lim, 2013; Zdroik & Veliz, 2021). Thus, the female athletic director must negotiate integrating their family into their role or keep them separate, both of which potentially create stereotypes that can lead to varying levels of perceptions surrounding women in leadership positions (Cheung et al., 2010). For example, Levensailor (2018) indicated that integrating the family into the role may alleviate the family role pressures women face, but it can also lead to individuals questioning their leadership capabilities. One participant in this study suggested she received pushback for always having her son around, however, she argued, ‘you can’t make everyone happy.’ As such, at the interscholastic level, the intersection of the family role (for women) and role responsibilities of the athletic director, acts a key central barrier for longevity in the position and further confirms the role congruity theory applicability to interscholastic athletic leadership roles (Burton et al., 2011; Eagly & Karau, 2002).

The participants in this study also discussed their perceptions of gender and how it impacted their experiences (Burton & Leberman, 2017; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). They expressed the challenges of handling their roles with the constant reminder that they are the significant minority One participant accurately described this as, “it's a room of 200 men and six women.” This is not uncommon across the country for women interscholastic athletic directors, as they nationally represent only 15% of all athletic directors (Fletcher, 2019). This lack of representation led to multiple negative experiences of sexism, which gave credence to the idea that role congruity theory applies to interscholastic sport leadership roles (Burton et al., 2011). The majority of the sexism experiences of participants were micro-aggressions (benevolent sexism), which can lead
to negative thoughts about one’s personal ability from a leadership capacity (Fink, 2016, Taylor et al., 2018a; Taylor et al., 2018b).

Interestingly, the participants in this study discussed these micro-aggressions somewhat in passing, suggesting that sexism may be so entrenched in interscholastic sport that participants hardly recognize these experiences (Fink, 2016). The findings from this study confirm the continued existence of sexism in sport experienced by women leaders in the interscholastic space (Moore et al., 2005; Welch, 2012; Whisenant et al., 2015), but also challenges these a bit. For example, in past studies the researchers found sexism was somewhat of an internal issue amongst the athletic department (Moore et al., 2005; Welch, 2012; Whisenant et al., 2015). This study suggests that while some experiences of sexism occurred internally, most of the negative perceptions of female interscholastic athletic directors were external (parents, coaches, athletic directors, referees). This might suggest that sexism is more institutionalized into sport, rather than the perceptions of one individual women leader (Fink, 2016).

While discussing gender in this study, the participants were adamant that their promotion to their leadership role was due to their qualifications- not because they were a woman. They felt they earned the athletic director position. As Wilbanks (2020) suggests, women want to feel their leadership capability is valued, rather than just being a token. This rhetoric was expressed by a participant who stated, ‘we need to get away from the first woman ever’ conversation and start building the network of women leaders where the system supports multiple women moving into higher level leadership spaces (Burton & Leberman, 2017). When we just celebrate the one-woman sport leader model, we continue to promote the theoretical implications of negative experiences associated with
the role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Overall, this study indicates some significant barriers and challenges for women performing and retaining their role as interscholastic athletic director.

**Practical Implications**

The first major practical implication for the interscholastic sport space is the importance of support in the role. For example, only a few individuals had the ability to have assistant athletic directors, which can greatly decrease the working hours required for the athletic director (especially when the position is a dual role). High schools should look to add these roles to support their athletic director (male and female), which should improve experiences and potentially lessen turnover of role. Another way to potentially decrease the working hours challenges in the athletic director role could be for leadership (principals/supervisory unions) to adjust the responsibilities of athletic directors. We saw a major burden of holding dual role responsibilities- if schools are not willing to provide additional athletic support, they should at least consider the athletic director role a full-time position without dual role responsibility.

Another important practical implication of this paper would be for state associations and the NIAAA to add/continue to provide mentoring programs for their athletic directors. As the discussion in this paper outlined participants struggled with the role responsibilities and their capacity. The ability to create a larger network amongst athletic directors seems like a viable option to potentially support athletic directors with external perspectives and guidance. An additional practical implication from this study is the importance of having qualified women candidates to fill open roles. As the candidates indicated, they sometimes struggled with responsibilities, especially looking at the ‘coach
of coach’ and balancing time commitments. One way to combat these challenges would be through educational workshops/seminars from state associations for those interested in seeking the athletic director role. These workshops/seminars should focus on the intricacies of the athletic director role to help potential candidates have a better understanding of how to ready themselves for the position.

**Future Research**

The first avenue of future research would be to discuss the experiences of women who left the athletic director position. While the current population indicated the challenges and barriers in the role, hearing from those who have actually left the position can lead to a more in-depth understanding of the current issues. Due to the unique governance structure of the interscholastic sport space, this type of research should be done in a state-by-state (case study approach), as the differences in experiences at the state levels may differ based on political, geographic, or governance differences. The next study would be to understand burnout in the position. The participants constantly discussed their negative experiences with working-hours and the heightened turnover of the role, but little is known about the actual stressor differences between men and women. Understanding the scope of the issue across gender could lead to helping to create a more inclusive leadership system for all in interscholastic athletics.

Next, the athletic directors in this study indicated they were often confused on their role and how it fit into the larger interscholastic school system. Therefore, conducting interviews with principals and administrative leadership can lead to better understanding of the current structural system and how the athletic director is viewed at the higher-level decision-making level. Lastly, it would be important to hear from the
next generation of athletic directors- coaches and teachers. This population, as noted is the next generation of women athletic directors. Therefore, hearing from this population on their career aspirations and needed support would help assist in creating inclusive career pathways for women into the interscholastic athletic director position.

**Summary**

Exploring the lived experiences of women athletic directors can promote better understanding of the under-representation of women in the interscholastic athletic director role. Role congruity theory was the guiding theoretical framework, with the purposes of this study to examine (a) experiences in attaining the athletic director position and (b) experiences in performing the position.

The first manuscript explored the experiences of the participants’ career paths and hiring process. The findings echoed the importance of holding a prior position in the school system, as either a teacher, support services, or coach. The familiarity in the institutional knowledge of interscholastic sport facilitated participants’ ability to move up the leadership ranks into the athletic director position. Further, this first manuscript highlights potential issues in the hiring system which do not favor women ascending to the leadership position of athletic director. It was suggested that inconsistencies of job postings and the lack of structure associated with a ‘fair’ job hiring process for internal versus external candidates emerged. However, participants indicated that their past experiences allowed them to stand out as candidates, arguing that women either need to be highly qualified (on paper) to be considered or have internal connections to attain the interscholastic leadership position.
In the second manuscript, the participants indicated they faced multiple challenges when attempting to attain the athletic director position. The findings suggest that the athletic director position must be considered a full-time responsibility, as multiple participants indicated having to handle multiple positions (assistant principal or student services). These dual roles can lead to inconsistencies in working hours for women athletic directors, especially when they had the primary responsibilities to their family units. These results suggest that female interscholastic athletic directors with families are faced with the choice of either integrating their family into the position - through having them present at practices, games, and supervision- or try to separate the family from the athletic director role. Both presented challenges for participants, which might act as unique experiences for women athletic directors as past studies have shown women working in sport have heightened family unit responsibilities compared to their male counterparts (Lumpkin et al., 2013; Martin, 1999; Fletcher, 2019; Zdroik & Veliz, 2021).

Overall, these two manuscripts confirm the presence of role congruity theory, in that women face significant barriers in attaining and performing tasks in the interscholastic athletic director position. The results of these studies can assist decision-makers and policy developers creating better support systems for women in their career pathways and while performing the athletic director position.
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APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT EMAIL & GRAPHIC

Subject Line: National Athletic Director Conference Study Participant Request

Body of Message:

Dear _______,

My name is Nicholas Swim and I’m currently a doctoral student at the University of Louisville. I’m emailing you today to inform you about my upcoming dissertation research study in the hope you may assist in the attainment of participants.

My current study, titled “Where are all the Women? Using Role Congruity Theory to Explore the Experiences of Interscholastic Women Athletic Directors (IRB #: ____)” is looking to contact current female public high school athletic directors. The population identified for this study are females with whom have only held the position for under 7-years. My hopes would be to attend the National Athletic Director Conference and conduct in-person interviews on site in Denver this upcoming December. However, to do so, I would need the permission of the NIAAA. Would be able to set up a meeting in the next few weeks to discuss the potential to conduct this research and to fill you in on more of study details?

Upon completion of this study, I would be happy to work with you and the NIAAA to create a one-page document and/or presentation outlining my findings from this study to help assist in creating a more substantial pipeline of women into the athletic director position. Thank you for your time in reviewing this email and I hope to speak with you soon about this research project and the upcoming NIAAA conference.

Best Wishes,

Nicholas Swim

Attached Info Graphic

[Image of info graphic with text: Are you a current interscholastic woman athletic director? We need your help! Scan the link or follow the link below. Survey link here.]}
APPENDIX B

DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Interscholastic Women Athletic Directors Study | Demographic Information Survey

Thank you again for participating in an interview for our qualitative research study titled “Experiences of Interscholastic Women Athletic Directors.” We truly value your insights and perspectives. Listed below, you will find the demographic information survey for this study. Remember: This study is strictly confidential, and your identity will be protected.

-Name: 
  
-Email: 

-When publishing our results from the study, your identity will be protected by using a pseudonym. If you have a preferred name to be used as your pseudonym, please list the name here: 
  
-With which gender identity do you most identify? 
  Male • 
  Female • 
  Non-binary • 
  Prefer not to answer • 
  Prefer to self-describe (please provide self-description below): 

-Are you Hispanic or Latino? 
(A person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central America or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race) 
  No, not a Hispanic or Latino • 
  Yes, Hispanic or Latino • 
  Prefer not to answer • 

-How do you describe yourself? 
(Choose one or more from the following racial groups. The previous question is about ethnicity, not race. No matter what you selected above, please continue to answer this question, if applicable, by marking one or more boxes to indicate what you consider your race to be.)
American Indian or Alaska Native •
Asian •
Black or African American •
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander •
White •
Prefer not to answer •
Prefer to self-describe (please provide self-description below)

-Please indicate the state in which your current high school is located.

Drop Down Menu (All 50 states, and DC)

-How many years have you held your current role of athletic director?

____________________

-Please indicate the classification of your high school (public/private).

Please estimate the size (number) of your high school’s student body population.

____________________

Please indicate the number of sports your school currently sponsors.

____________________

Please indicate the gender of your school principal.
Male •
Female •

Please indicate the gender of your schools prior athletic director (prior to your hiring).
Male •
Female •

If applicable, please indicate the number of assistant athletic directors at your high school.

____________________
# APPENDIX C

## PARTICIPATION INFORMATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Year in Role</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>School Size*</th>
<th>Coaching Experience</th>
<th>Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Dual Role</th>
<th>Assistant Athletic Director</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>MA- Athletic Administration</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Yes (7 years)</td>
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<td>Regina</td>
<td>MA- Special Education</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
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<td>Yes (8 years)</td>
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<td>Mikayla</td>
<td>MA- Education Leadership</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>Big</td>
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<td>Yes (8 years)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (14 years)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hailey</td>
<td>MS-Sports Medicine</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>Small</td>
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<td>Yes (20 years)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>MS- Sport Psychology</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Yes (14 years)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brigitte</td>
<td>MA-Athletic Administration</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>Big</td>
<td>Yes (8 years)</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carson</td>
<td>MS-Education (Elementary Ed)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Yes (14 years)</td>
<td>Yes (15 years)</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>MS- Teaching &amp; Curriculum</td>
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<td>Oregon</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Yes (4 years)</td>
<td>Yes (6 years)</td>
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<td>Emory</td>
<td>MS- Earth Science</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Utah</td>
<td>Big</td>
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<td>Kendra</td>
<td>MS- Educational Leadership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Isabella</td>
<td>MA-Education (Counselor Ed)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Yes (8 years)</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>Abby</td>
<td>MS- Educational Leadership</td>
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<td>New Jersey</td>
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<td>Madison</td>
<td>MA- Education Administration</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (7 years)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meghan</td>
<td>MS- Education Leadership</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Yes (17 years)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>MA- Public Health</td>
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<td>New Mexico</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Yes (5 years)</td>
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<td>Piper</td>
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<td>Yes (6 years)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Q1. Tell me about your past sport and professional experiences.
   • What is your driving motivation and/or your personal WHY?

Q2. What past sport experience would you say made the biggest difference in your life?
   • How did your past sport experience affect you attaining your current position?
   • How did your past professional experience affect you in attaining your current position?
   • What past experience made you stick with a career in sport?

Q3. What mentoring experiences did you encounter in your sport and professional career?
   • Would you describe this mentorship/role modeling as a significant factor to how you attained your current position?
   • What did you take most from this mentorship relationship?
   • Are you current providing mentorship for a fellow women in athletics?

Q4. What have been some challenges or barriers in your career progression?
   • What have been some challenges or barriers in your attainment of the athletic director position?
   • Do you feel you received discrimination in your past sport experiences? Or in the attainment of your current position?
   • Can you give me one instance where you felt defeated, or you wanted to give up on the sport industry?

Q5. Do you feel you have every been passed up for a position in the sport field?
   • Why do you feel this was the case?
   • Do you feel self-limiting behavior occurs for women in their attainment of leadership positions in sport? (explain self-limiting behavior)

Q6. Please explain the hiring process into your current athletic director position.
   • Do you feel your network within the field helped your attainment of this position?
   • Do you feel your mentoring relationships helped your attainment of this position?
   • Did you feel any discrimination during the interview process?

Q7. Tell me about your experience as the head athletic director?
   • Do you feel any different than your past leadership roles?
• How do you define success in your current role?
• What was the initial reaction to your hiring as the athletic director? (Coaches, teachers, student-athletes, administration, community members)

Q8. During your time as athletic director, how do you feel your inter-personal relationships have grown?
• What has been your relationship with your supervisory board/school principal?
• What has been your relationship with your head coaches?
• What has been your relationship with student-athletes?
• What has been your relationship with parents?
• What has been your relationship with community members?

Q9. What have been some challenges or barriers in performing the athletic director position?
• Do you feel working hours has been a barrier for you in the athletic director position?
• Do you feel family/work balance has been a barrier for you in the athletic director position?
• Do you feel gender stereotypes exist for the interscholastic athletic director position?
• Do you feel you have been discriminated against based on your gender?
  o If so, how do you feel with such discrimination, personally and professionally.
  o Have you witnessed others being discriminated again based on gender?
    How do you step-in and handle these situations?
• Do you feel the current networks within interscholastic athletic director positions favor men?

Q10. How do you personally address/overcome the challenges or barriers you have faced?
• How have this shifted throughout your career?

Q11. Do you actively engage in mentorship in your current role?
• If yes explain..
  o Student-athletes?
  o Other women in leadership positions?
• How do you engage in meaningful mentorship relationships?

Q12. What would be some advice for future women sport leaders?
• Do you feel we can improve the opportunities for women within leadership position at the interscholastic level? How we go about implementing these opportunities?
APPENDIX E

INFORMED CONSENT

WHERE ARE ALL THE WOMEN?: USING ROLE CONGRUITY TO EXPLORE THE EXPERIENCES OF INTERSCHOLASTIC WOMEN ATHLETIC DIRECTORS

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Introduction and Background Information
You are invited to take part in a research study regarding women in interscholastic athletic leadership. You have been selected for this study due to your position as a high school athletic director and have the expertise to bring valuable insight into the improvement of the athletic director position for future women. The study is being conducted under the direction of Mary Hums, Ph.D. at the University of Louisville.

Purpose
The purpose of this study will be to illustrate the lived experiences women who attain/perform the athletic director position at the interscholastic level. Throughout the literature, little research has been conducted on interscholastic athletic director experiences, especially when females hold the position. Therefore, this study will explore the lived experiences of female interscholastic athletic directors. With a specific focus on how individual perceive themselves handling the current barriers to attainment and retention of leadership position in the male dominated position of interscholastic athletic leadership.

Procedures
You will be asked to meet with the researcher (face-to-face, via recorded video conference session, or by phone) to take part in a semi-structured interview regarding your experiences of an athletic director. Prior to the interview, you are asked to review this consent document, including its description that answering interview questions will convey your consent to participate. This interview will be audio and video recorded, with the audio version being transcribed by a professional transcription service. Upon the finishing of your interview, you will be asked to complete a short demographic survey. Once completed, your participation in this study will be complete.

Potential Risks
You will be exposed to no greater of a risk than you might typically face in your daily life.

**Benefits**
We do not anticipate that you will benefit directly by participating in this study.

**Alternatives**
Instead of taking part in this study, you could choose to not participate in the study.

**Payment**
You will not be paid for your time, inconvenience, or expenses while you are in this study.

**Confidentiality**
Total privacy cannot be guaranteed. We will protect your privacy to the extent permitted by law. If the results from this study are published, your name will not be made public. Once your information leaves our institution, we cannot promise that others will keep it private.

Your information may be shared with the following:
- Organizations that provide funding at any time for the conduct of the research.
- The University of Louisville Institutional Review Board, Human Subjects Protection Program Office, Privacy Office, others involved in research administration and research and legal compliance at the University, and others contracted by the University for ensuring human participants safety or research and legal compliance
- The local research team
- People who are responsible for research, compliance, and HIPAA/privacy oversight at the institutions where the research is conducted
- Applicable government agencies, such as:
  - Office for Human Research Protections

**Security**
The data collected about you will be kept private and secure via a storing software offered by the University of Louisville. With limited access to the data by only the investigators of this study.

**Voluntary Participation**
Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide not to be in this study, you won’t be penalized or lose any benefits for which you qualify. If you decide to be in this study, you may change your mind and stop taking part at any time. If you decide to stop taking part, you won’t be penalized or lose any benefits for which you qualify. You will be told about any new information learned during the study that could affect your decision to continue in the study.

**Research Participant’s Rights**
If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may call the Human Subjects Protection Program Office at (502) 852-5188. You may discuss any questions about your rights as a research participant, in private, with a member of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is an independent committee made up of people from the University community, staff of the institutions, as well as people from the community not connected with these institutions. The IRB has approved the participation of human participants in this research study.

Questions, Concerns and Complaints:
If you have any questions about the research study, please contact Dr. Mary Hums at mary.hums@louisville.edu.

If you have concerns or complaints about the research or research staff and you do not wish to give your name, you may call the toll-free number 1-877-852-1167. This is a 24-hour hot line answered by people who do not work at the University of Louisville.

Acknowledgment
This document tells you what will happen during the study if you choose to take part. By answering interview questions, you indicate that this study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in the study. You are not giving up any legal rights to which you are entitled by agreeing to participate. You may make a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

Phone number for participants to call for questions: 502-852-0555
Principal Investigator: Dr. Mary Hums

Mary Hums, Ph.D.  
Professor,  
Sport Administration, HSS  
University of Louisville  
mary.hums@louisville.edu

Nicholas Swim, M.S.  
Doctoral Student,  
Sport Administration, HSS  
University of Louisville  
nicholas.swim@louisville.edu
### APPENDIX F

#### QUALITATIVE QUESTION CODING CHART

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>RQ #1: Career Path/Trajectory</th>
<th>RQ #2: Attaining Position</th>
<th>RQ #3: Performing Position</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>4 (Challenges/Barriers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 (Passed up for Role)</td>
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<td>6 (Hiring Process)</td>
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<tr>
<td>7 (Experience as AD)</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 (Inter-Personal Relationships)</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 (Challenges/Barriers as AD)</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 (Overcome Challenges/Barriers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>11 (Mentorship from AD position)</td>
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<td>12 (Advice for women sport leaders)</td>
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</table>
APPENDIX G

IRB ACCEPTANCE LETTER

Human Subjects Protection Program Office
300 E. Market Street, Suite 380
University of Louisville
Louisville, KY 40202

DATE: March 22, 2022
TO: Mary Hums, PhD
FROM: The University of Louisville Institutional Review Board
IRB NUMBER: 22.0164
STUDY TITLE: WHERE ARE ALL THE WOMEN?: USING ROLE CONGRUITY THEORY TO EXPLORE THE EXPERIENCES OF INTERSCHOLASTIC FEMALE ATHLETIC DIRECTORS
REFERENCE #: 741859
DATE OF REVIEW: 03/22/2022
CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS: Jackie Powell 852-4101 js Powell@louisville.edu

This study was reviewed and approved with changes on 03/20/2022 by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board. The resubmitted changes were approved administratively on 03/22/2022 through Expedited Review Procedure, according to 45 CFR 46.110[b], since this study falls under Category 7: Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

This study now has final IRB approval from 03/22/2022 through 03/21/2025.

This study was also approved through 45 CFR 46.116 (C), which means that an IRB may waive the requirement for the investigator to obtain a signed informed consent form for some or all subjects.

The following items have been approved:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Submission Components</th>
<th>Version</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
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<tr>
<td>Submit for Initial Review</td>
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<tr>
<td>Review Response Submission Form</td>
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<td>Review Response Submission Form</td>
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<tr>
<td>IRB Study Application</td>
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<th>Outcome</th>
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<tr>
<td>Clean IRB Protocol 1.3</td>
<td>Version 1.0</td>
<td>03/21/2022</td>
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IIRB policy requires that investigators use the IRB "stamped" approved version of informed consents, asents, and other materials given to research participants. For instructions on locating the IRB stamped documents in IIRS visit: https://louisville.edu/research/humansubjects/IIRBSubmissionManual.pdf

Your study does not require continuing review per federal regulations. Your study has been set with a three-year expiration date following UofL local policy. If your study is still ongoing at that time, you will receive automated reminders to submit a continuing review form prior to the expiration date. If you complete your study prior to the expiration date, please submit a study closure amendment.

All other IRB requirements are still applicable. You are still required to submit amendments, personnel changes, deviations, etc., to the IRB for review. Please submit a closure amendment to close out your study with the IRB if it ends prior to the three-year expiration date.

Human Subjects & HIPAA Research training are required for all study personnel. It is the responsibility of the investigator to ensure that all study personnel maintain current Human Subjects & HIPAA Research training while the study is ongoing.

Site Approval
Permission from the institution or organization where the research will be conducted must be obtained before the research can begin. For example, site approval is required for research conducted in UofL Hospital/UofL Health, Norton Healthcare, and Jefferson County Public Schools, etc.

Privacy & Encryption Statement
The University of Louisville’s Privacy and Encryption Policy requires identifiable medical and health records; credit card, bank account and other personal financial information; social security numbers; proprietary research data; and dates of birth (when combined with name, address and/or phone numbers) to be encrypted. For additional information: http://louisville.edu/security/policies.

Implementation of Changes to Previously Approved Research
Prior to the implementation of any changes in the approved research, the investigator must submit modifications to the IRB and await approval before implementing the changes, unless the change is being made to ensure the safety and welfare of the subjects enrolled in the research. If such occurs, a Protocol Deviation/Violation should be submitted within five days of the occurrence indicating what safety measures were taken, along with an amendment to revise the protocol.

Unanticipated Problems Involving Risks to Subjects or Others (UIRRTSOs)
A UIRRTSO is any incident, experience, or outcome, which has been associated with an unexpected event(s), related or possibly related to participation in the research, and suggests that the research places subjects or others at a greater risk of harm than was previously known or suspected. The investigator is responsible for reporting UIRRTSOs to the IRB within 5 working days. Use the UIRRTSO form located within the IIRB system. Event reporting requirements can be found at: http://louisville.edu/research/humansubjects/lifecycle/event-reporting.

Payments to Subjects
In compliance with University policies and Internal Revenue Service code, payments to research subjects from University of Louisville funds, must be reported to the University Controller’s Office. For additional information, please call 852-6237 or email control@louisville.edu. For additional information: http://louisville.edu/research/humansubjects/policies/PayingHumanSubjectsPolicy201412.pdf

The committee will be advised of this action at a regularly scheduled meeting.

We value your feedback; let us know how we are doing: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/FCCU2019P

Peter M. Queveda, Ph.D., Chair
Social/Behavioral/Educational Institutional Review Board
PMO/irp

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Nicholas Michael Swim

911 McKinley Ave., Louisville, KY 40217
(802) 309-9722 nicholas.swim@louisville.edu
https://www.linkedin.com/in/nicholas-swim-75262284/

EDUCATION

Ph.D. University of Louisville
Graduation: August 2023
Educational Leadership and Organizational Development
Specialization: Sport Administration
Advisor: Mary Hums, Ph.D.
Dissertation: Where are all the women?: Using role congruity theory to explore the experiences of women interscholastic athletic directors

M.S. Ball State University
August 2019
Sport Administration
Advisor: Khirey Walker, Ph.D.
Thesis: Perceptions of female student-athletes self-efficacy to pursue collegiate coaching

B.S. Castleton University
May 2016
Business Administration
Major: Management
Minor: Statistics

ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS

University of Maine- Orono, Maine Business School
Assistant Professor
August 2023-Present

University of Louisville, College of Education, Department of Health & Sport Sciences
Lecturer
August 2021-August 2023
Graduate Teaching and Research Assistant
August 2019-July 2021
RESEARCH

Peer-Reviewed Publications


**Invited Publications**


**Manuscripts Under Review**


**Manuscripts in Progress (Organized by Progress toward Completion)**


7. **Swim, N.** (In Progress). Where are all the women? Using role congruity theory to explore the lived experiences of interscholastic women athletic directors. (Dissertation Manuscript #1). Target Journal: *Sport Management Review*.

8. **Swim, N.** (In Progress). How did we get here? Understanding the lived experiences of women in their attainment of the interscholastic athletic director role. (Dissertation Manuscript #2). Target Journal: *Journal of Sport Management*.

**Refereed Conference Presentations**

1. **Swim, N.** (2023, March 26th). *Leadership diversity: Why it’s important and how can we improve?* Presented at the Vermont State Athletic Directors Association Conference.


8. Thompson, E., Ifill, A., & Swim, N. (2022, April 2). The Circle of Life: How student-athletes use sport as a conduit to break societal expectations. Presented at the Spring Research Conference (University of Kentucky), Lexington, KY.


Presented at the Applied Sport Management Association Conference, Indianapolis, IN.


22. **Swim, N.** (2020, February 27-28). *Can we solve the gender gap of leadership in college athletics?* Poster presentation at the Graduate Student Regional Conference, Louisville, KY.

23. Turick, R., Feller, R., & **Swim, N.** (2020, February 27-29). *Set up to fail: Coaching, race, and the glass cliff in college football*. Presented at the Applied Sport Management Association Conference, Waco, TX.


25. Turick, R. & **Swim, N.** (2019, April 3-5). *“We get bad jobs and no time to fix them”: A Glass Cliff Examination of Black Coaching Hires in Division I Football*. Presented at the College Sport Research Institute Conference on College Sport, Columbia, SC.


**Supervision of Students Scholarly Work**
• College Sport Research Institute Conference UG Case Study Competition-Faculty Advisor (March 2023)
• Applied Sport Management Conference UG Case Study Competition-Faculty Advisor (February 2022)

Research Assistant
• SB 206 Community College Athlete Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) Working Group. (FA20) P.I.- Adam Cocco PhD
  o Data collection of California junior college athlete social media platforms
  o Chapter and instructional material editing/formatting

Grant Proposals
• *(Not Funded).* NCAA Innovations in Research and Practice Grant (2022). Feller, R., Swim, N., Mercado, H. An exploratory examination of international student-athletes and the post-collegiate experience. **Grant Request:** $3,520

TEACHING

**University of Louisville**

**Instructor of Record**

SPAD 561  **Special Topics- Mega Events Logistics- Kentucky Derby 2020:** This course was designed to provide students’ knowledge on logistics, transportation, and guest services through gaining real-world experience working the Derby.

  SP20  Hybrid  23 enrolled (eval: COVID-19)

SPAD 445  **Sport Communication:** The purpose of this course is to explore sport communication theories and to examine practical concepts, activities, and behaviors related to sport communication and apply them to professional and collegiate sports.

  FA21  In-Person  36 enrolled (eval= 4.34)

SPAD 402  **Internship: Undergraduate:** The purpose of this class is to allow students to apply theoretical classroom information in a real-world environment and develop real-life work skills beneficial to students seeking careers in sport management.

  FA20  Remote  38 enrolled (eval= 4.61)
  SM21  Remote  47 enrolled (eval= 4.40)
SPAD 390  **Sport Governance:** This course is designed to provide knowledge and awareness of the development of rules and laws governing various sport organizations and their participants.

- SP21  Hybrid      36 enrolled (eval= 4.59)
- SP22  In-Person  40 enrolled (eval= 4.42)
- FA22  In-Person  31 enrolled (eval=4.35)
- SP23  In-Person  40 enrolled

SPAD 336  **Digital Development & Technology in Sport:** This course was designed to provide knowledge and critical thinking skills across multiple digital platforms utilized in the sport industry.

- FA21  In-person    26 enrolled (eval= 4.25)
- SP22  In-person   21 enrolled (eval= 4.50)
- FA22  In-Person   35 enrolled (eval= 4.35)
- SP23  In-Person   37 enrolled

SPAD 284  **Issues and Ethics in Sport:** The purpose of this course is to apply moral development models and ethical theories to examine the relevant issues and trends in sport administration.

- FA20  Hybrid      33 enrolled (eval= 4.24)
- FA21  In-Person   39 enrolled (eval= 4.44)
- FA21  In-Person   39 enrolled (eval= 4.54)
- SP22  In-Person   45 enrolled (eval= 4.46)
- SP22  In-Person   25 enrolled (eval= 4.51)
- FA22  In-Person   48 enrolled (eval= 4.35)
- FA22  In-Person   45 enrolled (eval= 4.56)
- SP23  In-Person   37 enrolled
- SP23  In-Person   45 enrolled

SPAD 281  **Principles of Sport Administration:** This course is designed as an introduction to principles and theories of administration as they apply to the administration and management of sport, fitness, leisure, and recreation services, and programs.

- SP21  Remote     37 enrolled (eval= 4.29)
- SM22  Remote     21 enrolled (eval= 4.18)

HSS 253  **Coaching Baseball:** The purpose of this course is to introduce students to the interworking of coaching baseball across multiple age levels (high school, college, and professional).

- F22   Online    26 enrolled
- S23   Online    35 enrolled

HSS 138  **Basketball:** This class is designed to emphasis learning and developing basic basketball skills such as game-play, team concepts/strategies, rules/terminology, and sportsmanship.

- FA19  In-Person  25 enrolled
HSS 181  **First-Year Experience:** The course introduces first-year students to resources on campus to best prepare them for success in higher education.

<table>
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<tr>
<td>SP20</td>
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<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>SP20</td>
<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Teaching Assistant**

- SPAD 402.01: Internships (Undergraduate) (FA19, SP20)
- SPAD 561.02: Race & Sport in U.S. (FA20)
- SPAD 561.03: Mega Events Logistics- Kentucky Derby 2021 (SP21)
- SPAD 692.01: Internships (Graduate) (FA19, SP20)

**Ball State University**

**Instructor of Record**

PFW 103.01  **Fitness Walking:** Designed to develop physical fitness through twice weekly aerobic exercise classes, with a component of walking sessions.

<table>
<thead>
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</table>

**Teaching Assistant**

- SPTA 290: Revenue Generation (FA17, SP18, FA18)
- SPTA 300: Sport Law (FA18, SP19)
- SPTA 470: International and Comparative Admin. of Sport (FA18, SP19, SM19)

**SERVICE**

**Professional (Academy)**

- Ad Hoc Reviewer: Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics (April 2023-Current)
- Ad Hoc Reviewer: Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education (January 2022-Current)
- Ad Hoc Reviewer: Sport Management Educational Journal (September 2021-Current)
- Conference Abstract Reviewer: Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA) (November 2021)
- Sport and Recreation Law Association Student Committee (September 2019-March 2020)
- Sport and Recreation Law Association Conference Local Planning Committee (September 2019-March 2020)

**Professional (Industry)**
• TMS Mobility Services Partnership (Kentucky Derby)- Faculty Lead (May 2022, 2023)
• Student Professional Development Trip: Nashville- Faculty Lead (November 2022)
• Student Professional Development Trip: Cincinnati- Faculty Lead (April 2022)
• Sport Administration Alumni/Student Mentoring Program- Faculty Lead (January 2022- Current)
• SP+ Mobility Services Partnership (Kentucky Derby)- Faculty Lead (May 2020, 2021)

College
• College of Education and Human Development Standards and Admission Committee (August 2019-August 2021 & January 2023-Current)
• Cardinal Create Reviewer- Digital Transformational Suite (March 2023)
• Hiring Committee- ECPY/HSS: Sport Psychology (August 2022-December 2022)
• Graduate Student Ambassador (August 2020-August 2022)

Department
• Sport Administration Department Doctoral Admission Committee (January 2023-Current)
• University of Louisville Sport Administration Association Advisor (August 2021-Current)
• Health and Sport Science Department Student Engagement Committee (August 2019-Current)
• Digital Technology Workshop-Adobe Products (July 2022)
• Sport Administration Department Master’s Admission Committee (September 2019-March 2020)

Community Service/Volunteer
• Food Pantry Volunteer, The Center for Lay Ministries (January 2021- Current)
• Writing Volunteer, Young Authors Greenhouse (September 2019-August 2020)
• Baseball Sport Broadcaster, ESPN+ (April 2019)
• Scorer, Judo American Cup Championship (September 2018)
• After School Program Support, Ross Community Center (January 2018- May 2018)
• Food Delivery, Muncie Mission (November 2017)
• Head Coach, Legion Baseball (June 2016- August 2016)
• Head Coach, 5th and 6th Grade Basketball (November 2016- March 2017)
• Promotion Staff, MiLB- Vermont Lake Monsters (June-August: 2014 & 2015)
• Mentor, Castleton Elementary School (September-May: 2014-2016)
Membership

- North American Society for Sport Management (June 2020-Current)
- Applied Sport Management Association (February 2021-Current)
- Sport and Recreation Law Association (February 2020-2022)
- North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (November 2020-2022)

Awards

- University of Louisville- Student Champion (July 2022)
- 2022 Dr. Gerald S. Gurney Research Award- NACADA (June 2022)
- 2021 Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics Outstanding Article (March 2022)
- COSMA Chi Sigma Mu Honor Society (February 2021)
- Ball State Baseball Outstanding Service Award (May 2019)
- ISBC Graduate Student Showcase Poster Champion (April 2019)
- CSRI Graduate Student Case Study Champion (April 2018)

INDUSTRY EXPERIENCE

Ball State University, Varsity Baseball Team; Muncie, Indiana  
August 2017- May 2019

Director of Baseball Operations

- Assisted coaching staff in budgeting, recruiting, scouting, video, and game prep
- Coordinated all team travel logistics
- Helped coordinate marketing, preparation, and planning of prospect baseball camps

Ross Community Center; Muncie, Indiana  
Sports Coordinator  
August 2018- July 2019

- Created strategic plan for sustainable sport programing (3, 5, and 10-year goals)
- Implemented sport programing for at-risk-youth (Basketball, baseball, soccer, and tennis)
- Coordinator of Little League program of over 200 children

Sanford Mainers, NECBL; Sanford, Maine  
Assistant Baseball Coach  
June-August 2017 & 2018

- Hitting and infield coach- Helped Division I college players hone their skills at a competitive level during the summer
- In-game management responsibilities, along with all pre- and post-game duties
- 25 former Mainers have been selected in MLB amateur draft (2018 and 2019)
Bridgton Academy; North Bridgton, Maine August 2016-June 2017

Institutional Advancement Intern

- Alumni development and admissions suite- Contacted alumni and potential donors and recruited prospective students
- Assistant basketball/baseball coach- helped manage player loads, assisted gameday preparation and game management, and strength and conditioning program