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Career Entry and Experiences of Female Graduate Assistants in Collegiate Athletics

Allison B. Smith

Virginia Commonwealth University

Elizabeth A. Taylor

Temple University

Robin Hardin

University of Tennessee

Graduate assistants (GAs) provide support in a variety of capacities in NCAA Division I athletic departments from coaching and athletic training to academic advising and the general operation of the department. These positions are vital in athletic departments for women as they provide an entry point into the profession of collegiate athletics. Women face many challenges as they pursue careers in collegiate athletics due to the accepted male leadership and decision-making in sport. This research utilizes interviews to investigate the experiences of female GAs working in collegiate athletics. The findings show the graduate assistantships were beneficial to career entry, but the value of the experience in regards to duties and responsibilities was mixed. Specifically, assistantship responsibilities were at times more administrative than professional development, and there appeared to be the funneling of women into the “soft” areas of sport by either self-selection or gender normalcy. Furthermore, maintaining work/life balance was a difficult undertaking that resulted in role conflict as participants were forced to attend to their work responsibilities while devoting limited time to their academic responsibilities and personal obligations.

Keywords: graduate assistants, collegiate athletics, women, career entry

The most recent data from the Council of Graduate Schools reported that 2.2 million graduate applications were received, 903,000 offers of admission extended, and 522,131 first-time graduate students were enrolled full-time in education specialist, graduate certificate, and master's programs in fall 2016 (Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), 2017). Among these first-time U.S. citizen and permanent resident graduate student population, 23.4% were underrepresented minorities and 58% were women (CGS, 2017). These numbers indicate the increasing demand by the workforce for advanced education and degrees to meet the higher skill job requirements (CGS, 2017). However, the financial burdens of graduate school can create high levels of stress for graduate students, and these financial burdens create a need for graduate students to seek out additional funding sources such as grants, loans, assistantships, and work study. The National Center for Education Statistics, housed within the U.S. Department of Education, found 20.7% of full-time students enrolled in master's degree programs received financial aid in the form of a graduate assistant (GA) position in 2011-2012 compared to 14.3% in 1992-1993 (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2014a). Part-time graduate students also noted an increase in receiving assistantship positions from 4.7% in 1992-1993 to 6.7% in 2011-2012 (NCES, 2014b).

GAs are graduate students who provide services to the university (e.g., teaching classes, research assistants, working in the athletic department) in exchange for benefits such as a stipend, tuition waiver, or health insurance (Flora, 2007). Although assistantship positions differ by discipline, graduate students are typically assigned to GA positions that closely align with their professional goals so they can gain experience while also providing services to the university (White & Nonamaker, 2011). Given the steady increase in the population of graduate students and prevalence of GA positions, it is important to consider the experiences of these students, and how they may be a unique population split between student and employee status. This dual role can often be confusing for universities and students to navigate. For example, a previous court ruling (*NYU v. NLRB*, 2004) found that graduate assistants met the definition of employees due to their time spent working and performing their duties under the control of the university who pays them for the services, and therefore should receive protective rights under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA; NLRB General Counsel's Report on the Statutory Rights of University Faculty and Students in the Unfair Labor Practice Context, 2017). This ruling was overturned in the *Brown University v. NLRB* (2004) case where graduate assistants were found to no longer be classified as employees since their primary responsibility to the university was educational (NLRB, 2017). Again, this decision was overturned and now the *Columbia v. NLRB* (2016) case is used to explain that a graduate student can indeed be both a student and employee and receive coverage under the NLRA (NLRB, 2017). Although the role and rights of GAs can be complicated to understand, GAs do play an integral role in the academic and athletic setting within higher education. There is limited research on GAs working in collegiate athletics (Hancock, 2002), and the present study aims to fill this gap.

Graduate Students

Entering graduate school signifies the commencement of a period of rapid, inescapable life change in terms of finances, social relationships, and living conditions. All of these are

impacted by the decision to pursue a graduate degree (Kurtz-Costers, Helmke, & Ulku-Steiner, 2006). Graduate school is more individualized than undergraduate education, and graduate students enter at different stages of life, for different motivations or degree choices, and seek different outcomes (Hardré & Hackett, 2015a). Thus, because of the unique nature of graduate school, graduate students encounter significant changes in emotional and cognitive socialization (Austin et al., 2009; Murray, 2009; Gardner, 2009). Rigorous course loads, heavy work demands, and the aforementioned changes can increase self-doubt, anxiety, and stress in graduate students' lives (Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Johnson, 2006; Hall & Burns, 2009; Sweitzer, 2009; Toews, Lockyer, Dobson, & Brownell, 1993). Offstein, Larson, McNeill, and Mwale (2004) found graduate students experienced stress at varying degrees of intensity, and graduate students described their lives and workload as difficult, demanding, and stressful. These life changes can make the transition to a graduate school challenging, and it is imperative for graduate students to have substantial social support in the face of academic, family, and work responsibilities (Hardré & Hackett, 2015b).

The stress that occurs during graduate school seems to be felt at a higher degree for women than men (Oswalt & Riddick, 2007). Academic responsibilities were the most impactful and stressful factor for female graduate students, but women also felt school work and finances were significant burdens and sources of stress at a higher level than their male peers (Oswalt & Riddick, 2007). The presence of multiple roles for female graduate students (e.g., student, child, parent, sibling, employee, researcher, assistant, and writer) seems to be problematic and can cause physical and emotional harm in the presence of academic and personal life negotiations (Haynes et al., 2012; Johnson, Batia, & Haun, 2008; Offstein et al., 2004). Multiple roles may compete for an individual's limited time and energy resulting in time, expectation, and role conflict (Haynes et al., 2012). This role conflict occurs when an individual has multiple roles requiring simultaneous demands with contradictory expectations (Drake & Hebert, 2002; Getzels & Guba, 1954; Goode, 1960). Role strain, although very similar to role conflict, means that the individual feels a sense of overload in their demands based on time, energy, and commitment (Drake & Hebert, 2002; Goode, 1960). Thus, for women who are GAs, personal and societal role conflict and strain may emerge in relation to such issues as: aging parents, child care, parenting, partner relationships, job expectations, and academic workload. The presence of multiple roles can also cause conflicts, and added stress, over which role takes priority (Johnson et al., 2008). Further, Haynes et al. (2012) found female graduate students struggled with a sense of control over their roles, felt extreme conflict between work, personal, and academic expectations, and both physical and psychological well-being (i.e., high stress, anxiety, disjointed emotional and spiritual state, feelings of pressure and failure).

Institutional social support is not an uncommon desire and possible motivator of school selection for graduate students as they make the transition to graduate school. Graduate students not only look to family, friends, and significant others to provide support and alleviate stress, but also employers, professors, and fellow graduate students (Bair, Haworth, & Sanford, 2004; Castro, Garcia, Cavazos, & Castro, 2011; Johnson et al., 2008; Stratton, Mielke, Kirshenbaum, Goodrich, & McRae, 2006). Graduate programs that prioritize personal relationships with professors and fellow graduate students, and also emphasize a balance between the academic and social lives of their students experience higher levels of departmental integration and support, and lesser amounts of emotional and physical stress and isolation (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Benton, 2003; Earl-Novell, 2006). In comparison, programs that solely prioritize academic rigor and production at all cost experience high attrition or dropout. It is estimated that approximately 50%

of students who enter a doctoral program end up dropping out before degree completion (Hockey, 1994; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Patterson, 2016). Hawlery (2003) found doctoral program dropout was not due to background of the students or commitment to the program, but to disappointment, social isolation, and a lack of acclimation to a new environment. Research has found that a holistic, social support approach has been found to promote higher graduate student-program involvement, professional development, and persistence (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Benton, 2003; Earl-Novell, 2006). Thus, it is imperative for institutions, departments, and graduate programs to understand the experiences of their graduate students and graduate students who serve as GAs in order to enhance their overall graduate school experience.

Women in Collegiate Athletics

GAs play an integral role in the operation of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) universities and their athletic departments, particularly at the Division I – Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) level (Mazerolle, Monsma, Dixon, & Mensch, 2012). There are currently more than 4,500 GAs working in athletic departments, not including those working in football operations and administration, which represents 9.45% of all athletic department staff members across all three NCAA divisions (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2017). Approximately 50% of GAs are employed by NCAA Division I athletic departments and the number of GAs has more than quadrupled since the 1995-1996 academic year (NCAA, 2017). A graduate assistantship typically offers two distinct benefits for graduate students: the provision of financial assistance (i.e., tuition waivers/remission and stipends) and professional, hands-on experience in their chosen career path (Flora, 2007; White & Nonamaker, 2011). Collegiate athletic departments often have a variety of GA positions, ranging from coaching and athletic training, to more administrative positions such as compliance, marketing, ticketing, and media relations.

For female graduate students, with limited work experience, assistantships within athletic departments offer an entry point into the competitive profession and a pivotal beginning to their professional career journey in collegiate athletics. Graduate assistantships may be particularly beneficial for female graduate students' entry into the profession of collegiate athletics due to the historically patriarchal nature of collegiate athletics. Women face barriers in regards to career mobility within collegiate athletics from early career professionals to athletic directors. This includes gaining entry into the profession, lateral career mobility, and vertical career mobility (Hardin, Taylor, Smith, & Siegele, 2017; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Taylor, Smith, & Hardin, 2017).

This patriarchal nature is easy to see in the coaching profession with more than 60% of all NCAA women's teams being coached by men (Lapchick, 2015). Acosta and Carpenter (2014) found that more than 1,150 positions have been added to college athletics administration in the past decade, but three out of every four were filled by men. Sport, including collegiate athletics, is one of the most accepted domains for male leadership and decision-making (Whisenant, Pedersen, & Obenour, 2002). This acceptance of male leadership is due to the masculine qualities men display in leadership roles such as aggressiveness, strength, toughness, and confidence (Kamphoff, 2010; West & Zimmerman, 1987). These are seen as masculine traits not possessed by women and may cause the perception that women lack the needed skills to

ascend and assume leadership roles in sport (Burton, Barr, Fink, & Bruening, 2009; Kamphoff, 2010; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Women who choose to pursue careers in college sport face many challenges, similar to those experienced in other male-dominated professions (Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Whisenant et al., 2002). Women who work in traditionally male-dominated professions often attract increased attention, are evaluated more critically, and experience less support, particularly when they are new to an organization, from their male peers and superiors (Berrey, 2014; Carr, Szalacha, Barnett, Caswel, & Inui, 2003; Embry, Padgett, & Caldwell, 2008; Kanter, 1977). These challenges women face working in sport could cause them to not pursue leadership roles or have the opportunity to obtain leadership roles (Staurowsky & DiManno, 2002). Women may also self-select out of positions of authority within collegiate athletics in general due to burnout and/or the unequal division of household labor; which may cause added work-life conflict where one role makes it difficult to participate in the other (e.g. being a collegiate administrator and a mother; Linehan & Scullion, 2008).

Research suggests that female GAs working within collegiate athletic departments also experience gender bias; most notably from male coaches of male sports (Burton, Borland, & Mazerolle, 2015). Gender bias may occur due to the entrenched, gendered structure of many collegiate athletic departments. The gendering of an organization occurs when the division of labor falls along gender lines, as expressed through the use of language, images and/or symbols created to express and normalize such divisions (Acker, 1990; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012). For example, Sabo, Veliz, & Staurowsky (2016) found that more than 40% of female coaches were discriminated against based on their gender and twice as many female coaches compared to male coaches (15% vs. 6%) felt gender impacted their performance evaluations. Other barriers to the advancement to leadership experienced in collegiate athletics by women include unequal assumption of competence, hiring from a principle of similarity, homophobia, and lack of female mentors (Bass, Hardin, & Taylor, 2015; Kamphoff, 2010; Kilty, 2006). Women working in sport also describe experiencing difficulty working in a hostile, male-dominated environment (Norman, 2010; Sabo, et al., 2016; Staurowsky & Weight, 2011; 2013; 2014). Female coaches and administrators reported feelings of hostility within collegiate athletics, including a fear of retaliation and losing their job (Sabo et al., 2016; Staurowsky & Weight, 2011; 2013; 2014).

There has been a steady increase in the number of participation opportunities for female athletes since the passage of Title IX in 1972 (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). The number of girls and women participating in sport has increased drastically in the past 50 years from youth sport to the professional ranks (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; National Federation of High School Associations, 2015). For example, less than 300,000 girls participated in sport in 1971-1972 compared to over 3 million boys (NFHS, 2015). In the 2016-2017 school year, girls sports participation reached more than 3.4 million and boys sport participation was more than 4.5 million (NFHS, 2017). A similar trend has occurred in collegiate athletics. Prior to Title IX, only 16,000 women participated in collegiate athletics, however, by the 2015-2016 academic year there were more than 217,000 female athletes, or 43.6% of all NCAA athletes (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Irick, 2017).

Although there has been increase in participation, there has not been a corresponding increase in the percentage of women working in athletic administration or coaching (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Lapchick, 2014; LaVoi, 2013; Smith & Wrynn, 2013). Approximately 33% of all collegiate athletic department employees are women, but they often fill positions such as administrative assistant (93.4% women), academic advisor (62.3% women), life skills

coordinator (72.7% women), or senior woman administrator (100% women) as opposed to athletic director (20.7% women) or head coach (approximately 40% women; Bass et al., 2015; Irick, 2010; National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], 2017). Despite progress made by women in administrative positions, a disproportionate amount of women work within lower levels of athletic departments or the “soft” areas of sport (e.g., academic advising, life skills, academic counseling, & marketing; Hultin, 2003; Irick, 2010; Grappendorf, Pent, Burton, & Henderson, 2008). Similarly, there are of more than 1,000 GAs working in football across all three NCAA divisions, however, only 17 of those assistantships are held by women (NCAA, 2017). Although men have been able to successfully enter into the coaching and administrative positions of women's sports, women are nearly non-existent within the coaching and administrative ranks of men's sports with only 5.2% (Lapchick, 2015; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013; Zgonc, 2010). Thus, it is important to target and explore the unique experiences female GAs working within collegiate athletic departments through the application of CCT.

Career Construction Theory

Career Construction Theory (CCT) focuses on the social construction and interpretive framework that individuals create, impose, negotiate, and explore, in order to give meaning and direction to their behaviors (Savickas, 2005). CCT views career progression as an adaptation to the environment; therefore, careers do not unfold, but are constructed by individual choices relative to career goals, self-concept, and the social value placed on one's work role (Savickas, 2005). CCT also works to explain how past recollections, present experiences, and future aspirations weave together to guide, regulate, and sustain an individual's vocational personality, behaviors, and work life (Savickas, 2005). Furthermore, CCT should not be used as a predictor of career paths, but as a means for researchers to understand the decisions and values behind career paths as part of socially constructed realities (Astin, 1984; Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Savickas, 2005). As such, CCT looks at three distinct factors: career adaptability, vocational personality, and life themes (Hancock & Hums, 2016; Savickas, 2005).

The first factor, career adaptability, explains “individuals implement their storied self [or true self] into work roles, thus bringing their “inner needs and outer opportunities into harmony” (Savickas et al., 2009, p. 1). Career adaptability seeks to highlight the individual's ability to learn new skills, cope with development tasks, and incorporate structural and social determinants, such as career aspirations and expectations (Del Corso & Reh fuss, 2011; Savickas, 2005). This is an ever-evolving process as the individual does not incorporate his or her self-concept at one time, but rather as a continuous process that is adapted with each new experience and work environment (Bruner, 2004; Savickas, et al., 2009). Career adaptability also demonstrates an individual's relationship between occupational interests (e.g., individual skills and abilities, and job opportunities) and social expectations (e.g., acceptance of occupation by peers; Hancock & Hums, 2016). Furthermore, career adaptability occurs when an individual shows growth in four dimensions: (a) concern for his or her future as a worker or in their job, (b) increase his or her personal control over his or her occupational future, (c) displays curiosity in his or her self and possible future job scenarios, and (d) strengthens the confidence to pursue his or her aspirations (Savickas, 2005).

Vocational personality, the second CCT factor, discusses the characteristics or traits that contribute to an individual's career path and chosen occupation (Savickas, 2005); as often labor is divided among a group based on personality, skills, and individual differences. The vocational

personality component of CCT seeks to tie together personal and objective personality traits, by incorporating the subjective understanding of an individual's point of view and behaviors (Savickas, 2005). Thus, vocational personality looks at an individual's needs, abilities, values, and interests in relation to personal factors such as self-efficacy, gender, personality, and human capital (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Burke, 2007; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Wentling, 2003).

The final factor, life themes, expounds that individuals strive to give purpose and make meaningful decisions in their work (Savickas, 2005). Life themes uncover an individual's longing to feel significant and important within their work context, as well as in their personal lives (Savickas, 2005). Life themes can provide depth and insight into why individuals make certain decisions such as career starts, stops, and moves in their career path progression (Savickas, 2005).

CCT has mostly been used to explain how students in general and adult learners create their career plans (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2013). However, in recent years the theory has been applied to individuals within the context of college sport. For example, Navarro and McCormick (2017) used CCT when analyzing career preparation programs for student-athletes to understand if a mastery of learning outcomes was obtained in regard to life after their collegiate experience. Hancock and Hums (2016) used CCT to discover the career path, goals, and experiences of 20 female assistant and associate athletic directors in collegiate athletics. Since the majority of studies on women in collegiate athletic administration have focused on the experiences and progression of women at the senior administrative positions (i.e., athletic directors; Grappendorf & Lough, 2006; Grappendorf, Lough, & Griffin, 2004; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Whisenant et al., 2002), this study similarly to Hums and Hancock (2016), sought to understand the experiences of women who have not yet reached positions of leadership and their motivations and views on their graduate assistantship as it related to their overall experience as a GA, their career path, and future career goals.

Statement of Purpose

It is important to examine female GAs as there is limited research examining this population within college sport, given that these women have the potential to become future administrators and leaders in collegiate athletics. It is also imperative to explore the experiences of female GAs since women, in general, are underrepresented in administrative, and other leadership roles, and may face gender barriers, stereotypes, biases, and other challenges pursuing careers in college sport (Bass, Hardin, & Taylor, 2015; Irick, 2010; Kamphoff, 2010; Kilty, 2006; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Whisenant et. al, 2002). Thus, it is important to investigate if these same gendered issues exist, and to what degree, among this unique population. Providing a deeper understanding of female athletic department GAs experiences could help create suggestions (e.g., policy implications) for overcoming gender barriers within NCAA athletic departments; such as the creation of successful transitional programming upon entry into graduate school (Carron, Eys, & Burke, 2007). This study's purpose was to explore experiences of female GAs that work within collegiate athletic departments through the application of CCT. Two research questions guided the study: (1) What were the professional motivations to obtain a graduate assistantship?, and (2) What has been your experience as a graduate assistant?

Methods

A qualitative approach was selected because the study's aim was to explore the experiences of female GAs using CCT. CCT was used due to the focus on uncovering the participants' motivations for their assistantship (career path) and their unique experiences in these assistantships. It has been suggested that using a qualitative approach is appropriate when exploring social and cultural constructs such as race, gender, education, and even career development (Savickas, 2005). Qualitative research aims to uncover how meaning is created, shared, and explored by participants, groups, and cultures. More specifically, qualitative research seeks to highlight the meaning behind ideas by uncovering the deeply rooted and accepted realities, thoughts, behaviors, and feelings of the participants (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). In this study in particular, qualitative research was used to allow the participants the ability to tell their own stories related to their assistantships. Theorists have highlighted that it is particularly important to allow underrepresented populations, such as women in the male dominated environment of collegiate athletic administration, the power voice their own experiences (Creswell, 2008; Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Inglis, Danylchuk, & Pastore, 2000; Lent et al., 1994; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Walker & Bopp, 2011).

Qualitative interviews were used to allow the researchers to gain insight into participants' perceptions of their experiences. This method was also used in order to investigate participants' inner thoughts as women working as GAs within collegiate athletic departments (Corbin & Straus, 2008). Interviews are best suited to discover meaning of fundamental themes in the participants' lives (Kvale, 1996). Discussion, or a free-flowing conversation, is the foundation of interviews, and the use of open-ended questions provided an opportunity for the participants to express their feelings and experiences (Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

An interview guide was used to direct the interviews and provide probing questions and provide consistency and continuity across interviews (see Table 1). The interview guide was created through pilot interviews with three GAs who were not included in the sample for the current study. The original interview guide included 10 questions. These questions were formed based on the literature relating to CCT and the multiple roles for graduate assistants, possible presence of role conflict, and possible factors of isolation, disappointment, physical and emotional stress, or integrated support (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Benton, 2003; Earl-Novell, 2006; Hockey, 1994; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Patterson, 2016). One question was removed related to asking about the participants' experiences with being treated differently as a woman. The researchers and pilot participants felt this question was a leading question and decided to let any information on gender differences come out organically in the interview and through probing, follow-up questions. Four questions were also added to the interview guide after the pilot interviews, which were: a) How do you view your role within your department? b) How do you view your role as a graduate assistant? c) Do you find your job rewarding? Describe why or why not, and d) How does the department view your role as a graduate assistant? How does your supervisor view your role as a graduate assistant? These questions were added based on feedback from the three pilot participants on how they felt they were perceived as young professionals by other athletic department employees.

Pilot interviews were also used to ensure that biases did not emerge in the interview process. The principal investigators are both former female collegiate GAs and share a common interest in exploring the realities of other female collegiate GAs based on their own experiences.

This positionality was also included throughout the participants' interviews; the researchers intentionally illustrated that the participants were the experts on the topic and not the researchers.

Institutional Review Board approval was received for this study, and each participant acknowledged their consent to participate by signing an informed consent form. The participants were assigned pseudonyms. Interviews were conducted via telephone or in person and were audio recorded for transcription. Interviews lasted from 21 minutes to 30 minutes with two interviews being 43 minutes and 68 minutes in length. It is important to note that the researchers asked for 30 minutes of the participant's time understanding the busy, hectic lifestyle and limited free time that working in intercollegiate athletics allows. Interviews were transcribed and formatted for analysis by the principle investigators and then sent back to the participants for member-checking (Merriam, 2009).

Participants

The participants were all women working as GAs in collegiate athletics, who were willing to participate in the study (Creswell, 1994; Daniel, 2012; Gratton & Jones, 2004; Veal & Darcy, 2014). The researchers chose one NCAA Division I FBS conference and searched the athletic department staff listings for female GAs. This particular conference was chosen as a purposeful sample due to it being a part of Division I athletics and a Power 5 conference. The Power 5 is comprised of the Atlantic Coast (ACC), Big Ten, Big XII, Pac-12, and Southeastern Conferences. These conferences have the most financial resources within collegiate athletics and allow for large athletic staffs and the resources to hire GAs in a multitude of roles (e.g., coaching, marketing, academics, and athletic training).

Twenty-five women were identified as GAs in athletics via their athletic department staff directory and contacted via e-mail inquiring about their willingness to participate in the study. Two follow up emails adhering to the same format as the original were also sent and 12 women eventually agreeing to participate. The average of the participants was 23.5 years and all 12 participants had been working in their GA position for two years or less. Eleven of the 12 participants identified as single and heterosexual; the one participant who identified as in a relationship also identified as a lesbian (see Table 2). Ten participants self-identified as Caucasian and two identified as African-American. This period of time is not uncommon as graduate assistantships are typically one to two years in length. Two of the respondents were attending graduate school at the same institution where they earned their bachelor's degree, and five of the respondents were former student-athletes. They represented multiple areas of the athletic department including: administration (1), operations (1), coaching (2), marketing and sales (1), academics (5), student-athlete development (1), athletic training (1).

Data Analysis

A grounded theory approach that emphasized constant comparative data analysis was used. Grounded theory analysis operates inductively or coding and organizing the data throughout the data collection process, instead of all at once at the end of data collection (Glaser & Strauss, 1987). During constant comparative data analysis, one segment of data is compared to another in order to find similarities and differences (Merriam, 2009). Data are grouped together based on similar dimensions, which then become the categories to be studied. The researchers first coded for open and in-vivo coding to find as many categories as possible (Glaser & Strauss,

1967; Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). Open coding is the process of going into the data line by line and constructing unrestricted codes based on coherent meaning (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011; Glaser & Strauss 1987). In-vivo coding differs from open coding in that codes are created from direct words, phrases or quotations by the participants (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). Both open and in-vivo coding are used first to explore the data at a surface level (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). The research team created 76 initial categories through the first two rounds of coding (i.e., open and in-vivo).

The researchers then compared coded responses for the same dimensions and conditions to collapse or narrow the categories. Six categories emerged from the coding. Thematic memoing was then used to further connect categories, make sense of ambiguous findings, and interpret the findings (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). The researcher ascribes meaning to categories using thematic memoing. Categories continue to be narrowed until theoretical saturation is reached or when the addition of further data added little insight to the category (e.g. the same ideas and phrases are continuously repeated; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). Three themes eventually emerged from the data analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Career Construction Theory was used as a framework for analyzing the three themes that emerged from the interviews. The first theme, Career Enhancement, was related to if/whether respondents felt that their assistantship prepared them for a future career in college sport. The second theme, Perceived Value, represented respondents' perceptions of the usefulness of their GA experience. The final theme, Work/Life Balance, encompassed the challenges experienced related to balancing work/GA responsibilities, academic requirements, and social needs.

Career Enhancement

All but two respondents indicated their assistantships aligned with their career aspirations. These 10 participants said that they purposely pursued their assistantships because they wanted to work in that specific area of collegiate athletics and they believed an assistantship would help them eventually secure a full-time job. They spoke about how their assistantship was a direct path into the career they wanted to pursue. For example, Grace said, "Ultimately, I would like to be a director of marketing at a Division I school. I would say in five years that I would like to be at a big Division I school." Similarly, Donna stated, "I want to see myself in college athletics administration of some kind. I don't really want to be a head coach so maybe something in the supporting role whether it is operations or academic support."

Seven out of the 10 participants who indicated their assistantships aligned with their career goals expressed they wanted a career where they could assist, help, and develop student-athletes. Eleanor spoke not only about seeking a career in the area of her assistantship, but also that her career aspirations include working in a position that has purpose and meaning derived through helping others, particularly student-athletes:

I would love to be an academic counselor or a tutor coordinator or a combination of both at a Division I school. I would like to see myself in a position over student-athlete academic or student-athlete success. I love seeing student-athletes grow academically, athletically, and as leaders.

Helen echoed Eleanor's desire to assist and help student-athletes with her career choice.

Ideally, I would like to continue working as a learning specialist whether that is with athletics or not. I would like to continue to work with student-athletes that have learning disabilities, which is what I am doing now.

Finally, Kristen also expressed a desire to work with student-athletes,

I see myself, hopefully with a full time job in a Division I university doing athletic counseling, and I don't really see myself going above that in five years. I don't know if I want more of an administrative job, but I like academic counseling because you get to work with the students.

This theme parallels the vocational personality component of CCT. Vocational personality indicates the characteristics or traits that a person contributes to their career occupation and path. The women in this study indicated a desire to work in intercollegiate athletics and felt that their assistantships would provide entry into the field; a vital stepping-stone to career advancement. In addition, seven out of the 10 women who purposefully chose their assistantship explained they were also highly motivated to assist student-athletes; in line with personal characteristics that revolve around helping others. In speaking more specifically to CCT, the area of life themes or individuals' ability to make meaningful decisions in their work is discussed in the theme of career enhancement. The female GA participants specifically mentioned how assisting student-athletes would create personal meaning, fulfillment, and self-worth in their own lives personally and professionally. This could indicate their passion is to assist in the direct success of student-athletes and not necessarily pursue careers without interaction with student-athletes on a regular basis.

This desire to work with student-athletes is not uncommon for women in athletics. Working with student-athletes allows women to feel direct gratification and worth in their work. However, research has shown that this is not always a choice for women in intercollegiate athletics, but yet a deeply embedded cultural norm and gender ideologies. For example, Grappendorf et al. (2008) found that women are typically funneled into the "soft" areas of intercollegiate athletics such as academic advising and life skills. This is reflected in this study, with six out of the 12 participants self-selecting into academics or student-athlete development. This funneling into the "soft" skills of athletic administration can be problematic for women to gain the necessary skills (e.g., negotiation, donor relations, fundraising) to ascend to positions of authority or leadership (Grappendorf et al., 2008). Research has also shown that women many times are perceived to lack the characteristics (e.g., aggressiveness, dominance, strength, toughness) necessary to assume leadership positions in sport (Burton, et al., 2009; Kamphoff, 2010; West & Zimmerman, 1987). These gendered experiences can be attributed to gender normalcy (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012).

Gender normalcy is explained as "the occurrence of when the existence of gender inequality is recognized and accepted in organizational levels and positions and is considered normal while the numbers and qualifications of men and women represented in the organization indicate that gender equality should be the normal situation" (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012, p.409). For example, Burton, et al. (2012) found that female athletic trainers' formal and informal work practices reiterated power dynamics that privileged men and that such practices

had been normalized within their athletic departments. Participants discussed how female athletic trainers were not allowed to work with high profile sports such as football and men's basketball and that working with Olympic or women's sports had been normalized (Burton et al., 2012).

The current study demonstrates that participants have chosen to funnel themselves, or self-select, into careers within the "soft" areas of sport. The participants linked this to their own vocational personalities, goals, and life themes, but it can also be attributed to the male-dominated culture that surrounds intercollegiate athletics and reinforces the traditional gender roles of men at the top of the professional power structure at the NCAA Division I level. Thus, demonstrating that gender normalcy continues to perpetuate the field, because the minority or marginalized group (i.e., women) accept, normalize, and appropriate the disparities.

Lastly, the career enhancement theme also demonstrates that the landscape of collegiate athletic administration is changing as people are purposefully pursuing education and experience that will lead to careers in collegiate athletics (Hardin, Cooper, & Huffman, 2013). Increased revenue, media exposure, and pressure to win have created a shift in the career progression of athletic directors and others choosing to enter into this profession (Knight Commission, 2010). Collegiate athletic administrators now specifically prepare for these positions through academic degree programs and training programs, which often include GA positions (Hardin, et al., 2013). However, women are still at a disadvantage to men in the sport management classroom as sport management programs consist mostly of male students and male faculty (Jones, Brooks, & Mak, 2008; Taylor, Smith, Rode, & Hardin 2017).

Perceived Value

The respondents were split on whether their assistantship provided them the career guidance and experience they were seeking. Half of the participants felt that their assistantship was positive, useful, and rewarding as evidenced when Eleanor said, "I feel my role is personally rewarding; my role of working with the athletic teams and the tutoring program. I feel needed and appreciated for my contributions and what I am doing." Irene also talked about her assistantship as rewarding. She particularly found it rewarding with respect to positively influencing and impacting her assigned student-athletes.

I never really felt like I fit somewhere like I do now. It is rewarding because I get to meet with student-athletes every day. I get to know them especially since there are 500 here. I work with a group of about 80 so remembering when this was going on for me and how can I help them get to where they want to be. In that sense, it is definitely rewarding and knowing I am working towards something I want to do and in the field I want to work in helps keep me grounded and feeling rewarded in that sense.

Helen also spoke about the impact of working with student-athletes and how it made her feel useful in her assistantship, "I think I am really useful because I work with students and it is really easy to see the impact we make." Brittany detailed for her it was about the opportunities that her assistantship brought and the doors it could open that made her assistantship a positive experience. This was shown when she explained, "Honestly, it's a huge networking opportunity for me. It is definitely worth it, in the end; being around good people. That is what it is about and working hard."

The other six participants perceived their experiences as being negative or lacking in real educational or professional development opportunities. They felt that their role was not substantial and that they were not gaining the experience they needed to move into a full-time job in the field. Another common response was related to a sense of being frustrated with, and isolated in, their position. Linda described her job as doing "... a little bit of everything, just little things, I do a little bit of everything that the coaches need from me. I believe I have an impact somewhere but it is nothing grand." Jessica worked with a women's basketball team, and her expectations of her assistantship and the experience she was hoping to gain and the reality did not align.

I thought being a GA would be more about coaching, how to run a practice, drills, coaching duties and not really do what I am doing, which is office work. I know they think I am useful because they don't have to do the work I am doing, but I don't really think it would be a difference if it was me or someone else doing the work.

Jessica also stated her experience was negative due to a lack of appreciation and importance by her superior, the head coach. She said,

I don't feel like what I do really makes that big of a difference and I don't really feel like I am learning a lot about coaching. I feel like I am learning a lot about what other people don't want to do and I don't feel like my job is really needed because it is work that everyone else can do. I just try to keep a positive outlook on it because I am hoping the experience, the title, and everything will get me a coaching job where I want to be.

Two of the participants discussed the struggle of not being given true responsibilities, opportunities, and challenges in their role. Freda stated that, like Jessica, she felt she was not valued; "I get walked all over. I feel some times from our staff, I am not appreciated. I am not capable of putting this on. I think they are afraid of taking too much out of their own hands and giving it to the hands of their staff." Donna echoed feelings of frustration and isolation,

I don't perceive my job as useful. I do think that it is valuable to some degree to my bosses, but it is frustrating because I don't feel I do anything really meaningful. When it comes down to it these are the little jobs that need to get done whether they are small or big, they need someone accountable to follow through and get them done. I feel my role is pushed off to the side a little bit and I am not really considered. I know that I am really grateful for it and appreciate it, but it is hard to know because no one ever tells me anything. I am very out of the loop.

The participants who thought they were not being fully utilized were striving for more responsibilities and actual job training. Jessica said, "I would like to be more involved in the coaching aspect, so being in the coaching meetings and being able to put my input in on what I see in practice and on film." Donna echoed the need for job training and knowledge.

I wish I had more responsibilities with how to do things or processes to be more integrated because a lot of times I feel I am isolated because I am working alone. I don't have much interaction with the other staff or athletes and I don't really like that

environment, so therefore the athletic department or the staff can't really see what I am doing and I don't know if they really think if what I am doing is really important.

This theme demonstrates that some, but not all of the participants, experienced career adaptability within the CCT framework. Career adaptability refers to an individual's ability to cope with developmental tasks and may influence the relationship between their social expectations and occupational interests. Half of the participants expressed that in their assistantship they were given meaningful responsibilities and tasks, which allowed them to develop direct skills, knowledge, and competencies that would translate to success in the future. Secondly, the participants who had a positive experience with their assistantship responsibilities also perceived their role as meaningful and useful; in line with the CCT component of life themes. Their jobs were not simply task completions, but enrichments that inspired confidence and personal and professional growth.

However, the other half of the participants discussed dissatisfaction and frustration with their position, particularly, the aspect of being assigned menial tasks. There is certainly nothing wrong with answering telephones, sorting mail, stuffing envelopes, and performing errands, but those cannot be the sole responsibilities assigned to a GA. On paper, a GA coaching position at a Division I institution looks fantastic. However, if the GA is only completing menial tasks, and is not allowed to coach, their ability and self-efficacy as a coach cannot be improved. They may be able to land a full time job, but might struggle to achieve success because they have not had the ability to learn about, or engage in, practical experiential opportunities directly related to coaching. Assistantships should provide opportunities to participate in professional development within their position by engaging in duties and responsibilities that align with what could be their future career path.

It is critical supervisors (e.g., coaches and professors) create learning or teachable moments where tasks are broken down and their value explained to GAs (Marx, Huffmon, & Doyle, 2008). Assigned tasks can be viewed as menial if their value is not properly explained, which can lead to dissatisfaction and burnout. Ruderman and Ohlott (2004) found women within the business industry experienced burnout due to a lack of challenging assignments and lack of professional mobility. Supervisors should ensure the GAs have meaningful job responsibilities and also explain why the menial tasks they are performing are important to the overall success of the department. The negative perspectives came from GAs who were working in areas that are not typical of women (e.g., coaching). Women working in these areas still must be empowered to do their job. It is important to understand this phenomenon so strategies can be developed to give GAs the best experience possible.

Work/Life Balance

All of the participants discussed the issue of time constraints. This lack of work/life balance was due to the excessive hours required of the assistantship and the lack of time available to devote to academics or social needs. Arlene described the lack of work/life balance as an issue due to her workload as an athletic trainer. She stated, "It's a little difficult right now just because there is so much constantly to do." Eleanor reiterated the lack of work/life balance, "Days are definitely long because I work during the day and go to class at night. She added, "So it is kind of important to have all my work stuff done at work so I can focus on school in the evenings. My personal life, I feel like I probably don't have one." Jessica said, "There is really

no life outside of work and school. I am here at the office from 8 a.m. until 5 in the evening and three days out of the week I go to class after that. So there is really no time for life once I leave here.” Grace felt the lack of work/life balance negatively affected her effort towards her graduate studies and made her feel isolated from her peers.

Often there are not enough hours in the day and most of the time, work takes precedence over school and I know that is horrible. I just feel like other departments do a better job of allowing their GAs to still be in the role of a student and I don’t feel (like) a student at all. I go to class and I don’t feel connected at all to my peers.

Irene reiterated that education was not a high priority, “School probably takes a back-burner, and I really wish it didn’t. Right now I probably put my graduate assistantship, then my social life and then school, which is an interesting balance.”

The excessive hours GAs work seemed to be a constraint for all participants. All of the participants acknowledged they were allotted and mandated 20 hours per week in their contract for their graduate assistantship, but 11 out of the 12 said they worked beyond those hours on a consistent basis. Helen said,

It is hard because being a GA doesn’t pay like a living wage. You are supposed to work 20 hours a week. That’s what they equate your pay to, but I don’t know any GA that only works 20 hours a week. I am probably in the office at least 30 hours a week. I have to work a second job and have to work that job about 20 to 25 hours a week.

All of the GAs mentioned the excessive hours, but the participants also acknowledged the time requirements as a norm in athletics. Eleanor explained, “There is an expectation that if you work in athletics you are going to be working more than 9 to 5. I think most people that work in athletics know that about going into the field or an awareness of it at least.” Cathy stated, “They say if you work in athletics you never work the amount of hours you are supposed to.”

The work/life balance theme exemplifies the prominence of the life theme component of CCT. All of the graduate students mentioned a lack of time for education, social pursuits, and life outside of their graduate assistantship, or a direct conflict with the life themes component of CCT. Due to the participants’ work demands, they are restricted from incorporating their personal, family, and social lives into their jobs. Thus, they are constantly faced with role conflict and stress over which role should take priority. Research has shown that graduate students with role conflict and stress incorporate a mix of healthy and unhealthy strategies to deal with graduate school stress. Oswald and Riddick (2007) found that out of their 223 participants, 70% talked with friends, 58.9% exercised, 63% watched TV, 68.5% gave into eating or overeating comfort foods and 31.5% used alcohol as coping mechanisms. Particularly, the female graduate students in their survey used eating comfort foods, exercising, talking with friends, and watching TV as coping mechanisms more than their male peers (Oswald & Riddick, 2007). However, in the same study students were also highly interested in discovering different coping mechanisms such as massage, yoga, stress and time management classes and receiving this social support from their institutions.

Not only are coping mechanisms important to understand when it comes to graduate students and GAs overall health, it has been noted that female graduate students, in particular, struggle with role conflict, associated stress, as well as seek social support from peers and

employers (Bair, Haworth, & Sanford, 2004; Castro, Garcia, Cavazos, & Castro, 2011; Johnson et al., 2008; Stratton, Mielke, Kirshenbaum, Goodrich, & McRae, 2006). Without social support, high levels of stress and role conflict has been shown to lead to low job satisfaction, burnout and eventually leaving the profession (Goodger, Gorley, Lavelle, & Harwood, 2007). Burnout affects a variety of employees of different professions, age levels, cultural groups, and genders (Gaffney, Hardin, Fitzhugh, & Koo, 2012). Low levels of social support, high stress levels, and emotional exhaustion can all lead to burnout (Georgios & Nikolaos, 2012; Kelley, 1994; Kelley, Eklund, & Ritter-Taylor, 1999; Nikolaos, 2012). Burnout can impact relationships with other stakeholders in the athletic department, which can lead to lower levels of job performance and job satisfaction for them (Chelladurai, 1990; Dixon & Warner, 2010). It is important then for GAs to develop a healthy work/life balance to avoid burnout.

Work/life balance is an important issue for women seeking a career in college sport. Most graduate students and GAs are stretched to their limits in regards to time demands, but GAs in sport are asked, and often required, to work more than the 20 hours required of their assistantship. GAs in sport, like many professionals in sport, have their regular workday, but then they must also attend sporting events on nights and weekends, and may also be required to travel for competitions. Athletic departments are also isolated from the larger campus community at institutions within the Power Five conferences; which adds another dimension to the demands of working in college sport. Working in college sport is not just a career choice, but also a lifestyle; a lifestyle that has many competing interests (Nagal & Southhall, 2011).

The respondents in this study are just beginning their careers in college sport and are already facing issues such as work/life balance, burnout, and low job satisfaction. Long and unconventional hours have become the accepted norm for people working in the sport industry including collegiate athletics. These female GAs are already being forced to make decisions regarding their pursuit of a social life and perhaps a family in exchange for progressing in their career, which further reinforces gender roles and bias towards women in collegiate athletic administration. Women, when faced with the conflict of balancing work and family, most often choose family and choose to leave the profession (Kamphoff, 2010; Mazerolle, Burton, & Cotrufo, 2015; Taylor et al., 2017; Taylor, Smith, Siegele, & Hardin, 2017). Research has found that this negotiation for family is not uncommon; collegiate coaches felt feelings of guilt, anxiety, and stress surrounding expectation of long hours and time away from their children (Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Palmer & Leberman, 2009). This struggle with the dual role of mother and coach was further exacerbated when the female coaches did not feel they had organizational support (Dion & Bruening, 2005; 2007). This demonstrates an area for improvement with administration; women who are provided support during maternity, childbirth and their return to work, are given flexibility around scheduling and travel, and are supported with additional staffing are less likely to experience high levels of role conflict, burnout, and turnover (Bruening & Dixon, 2008).

Finally, the respondents in this study felt more obligation to their assistantship than the educational components of their graduate programs. This singular focus is somewhat understandable due to the financial incentives associated with assistantships. Funding of assistantships is typically through the athletic department and poor performance could lead to losing the position. This would lead to both financial and professional consequences. Regardless, GAs should be able to devote the necessary time to their educational pursuits. Not allowing this leads to an unproductive environment in both the academic and professional settings (i.e., GA), due to the role conflict stress involved in overcommitting (e.g., time, energy) to the professional

role. An over emphasis to the professional GA role, also hinders the holistic (i.e., professional and educational) development of each individual GA. An unhealthy relationship can also develop between the athletic department and the academic units, as faculty begin to realize the graduate students will not be able to devote the time and energy necessary to be successful in the classroom. There needs to be a concerted effort by those in managerial and leadership roles to assist women during their graduate assistantship experience in work/life balance and allow adequate time for education in an effort to acquire, obtain, and have women flourish in collegiate athletic administration. There should be some sort of expectation of life/work imbalance during this intense period for GAs. Most of GAs are full-time graduate students and are working what is an essentially a full-time job. The GAs should be made aware of the time demands of the professional position as well as the academic demands so they can be prepared for the intense nature of the experience.

Conclusion

Women are seeking careers in collegiate athletics and GA positions can provide a valuable entry point for women wishing to enter the profession. The opportunities are available, but not all of the participants in this study believed they were gaining the experience they needed. Time demands and role conflict were also a concern. These findings provided valuable insight for women wishing to enter this profession or those who have obtained entry level positions. The information is also valuable to administrators and coaches as they can work to provide valuable experiences to those serving in GA roles as well as realize the obstacles they are facing.

The respondents in this study illustrate the importance of all three components of Career Construction Theory. First, participants expressed vocational personality and life themes through their desire to help student-athletes develop. Additionally, half the respondents demonstrated career adaptability and life themes by their acceptance of challenges and growth in their job, as well as the personal and social worth and usefulness felt. However, unique to this population and heightened in the landscape of college athletics were the participants that felt frustration and disappointment in their assistantship. All of the participants expressed multiple roles, role conflict, and stress which negate the ability to incorporate important personal factors into work and experience social support which research has shown to be contributing factors to career progression and persistence.

Limitations & Future Research

Future research should examine the experiences of male GAs working in collegiate athletics as well as examining the experiences of GAs working in the other areas of higher education such as academics, housing, and campus recreation. Examining the experiences at in other divisions of the NCAA would also provide insight into this population. Since this study found the GAs had a disconnect between their personal and organizational value, a future study should also look to discover the perceived value of athletic GAs from coaches and administrators.

There were several limitations to this study. First, the majority of GAs in this study were White and future research should look to include a diverse population based on race and ethnicity. Another limitation could be that six out of the 12 participants worked in academics as

it relates to advising and assisting athletics. A future study should aim for a more diverse population in regards to assistantships. Finally, the amount of time allotted for the interviews was a limitation. Future research should strive for longer interviews for richer description and data. Although there were limitations, this research does build on the notion that intercollegiate athletics perpetuates a culture of disproportioned work life balance and that in order to avoid high turnover and burnout, employees must feel a sense of value in their job and to their organization.

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Table 1
Interview Guide

Questions

1. Why did you decide to go to graduate school and pursue your master's degree?
 2. Describe how you obtained your graduate assistantship at your university.
 3. Describe the transition from undergraduate to graduate school
 4. Describe your graduate assistant position. What is it that you do?
 5. How many hours do you work in a day? How many hours do you work per week?
 6. Describe your balance between life, school, and work as a graduate assistant.
 7. How do you view your role within your department? How do you view your role as a graduate assistant?
 8. Do you find your job rewarding? Describe why or why not.
 9. How does the department view your role as a graduate assistant? Your supervisor?
 10. If and how is age a factor in how you are viewed at your job?
 11. What are your career goals? Where do you see yourself in five years?
 12. Is there anything else you would like to add?
-

Table 2
Demographics

Participant	Age	Family Structure	Years in Position	Area	College Athlete
Arlene	22	Single	< 1	Athletic Training	No
Brittany	23	Single	1	Student-Athlete Development	No
Cathy	24	Single	< 1	Academics	Yes
Donna	26	Single	1	Administration	Yes
Eleanor	21	Single	< 1	Academics	No
Freda	24	Single	1	Coaching	Yes
Grace	23	In a relationship	2	Sales and Marketing	No
Irene	25	Single	< 1	Academics	No
Helen	23	Single	1.5	Academics	No
Jessica	25	Single	1	Operations	Yes
Kristen	24	Single	< 1	Academics	Yes
Linda	22	Single	1	Women's Basketball Coaching	Yes