



An Examination of Career Mobility Patterns among Black Senior Level Administrators Working in NCAA Division I Sports

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College sports in the United States is a mammoth business enterprise that is predominately led by White, middle-aged men—athletic directors (AD). At the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), Division I level—the highest classification of college sport competition—according to Lapchick (2019), Whites occupy 84.5% of AD positions, compared to 8.8% for African Americans and 6.7 % for all other racial groups combined. For senior-level administrative (SLA) positions, Whites held 85.1% of associate AD positions and 82.4% of assistant AD positions (Lapchick, 2019). The purpose of this study was to explore the career experiences and perceptions about the career mobility of Black college athletics administrators at NCAA, Division I level. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven SLAs (4 men, 3 women) who self-identified as “Black” or “African American” and were employed by an NCAA Division I institution. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to organize and analyze the data. Four themes emerged from the interviews: (1) Champions in Your Corner, (2) Navigating the System, (3) the Responsibility of Representation, and (4) Variability of Career Pathways. Key findings of the study included: 1) mentor and peer relationships were central to participants’ ability to experience career mobility; 2) learning to navigate barriers (e.g., race, gender, lack of a network) is crucial to career mobility; 3) Black SLAs felt the pressure and responsibility of representing aspiring Black administrators in general; and 4) the narratives of the participants did not reveal a definitive career pathway to becoming an SLA. Understanding the career experiences of Black SLAs is important to addressing the inequities that persist in college athletics in the US.

Keywords: African American, Athletic director, Barriers, Career mobility, Senior-level administrator

College sports in the United States is a major enterprise that remains riddled with inequities. Athletic directors (ADs) at the most powerful institutions command annual budgets of more than \$200 million for their departments (Berkowitz, 2019). The most popular and lucrative sports, football and basketball, are disproportionately dominated by Black athletes, but leadership positions in college athletics remain disproportionately held by White men. At the premier level of competition in the NCAA, Division I, Whites occupied 84.5 percent of AD positions, compared to 8.8 percent for African Americans and 6.7 percent for all other racial groups combined in 2019 (Lapchick, 2019). The racial demographics of other senior-level administrative positions are similar, as White people held 85.1 percent of Associate AD positions and 82.4 percent of Assistant AD positions (Lapchick, 2019). Given these persistent racial inequities, the primary aim of the current study was to examine the career experiences and perceptions of Black college athletics administrators in senior-level positions at NCAA Division I institutions.

Prior research has investigated career pathways for senior-level administrators (SLAs) (Spenard, 2011; Wood, 2016) and constraints to career mobility for Black SLAs (Coleman, 1998; Worsley & Stone, 2011). The current study builds on this work by examining the aspirational career mobility experiences of Black administrators (Holloman, 2016; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; Steward & Cunningham, 2015). Specifically, the current study draws insight from career mobility theory as a means of illuminating the experiences of Black administrators as they navigate careers in the field of college athletics.

Literature Review

Career Construction Theory

The current study examined the experiences of Black SLAs in collegiate athletic departments with specific attention to the factors that either assisted or constrained participants as they navigated their way to senior-level positions. Career Construction Theory (CCT) provides a meaningful framework for examining the social dimensions related to the ways in which individuals select and engage in their occupations (Savickas, 2005). The theory presents a model for understanding how personal characteristics and social contexts inform an individual's development of their personal and professional identities (Savickas, 2005). It seeks to be comprehensive in its purview by encompassing three components: vocational personality, career adaptability, and life themes (Savickas, 2005). The term vocational personality represents the assemblage of an individual's career related abilities, needs, values and interests. Career adaptability epitomizes an individual's readiness and resources for handling current and anticipated tasks, transitions, and distresses in his or her occupational roles that may alter his or her social integration. Additionally, life themes are operationalized as an individual's self-constructed narratives or stories that inform and drive their career experiences (Scandura, 2022). Each of these components shapes an individual's career in different ways. For example, one must navigate the intersection of personality and occupation, be able to adapt to various career challenges and career stages, and negotiate the interrelatedness of work and personal life. In this way, the three components are interrelated as people strive to find purpose in their work.

In the sport management literature, CCT has been utilized as a helpful lens through which to explore an individual's career choices and development. Several researchers have found CCT insightful in unpacking the career choices made by individuals in intercollegiate athletics as they

constructed their career paths (Darvin et al., 2019; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Taylor et al., 2018). Through such work, participants have been found to navigate work-life balance, discrimination, and the development of mentor relationships in pursuit of their careers (Hancock & Hums, 2016; Taylor et al., 2018). Darvin and colleagues (2019) found that individuals utilized and focused on different aspects of CCT (e.g., vocational personality, career adaptability, and life themes) as their careers evolved. Hartzell and Dixon (2019), meanwhile, noted that CCT is useful in examining the unpredictability and nonlinearity of peoples' career journeys.

Career Mobility Theory

Building on the scholarship of Kerckhoff (1993) and Sorenson (1975), Manzoni et al. (2014) surmised that “career mobility is a product of individual efforts and resources along with structural opportunities and constraints” (p. 1287). Similarly, Hancock and Hums (2016), in a study that examined factors influencing the career development of senior-level female administrators in NCAA Division I athletic departments, followed Manzoni et al.'s line of thought related to career mobility. Such work has illustrated how career mobility incorporates shifting of occupational assignments (i.e., changes in work responsibilities, hierarchical levels, titles within an organization), organization changes (i.e., changes in one's employer), and occupation changes (i.e., changes that require fundamentally new skills, routines, work environments, training, education, or vocational preparation) (Feldman & Ng, 2007; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Lyons, Schweitzer & Ng, 2015). Theories of career mobility (Rosen, 1972; Sicherman & Galor, 1990) predict that workers may deliberately enter their preferred profession at a level lower than would seem commensurate with their qualifications in order to acquire the necessary skills through on-the-job training and learning that will enable them to achieve more rapid career progression in the future (McGuinness & Wooden, 2009). Education, experiences, networking, mentors, race, and gender are all factors that must be carefully examined when studying career mobility (Berrey, 2014; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Hollomon, 2016; Outley & Dean, 2007; Spenard, 2010; Worsley & Stone, 2011).

The theory of career mobility provides a useful framework for analyzing career experiences, as it contextualizes individuals' career opportunities. Conceptually, career mobility refers to one's occupational movement within the context of an organization or throughout an industry (Sicherman & Galor, 1990). Career mobility theory (CMT) describes two typologies of career movement, interfirm mobility (i.e., decisions subject to the employee) and intrafirm mobility (e.g., decisions subject to the employer), which are characterized by lateral and upward movement (Sicherman & Galor, 1990). However, this fluidity is unique to the individual due to differences in education, skills, and experience (Sicherman & Galor, 1990; Smith et al., 2019).

In reference to upward mobility (e.g., intrafirm mobility, promotion), a core tenet within CMT contextualizes attaining high level positions as contingent upon one's educational background, personal characteristics (e.g., attitudes, behaviors) and transferability of skills and experience (Sicherman & Galor, 1990). However, as career mobility theorists posit education, ability, personal attributes, skills and experience as the primary “predictors” to career mobility, research indicates that demographic variables such as social class, gender, and race are linked to career paths (Garavan & Coolahan, 1996; Sicherman & Galor, 1990). Specifically, career mobility scholars have highlighted race as a factor that merits consideration when examining career experiences (e.g., mobility), as it creates a unique set of challenges and barriers to career advancement (McGinn & Milkman, 2013). Non-traditional work arrangements (e.g., temporary

and part-time work and multiple jobs) confound what is viewed as the traditional career ladder that features upward and linear movement, grounded in the individual's career objectives.

Career Mobility of Athletic Directors

While there is no single career blueprint for those aiming to become ADs, the increasing number of ADs previously occupying SLA positions shows the prevalence of upward mobility in the field of college athletics (Swift, 2011). There is a growing body of literature centered on career paths of ADs and SLAs. Fitzgerald et al. (1994) conducted one of the first studies examining career patterns of 200 male and female ADs at the NCAA Division I and II levels. What appeared to be the normative career pattern toward becoming an AD was a five-position sequence progressing through the following ranks: collegiate athlete, coach (high school or college), assistant director, associate director, and ending with athletic director (Fitzgerald et al., 1994; Swift, 2011). Fitzgerald, and colleagues' study (1994) revealed that the two most frequent experiences preceding the AD position were college athlete and college coach.

Shoji (2004), meanwhile, investigated patterns in the career paths of 60 ethnic minority SLAs at NCAA Division I institutions. Coaching (i.e., head, assistant, or graduate assistant) was the most frequent job in athletic administration, followed by internships in athletics. These findings stand in contrast to those of Welch and colleagues (2021), who found that the majority of female ethnic minority athletic directors' experience was outside of athletics. In addition to certain jobs that appear to provide a pathway to AD, there are other shared attributes in SLAs' backgrounds. For example, Spenard (2011) explored the role of educational attainment in ascending to the position of Division I AD and found that a master's degree in sport management or athletic administration was the most common degree obtained. Spenard also noted that of the ADs surveyed, 65 percent were previously associate or assistant ADs, 36 percent were previously college coaches, 29 percent were previously high school coaches, and 25 percent were previously graduate assistants. Other key positions held in intercollegiate athletics that impacted mobility included development, marketing, business management, compliance, event management, and education.

In summary, qualifications influenced one's mobility in an athletic department (Fitzgerald et al., 1994; Spenard, 2011; Wood, 2016). While career patterns suggest that the role of college athlete is a portal of entry, collegiate coaching often has been the precursor to the inaugural appointment as an AD (Fitzgerald et al., 1994; Wood, 2016).

Career Mobility of Black Athletic Directors

There is limited research on career mobility for Black ADs. Several articles allude to the overall lack of Black ADs (Hollomon, 2016; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; Spenard, 2011; Steward & Cunningham, 2015; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). There are several other studies that have investigated the barriers, impact of racial identity, and intersectionality for Black female administrators (Hollomon, 2016; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; Steward & Cunningham, 2015). Truiett-Theodorson (2005) studied the career patterns of Black ADs at predominantly White higher education institutions (PWIs), conducting case study interviews with four Black ADs, followed by a cross-case analysis. The results of the study revealed that most of the ADs were head coaches at one time, and their coaching career helped them transition into athletic administration. Participants stressed the importance of strong communication skills and having experience in several areas, but they avoided the areas of compliance and academic

support positions because Blacks tended to be “pigeonholed”—assigned to a particular employment category or class (Waller, 2020)—in a way that could limit their ascent to senior-level administration. Regarding career advancement, factors relevant to Black individuals becoming SLA’s include mentorship, networking, and institutions’ commitment to diversity and inclusion (Champagne, 2017).

In the NCAA, people of color and women are significantly underrepresented in leadership positions (Burton, 2015). At the start of the 2019-20 academic year, there were nine women and 21 men of color working as athletic directors at PWIs in the Football Bowl Subdivision (Lapchick, 2019). Of these nine women, only three were women of color: Desiree Reed-Francois (University of Nevada, Las Vegas), Carla Williams (University of Virginia), and Lisa Campos (University of Texas at San Antonio).

A relevant concept in the area of career mobility is self-efficacy, which refers to an individual’s belief about their ability to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance. It can be acquired through learning experiences that are influenced by social interactions, task difficulty, environmental, and contextual factors; the most potent source of self-efficacy is personal attainment (Brown, 2002). Notably, women and racial minority SLAs have similar self-efficacy compared to White men, but they encounter more barriers, unfavorable outcome expectations, pressures, and lower choice goals associated with becoming a Division I AD (Howe & Rockhill, 2020; Wells & Kerwin, 2017).

In their intent to become ADs, research regarding women and people of color has revealed several primary subthemes, including stacking, role models, and structural barriers (Singer & Cunningham, 2018). Similar to the “stacking” of athletes into peripheral positions that lack decision-making authority, Wells and Kerwin (2017) found that women and administrators of color have been stacked into peripheral administrative positions (e.g., senior women administrator, compliance, academic services). Those aspiring to become ADs are often discouraged because of the lack of role models in that position. Moreover, Elliott and Kellison (2020), after studying the career mobility patterns of senior-level women administrators who sought positions in conference offices, noted that in many instances women appeared not to be ready when opportunities arose. This sense of lacking preparedness can be attributed to the lack of opportunities in transitional jobs that prepare for the next level of their careers.

Constraints to Career Mobility

Existing research provides some insight regarding barriers to the career mobility of Black men and women. One common barrier related to networking has been coined “cronyism,” encapsulated by the adage “it’s not what you know, but who you know” (Holloman, 2016). Another frequent barrier is a lack of institutional integrity for supporting diversity initiatives (Bimper & Harrison, 2017). This often entails not a lack of policies for increasing diversity, but rather a failure to enforce or follow through on existing policies. Finally, the intersectional identity of being a Black woman leads to additional barriers, including gender and the racial stereotype of “the angry Black woman” (Hollomon, 2016; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; Taylor & Hardin, 2016).

Research Questions

Existing research examining career mobility patterns of Black administrators in sport indicates the prevalence of individual barriers (e.g., tokenism), group barriers (e.g., stereotypes, discrimination, exclusion from networks) and organizational barriers (e.g., cronyism) (Coleman,

1998; Holloman, 2016; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017). Given the background outlined above, the overarching research questions addressed in the current study were:

- 1: What career experiences do Black administrators identify as important in their progression to senior leadership positions in NCAA Division-I college athletic departments?
- 2: What constraints and barriers to career mobility have Black administrators experienced as they progressed to senior leadership positions in NCAA Division-I college athletic departments?

Method

The current study employed a qualitative design to explore the career experiences of Black college athletics administrators as they progressed to senior-level positions (i.e., Senior Athletic Director/Athletic Director). As research in career construction and career mobility theory has evolved, qualitative approaches have served an important role in illuminating the ways in which career mobility is affected by cultural and social forces (Cornileus, 2013). Additionally, given that sport is a social phenomenon (Gratton & Jones, 2010), a qualitative approach facilitated exploration of intangible factors, such as feelings and emotions that influenced participants' decisions and actions (Creswell, 2013).

Data Collection

Prior to conducting the study, an approval to proceed with the study was sought from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at a university in the Southeastern United States. After a thorough review of the application, the IRB issued a letter approving the study under approval number IRB-17-04093-XP. The study population consisted of SLAs at the NCAA Division I level who identified as "Black" or "African American." This included participants with position titles of AD, Deputy AD, Executive Associate AD, and Senior Associate AD. Purposive sampling was used to develop a pool of participants for the study. This sampling method is cost-effective and allows the researcher, based on their knowledge of the subject matter, to select participants that best fit the investigation (Creswell, 2013). E-mail addresses were collected to send out letters of interest to each potential participant. Fifteen subjects were contacted about participating in the study with seven (4 men, 3 women) consenting to participate in interviews. Each participant was assigned a randomly selected pseudonym to protect their identity (See Table 1).

Table 1
Study Participants

| Pseudonym | Gender | Position |
|-----------------|--------|------------------------------------|
| Bob Fitzgerald | Male | Athletic Director |
| Darla Johnson | Female | Senior Associate Athletic Director |
| Derrick Stubbs | Male | Athletic Director |
| John Terry | Male | Athletic Director |
| Erica Thompson | Female | Senior Associate Athletic Director |
| Cynthia Waters | Female | Athletic Director |
| Darius Williams | Male | Athletic Director |

Each interview began with a broad question encouraging the participants to speak about their experiences working in a field in which leadership positions are disproportionately held by White people. Subsequent questions asked participants to speak about the barriers they had faced in their careers as well as the most important factors that helped them advance to their current positions. Examples of questions utilized in the interviews include: (1) Tell me about your experiences working in a field—college athletics—in which leadership positions are disproportionately held by Whites?; (2) What were the most important factors that helped you advance to your position?; and (3) What were the most significant barriers you faced while progressing toward your current position? The questions used in this study were informed by both career construction theory and career mobility theory.

These semi-structured interviews were conducted using Zoom videoconferencing software. The Zoom software platform is available free of charge to students and faculty at the parent university. Each interview ranged in length from approximately 30-45 minutes, allowing the interviewer opportunity to use clarification and elaboration probes to encourage participants to expand on their initial responses (Creswell, 2013).

Given that there are so few Black people in SLA positions in Division I college athletics, the sample of seven participants represents a substantial portion of people from a relatively small population of administrators. As such, we use caution in the current manuscript to avoid providing identifying information that might compromise the confidentiality of participants, all of whom are referred to by pseudonyms. Further, researchers used the work of Charmaz (2006) as a guide for reaching data saturation and determining when to cease interviews.

Data Analysis

Data analysis and subsequent writing was conducted by a six-person research team: One full professor, one associate professor, three third-year doctoral students, and one second-year doctoral student. All interviews were conducted by one researcher, a third-year doctoral student who self-identified as a Black man. Of the remaining research team, three self-identified as Black and two self-identified as White. Three self-identified as women and two self-identified as men. All six researchers had experience and interest in studying career mobility in sport management, three of whom had experience studying the career mobility of Black individuals in various sport settings.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher who had experience in transcription. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to organize and analyze the data. The researchers engaged in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which is a method for finding, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. The researchers first familiarized themselves with the data by engaging in repeated readings of the interview transcripts while searching for patterns. A round of open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) followed this initial reading, in which researchers studied each passage of an interview to identify potentially relevant codes and categories. Finally, the researchers collapsed and combined initial codes into broader themes; this involved refining 177 initial codes into four primary themes and five subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2013). With respect to the final reporting of results, the research team conferred regularly to discuss differing interpretations of data and reach consensus on the primary themes. To strengthen reliability, the researchers also employed "member-checking" with participants to help ensure that their thoughts and experiences were captured accurately (Creswell, 2013).

The researchers established trustworthiness and scholarly rigor in multiple ways. First, the researchers invested a substantial number of hours in the field as well as using electronic

means (e.g., Zoom) to converse with each of the seven respondents. The use of reflexivity—where the researcher clearly describes the contextual intersecting relationships between the participants and themselves (Dodgson, 2019), was important in the early stages of data analysis, as the aim was to glean in-depth insights about participants' career experiences. Secondly, the investigators triangulated individual job descriptions, resumes, career path models, field notes, memos, interview transcripts, and electronic news media articles about the respondents. Toward the objective of ensuring rigor, peer debriefing, commonly known as analytic triangulation, was also utilized (Given, 2008). Finally, the research team utilized the services of an independent, qualitative researcher affiliated with the university's Office of Research Computing Support to assist with examination of the data, namely the coding and thematizing processes.

Findings and Discussion

Four primary themes emerged from the interviews with Black SLAs: (1) Champions in Your Corner, (2) Navigating the System, (3) the Responsibility of Representation, and (4) Variability of Career Pathways. The idea of having champions in one's corner entails creating and maintaining relationships that provide guidance, encouragement, and advocacy. Navigating the system, meanwhile, refers to learning about and understanding barriers, timing, location, opportunities, and departmental culture. Responsibility of representation refers to the value participants find in being a person of color in a field disproportionately dominated by Whites. Lastly, the variability of career pathways them highlights participants' unique career paths to leadership.

Theme 1: Champions in Your Corner

The findings of our investigation revealed that having “champions in your corner” was a key item shaping the career experiences of Black SLAs. The development of this theme was based on repetitive respondent dialogue that expressed the value of forming and developing meaningful career-related relationships. In reference to career mobility, “champions in your corner” was an instrumental component of participants' career advancement. For example, John Terry illustrated this within the context of his career, explaining:

I just think the people in my corner. Each step along the way I've had really good people in my corner who got me the next position. So, you know, the position with [professional sports league] was set up via one of my graduate professors. Then when I was looking to get back into college athletics, a head-hunter reached out to someone at [name of school], and they recommended me for that initial position.

The importance of such advocacy and support was consistently demonstrated through our respondents' lived experiences. Darla Johnson and Derrick Stubbs, for instance, both mentioned relationships so strong with individuals situated in positions of power, they often directly resulted in advancement opportunities, such as being asked to join the staff when their supervisor moved to a job at a new institution.

As another component of the “champions in your corner” theme, participants scrutinized the belief that hard work inherently leads to career success. Cynthia Waters addressed this idea through highlighting the importance of advocacy-based relationships: “It's also a mistake to think that if you work hard that you will get there....No, you have to have champions. You have

to have people you know that are in your corner.” By discrediting the narrative that all one needs is hard work, the theme “champions in your corner” represents an important career reality for Black SLAs. As notable components of this theme, participants discussed the nature of developing mentor relationships, the need to develop a network of peers, and the importance of “paying it forward” by developing a network of mentees.

The thought of “champions in your corner” is similar to the ideas of sponsorship and mentorship in the sport management literature. A mentor provides “guidance focused on professional issues, such as talking about goal setting, pursuing education, and seeking the right experiences to be successful in a position” (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010). A sponsor identifies high-potential individuals and uses their platform or position of power to overtly support the individual’s career advancement (Hewlett et al., 2011). According to Darwin and colleagues (2019), engaging with a mentor or sponsor is an effective way for women to not only advance, but to enter a profession. A similar dynamic appeared to serve an important role in Black SLAs’ career advancement.

Subtheme 1a: Mentor Relationships. The importance of mentor relationships was evidenced by accounts from six of the seven respondents. Specifically, the participants described the importance of purposefully choosing mentors. For instance, Erica Thompson presented her cultivation of mentors as strategic, as she conceived of them as a personal “board of directors.” As she explained,

I think it's important that you have those mentors. And you'll hear more and more people talking about your personal board of directors. And I definitely have that group of people that I can call at any time about whatever it is.

Respondents expounded on this idea by situating the nature of mentor relationships as dynamic and in need of continual growth. Bob Fitzgerald credited this to the ever-changing pace of college athletics by explaining how his career progression created the opportunity for new mentor relationships, as he has been “fortunate to have had great mentors at each of his schools.”

The selection of “proper” mentors was another element receiving significant respondent dialogue. Specifically, participants described the ways in which one’s appropriate mentor may not always reflect their own identity (e.g., race, gender, field of study, interests, views). For instance, Darla Johnson and Erica Thompson’s mentors included White men outside the field of athletics. These perspectives from people of different racial backgrounds and from fields of business outside of sport were valuable, as they provided a wide range of insight and feedback that participants could consider when making choices about their careers.

Subtheme 1b: Developing a Network of Peers. In reference to peer relationships, participants indicated the need to transcend professionalism by establishing personal relationships. Cynthia Waters spoke to this directly by noting the importance of:

building relationships that are genuine outside of just day-to-day professional relationships. I think, you know, sometimes, you put too much pressure on people to say there's a fine line between professional and personal. There really isn't. People are people. But you want to get involved with people because people will go to the max for people they care about and believe in.

Several other participants also maximized daily interactions with peers to build personal

relationships with professional benefits. Waters explained that her network of peers in community relations, campus relations, coach relations, and student relations was instrumental to her upward mobility in collegiate athletics and, ultimately, in becoming an AD. The value of such a peer network is provided through multiple means, including the ability to become informed about potential job openings that may help one advance their career.

Participants viewed peer relationships as being particularly important in collegiate athletics because it is a “people industry,” requiring a team effort, wherein peers play the crucial role of minimizing the learning curve and filling knowledge gaps. Bob Fitzgerald explained this through his understanding of the purpose of peer relationships: “You don’t necessarily have to have all of the answers, but you have to be smart enough to know where your gaps are and make sure you align yourself with people who can fill those gaps for you.” Erica Thompson operationalized Fitzgerald’s premise by illuminating the ways in which her peers filled a knowledge gap for her in the area of professional development by providing critical feedback, thereby increasing her professional attractiveness. Research on women in leadership positions within collegiate athletics suggests that they benefit both personally and professionally when they establish a strong network of peers (Taylor et al., 2018), and such a network appeared to serve a similar role for many Black SLAs.

Subtheme 1c: Developing a Network of Mentees. A considerable number of responses mentioned the duty to “pay it forward” by creating a “pipeline” for other aspiring administrators who look like them. Cynthia Waters described the formation of a network for Black women that did not exist when she aspired to become an AD:

For those that have become athletic directors or have become senior administrators, it’s very important for us to reach out and for us to share our experiences with those that are interested in doing the same thing. I just think that it’s more important than ever. The good, the bad and the ugly to share all those experiences and any opportunities we can to help get them positioned to get in the door. We need to do that. We also, you know, I mean it’s almost like you know your kids, no one can take care of your kids as well as you’re going to take care of your kids. So you have to – we have to start within, and I’m really proud of the fact that, you know, as far as female African Americans we have several different entities that we have built ourselves to make that happen and to share with others, whereas that was not there when I became the athletic director.

Expressing a similar need to mentor up-and-coming administrators, Bob Fitzgerald explained:

It’s also very important to me to be, I don’t like using this word, but I guess a role model for young people of color who want to be, who have higher aspirations. So, I want to be there to be a mentor to those folks to help them navigate through this industry and give people some comfort that there’s someone who they can talk to or reach out to that looks like them.

Some participants, such as Darla Johnson, dedicated special efforts to develop a network of mentees, explaining that she says to junior colleagues, “I am going to make you come talk to me one time. If you choose to come back, that’s up to you, but I am going to make you come one time.” She also mentioned an awareness of the intersection between race and socioeconomic status, expressing that many African American students have difficulty completing a master’s

degree and accepting an unpaid internship. She noted:

I have not had a job in intercollegiate athletics where at some point in time, a junior person in the department has not lived with me for some period of time, whether it was on their way in or on their way out to help make the transition.

Given these barriers, Johnson extended an extra measure of support by actually allowing some young mentees to live with her as they built their careers.

In addition to serving as mentors for those entering the NCAA system, a few participants mentioned a particular responsibility to develop a network of mentees due to a lack of awareness that Black people can achieve careers as SLAs. As Darius Williams mentioned, “student-athletes would say to me, ‘I never thought about stuff like that, Darius. I never thought that I could do this or work in athletics administration.’” Fitzgerald further described the nature of this barrier:

I think that because there isn’t a visible number of people of color in positions of success, there’s no one to look up to. There’s very few to look up to. So when you don’t see someone like yourself in a position of authority, you wonder. How should I say this? It doesn’t help you. No. It’s hard to see yourself in a role when you don’t see other people like yourself. That may be the best way to put it.

Overall, the need to develop a network of mentees was particularly salient to participants given the underrepresentation of Black people in senior-level positions.

Ultimately, “champions in your corner” and its affiliated subthemes demonstrate the importance of developing mentor and peer relationships, as they were central to participants’ ability to experience career mobility. Key insight from the “mentor relationships” subtheme included the need to actively select mentors with intentionality and embrace outside perspectives. The “network of peers” subtheme demonstrated the salience of peer relationships within the Black SLA experience, as they led to unique benefits including specialized human capital, career development, and career advancement (Champagne, 2017). In the “network of mentees” subtheme, participants expressed a sense of responsibility to “pay it forward” by serving as role models and supporting the future generation of Black administrators. Aligning with research regarding the unique challenges facing people of color (Champagne, 2017; McGinn & Milkman, 2013), this theme yields unique insight into the Black SLA career experience, including challenges that participants face and the ways in which they overcome barriers.

Participants identified mentor and peer relationships as being of principle importance to their career advancement, and existing scholarship has identified these items as ongoing organizational and group barriers for Black professionals. Specifically, scholars have identified access to mentors and developing formal and informal networks as a challenge for Black employees due to (a) exclusion from formal and informal groups, and (b) their overall lack of representation in the field of college athletics (Coleman, 1998; Hollomon, 2016; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017). These factors are exacerbated by structural factors in the field, such as the prevalence of unpaid internships, which institutionalize inequities by putting people from less privileged backgrounds at a distinct disadvantage (Walker et al., 2021). Recognizing that they have been fortunate in overcoming such challenges, many of the current participants expressed a sense of responsibility to invest in prospective Black sport professionals by developing mentee relationships. Their sentiments suggest, if Black ADs operationalize Angela Davis’ (1990) concept of “lift as we climb” by creating mentee relationships, they provide (a) a diverse array of

role models for aspiring Black professionals, (b) a relatable window into the homogenous sport industry for rising professionals of color, and (c) communities and pipelines of talented people of color into collegiate athletics.

Theme 2: Navigating the System

Participants spoke at length about their experiences “navigating” the career system of college athletics, a space largely dominated by White men (Lapchick, 2019). The responses in this area provided insight into two main subthemes: (a) the scarcity of opportunities and (b) navigating barriers and finding opportunity.

Subtheme 2a: The Scarcity of Opportunities. Many of the participants indicated they struggled to find opportunities for promotion and/or felt they did not have the opportunity for “second chances” if someone felt they had made a mistake. Participants perceived race as playing an important role in the limited opportunities available to them. Darius Williams stated, “We’re not afforded all the opportunities, let’s just be real. We’re not.” Then, when addressing whether promotions seemed to be merit-based, he added, “Sometimes I’m baffled how some people are promoted when there are people who are much better than the ones that are being promoted. So, I’d leave it like that.” John Terry, meanwhile, explained,

I don’t give many people much of an opportunity to make judgments about anything I do, because I keep to myself. And part of that is probably because I know they’re less forgiving for people of my color—I mean for mistakes or wrong gestures.

Several other ADs mentioned a similar lack of forgiveness afforded to them. For instance, Darla Johnson expressed, “You haven’t seen that opportunity largely for people of color to have a mistake and recover from it.” Erica Thompson added:

I just think it’s important for people to understand the opportunity you have and a Black administrator and what that could mean when you’re given the opportunity. We don’t always get second, third and fourth chances. And if we do, we don’t get them as quick as some other people do, even in the coaching space.

The lack of “second chances” for participants often resulted in greater pressure to avoid taking risks that might lead to mistakes.

Overall, participants indicated that opportunities were scarce. Their stories demonstrated connections to existing research detailing the experiences of Black SLAs at predominantly White higher education institutions (e.g., Truiett-Theodorson, 2005). It was clear from participants’ responses that they encountered constraints, negative outcomes and lower choice goals associated with upper career mobility (Wells & Kerwin, 2017). They perceived discrimination as a substantial organizational barrier (Coleman, 1998), which resulted in exclusion from promotion and advancement opportunities (Champagne, 2014; Holloman, 2016). Although the participants did not often experience overt discrimination, there are many subtle, perhaps unconscious, forms of discrimination that limit the advancement of people from marginalized groups to the highest levels within an organization (Berrey, 2014).

Subtheme 2b: Navigating Barriers and Finding Opportunity. Given the scarcity of opportunities, participants discussed navigating numerous barriers in an effort to advance their careers. Several participants mentioned that they had been trained to ignore or simply not focus on barriers. For example, Cynthia Waters explained:

I think for me it was more about my own upbringing. You know, we didn't talk about barriers and challenges, you know? There's a lot of things I found out that were barriers for my parents ... [when] I was in my 40's ... I had no idea because they never allowed us to think it was a barrier, they just kept on doing what they needed to be done.

Rather than focus on the potential hindrance presented by a barrier, many participants expressed an effort to re-conceptualize challenges as opportunities. When Darla Johnson was asked about her experience working with so few people who looked like her, she remarked, "I see both the opportunity and the challenge in that and have just taken it as such." John Terry expanded, "my big thought is to use it to your advantage when you can." Erica Thomas, meanwhile, shared a story that illustrated the act of turning a challenge into an opportunity. While aspiring to become an AD, she did not have fundraising experience, which she cited as a major disadvantage for many Black administrators aspiring to be an AD. Instead, she sought help to market herself in spite of her limited fundraising experience. She explained:

Before I interviewed for [my current] position, I was up for an AD position. I was at a conference with [name of a current Black AD], and I pulled him aside, and I said, "you know, I've known you for quite some time since your [former conference] days, this is what I keep stumbling into is people asking the question about fundraising." He said, "look, you can't speak to something you've never been tasked with doing." He said, "but what you can speak to is what you've done in revenue generation." He said, "so don't let them discount what you've done in getting almost million-dollar grants and working with your staff on generating revenue in these spaces." He said, "you have to speak to what you know, and you cannot address what you haven't done. We had people on staff who were tasked with doing that job and where you partnered when you had that time." I said, "I can absolutely speak to that."

In support of Thomas' story, Williams indicated that aspiring Black SLAs must navigate challenges so well that others "have no choice but to hire me."

Additionally, several participants identified timing and networking as one of the factors that contributed to their success. As Darla Johnson explained, "I just happened to be at the right place at the right time in a couple of situations." Bob Fitzgerald, meanwhile, expressed: "It really makes a difference on who you hitch your wagon to. The better you can align the people who you work with or work for, I think the better opportunities you're going to have at success." In this example, Fitzgerald alludes to the prevalence of "cronyism," described as "it's not what you know, but who you know" (Holloman, 2016) This can be a barrier for Black SLAs due to the lack of mentors (Wells & Kerwin, 2017); but in this case, Fitzgerald was able to leverage his network and find opportunities.

Throughout the interviews, the participants indicated that navigating barriers in an

effort to find opportunities was important. This may reflect the shift from a traditional “career ladder” toward a more dynamic, multi-directional, and boundless career path motivated by individualist goals and values (Baruch, 2004; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Lyons, Schweitzer & Ng, 2014). Additionally, it was clear that the participants were highlighting race as a factor in their career mobility experiences, which created a unique set of challenges and barriers to navigate as they sought opportunities for advancement (McGinn & Milkman, 2013). In this way, their experiences with racial discrimination may play a role in disrupting the traditional “career ladder,” as participants had to exercise creativity and flexibility to navigate careers in a field where few SLAs “looked like them.”

Theme 3: The Responsibility of Representation

Another theme to emerge from participants’ responses about their career experiences was a sense of responsibility to provide a positive representation of Black sport administrators. Bob Fitzgerald recalled that he was often the only person of color on his teams when he played sports growing up, so he adapted to a similar context in college athletics administration as often the sole “representative” of his race. Similarly, Cynthia Waters explained, “you know, I guess I got used to being the only female or the only African American female that was in the room.” In this way, whether they liked it or not, other (White) administrators sometimes perceived particular Black administrators as representing the capabilities of other members of their racial group.

As a result of being members of an underrepresented group, these SLAs experienced having to work harder and longer, not only for their success but also for other aspiring Black administrators to have a chance. As John Terry explained, “I have kind of this internal pressure of, you know, I guess being an AD, living up to the notion that I’m always having to do better, be more thorough, more presentation.” Similarly, Fitzgerald expressed,

I would probably call it a greater sense of responsibility. Whether that burden was real or not real, I wanted to make sure that I did all I could for me and my career and those who followed and who are following to make sure that I’m laying some foundation and some groundwork for the next group of folks. If I don’t do my job well, someone may want to point to the fact that I’m a person of color...so, people of color aren’t fit for this job, right? Knowing that makes no sense, but I could see how someone would draw those two things together.

As Fitzgerald’s response illustrates, some participants felt an additional burden in being a Black SLA. Many realized that their success (or lack thereof) could be used to make broader assumptions about members of their racial group.

Findings from this theme reveal that many Black SLAs embrace, or perhaps have no choice but to embrace the responsibilities of representing aspiring Black administrators in general. Since there are relatively few Black SLAs in collegiate athletics, many participants experienced an internalized pressure to perform well so that other members of their racial group would have a chance to follow in their footsteps. Notably, carrying such a stressful burden may have negative implications to the career mobility of Black SLAs (Coleman, 1998; Sisco, 2020).

Theme 4: Variability of Career Pathways

An examination of participants' career progression revealed no definitive or singular path to becoming an SLA. Among women in the study, one of whom was currently an AD, all held assistant, associate, and senior associate AD positions as their careers progressed. For men, all of whom were now ADs, only one had previously been an assistant AD, while one had held the title of associate AD. Three of the four men were senior associate ADs before acquiring their current AD positions. As a group, the participants had experience in various areas, including compliance, business, fundraising, academics, and student life. Regarding the variability and individuality in participants' career paths, Bob Fitzgerald captured this sentiment when asked whether there is an ideal path to becoming an AD:

Absolutely not. There is no such thing as an ideal path. I think that's what makes our industry so beautiful is that it doesn't matter what make or model you are. You've got an opportunity. You've got an opportunity to make a mark. That's really cool.

Despite such positive sentiment, other participants acknowledged the value of having expertise in certain areas of college athletics at the senior-level of administration. Echoing a previous comment from Erica Thomas, Derrick Stubbs admitted, “the biggest thing that they will use against people of color in this business is when you don't know how to fundraise. You got to be prepared that you can answer all of those questions.” This quote illustrated how, although participants experienced numerous career paths, certain barriers remained particularly salient for Black administrators.

While many participants held positions in normative career areas for prospective ADs identified in the literature (Fitzgerald et al., 1994; Swift, 2011), findings confirmed the notion that there is no singular blueprint for successful advancement to AD. This echoes existing research in career mobility theory regarding the move away from “linear” career paths underpinned by loyalty and stability toward more dynamic, multi-directional career paths (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Baruch, 2004; Lyons et al., 2014). However, such uncertainty about the “right” career progression toward becoming an AD posed unique challenges for Black aspiring administrators. As a result, some participants embraced the ability to “customize” their pathway, being selective about pursuing the experiences that would make them more marketable based on their skill set.

Study Limitations and Future Research

Given the sample size of the current study, readers should be careful not to over-generalize the findings to Black administrators as a whole. Further, the current study did not differentiate between the ages of participants, and the experiences of younger and older SLAs may have unique facets. While it was briefly mentioned above, intersectionality may contribute in nuanced ways to the constraints to career mobility of women of color, yet exploring the intersections of different facets of identity was largely outside the scope of the current study. The use of purposive sampling alone, rather than in combination with other techniques, also contributed to limitations in the sample of seven Black SLAs. Lastly, the current study did not examine NCAA Division II, Division III, or Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Overall, the landscape of this topic is rife with questions for future research.

Based on the limitations of this study, future research should perform additional comparisons in terms of age, gender, race, and intersectionality. Comparing the experiences of Black SLAs to administrators from other racial groups would provide a further understanding of the ways in which race impacts people working in collegiate athletics. Approaching this topic from a critical framework and employing critical race theory may yield further insights. Additionally, it may be beneficial to employ quantitative or mixed methods utilizing a large sample of SLAs that includes both White and SLAs of color. Finally, a comparison between NCAA divisions and institutions outside of the NCAA is warranted.

With respect to practical implications, the current study provides insight about some potential ways in which institutions might address the persistent racial inequity that exists in college athletics administration (Lapchick, 2019). As articulated by many of the study's participants, Black SLAs often feel a sense of responsibility to mentor the "next generation" of Black administrators due to their underrepresentation. While such mentoring relationships often develop informally, institutions (e.g., individual athletics departments, conferences, the NCAA) should consider ways to formally facilitate mentoring programs. This strategy would be especially meaningful for junior administrators from underrepresented groups.

In addition, some of the study's participants spoke about the importance of forming mentoring relationships across racial lines. Thus, such mentoring programs would also help people of color entering sport administration connect with a diverse range of potential mentors who may also be willing to become sponsors as a part of their career development.

Considering the salience of mentor relationships and networking to the ascension of Black administrators into senior leadership positions, sport organizations must consider how they can facilitate supportive environments and development opportunities for Black administrators. For example, intercollegiate athletics should be fundamental in developing mentorship programs, conferences, and additional events so Black administrators can foster meaningful relationships that aid them in navigating the system throughout their unique career paths. Given the persistent inequity in college sport, the current study highlights the importance of intentionally facilitating such programs, rather than simply counting on mentoring relationships to develop organically.

Finally, career socialization is another area that should be explored more rigorously in terms of practice and scholarship. Social relationships, early career experiences, and career interests and values are critical factors in establishing meaningful career pathways. Each of these can be an area of early career professional development that can help to build networks and sponsorships. The position in which a person enters into the field of intercollegiate athletics often dictates the career path (Hancock, Cintron & Darvin, 2017). Thus, career socialization becomes paramount to career construction and subsequently career mobility for African American men and women aspiring to become an athletic director.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and career progression of Black SLAs as well as the barriers to career mobility that they have encountered. Although there is no singular career path toward becoming an AD (Baruch, 2004; Lyons et al., 2014), the findings indicate that certain experiences and barriers are unique and particularly salient to Black SLAs. While participants cited the importance of having a strong network of mentors and peers as being important in their career success, they also perceived a sense of duty to mentor the "next generation" of Black administrators given their underrepresentation in the field. Moreover, interpersonal relationships are important to career access and advancement for Black people seeking careers in intercollegiate athletic administration. Although any aspiring college

AD is operating in a highly competitive field, participants in the current study understood that they faced a particularly scarce set of opportunities with little room for error and few, if any, second chances. Ultimately, in the process of navigating their careers in college athletics, Black administrators often felt a sense of responsibility from the fact that their successes (or failures) could be perceived as representing members of their racial group in general. Of course, the relative lack of Black leadership is not unique to administrative positions in college athletics; there is also an underrepresentation of Black coaches and college administrators in general (Harper, 2012, 2016; Lapchick, 2016). Ultimately, understanding the perspectives and experiences of Black SLAs is an important step in addressing the deep-seated inequities that persist in intercollegiate athletics in the United States.

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